

Freedom? No, thanks!

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A commonplace in some left intellectual circles is that freedom is nothing but the freedom of the market. That is to say, when the term freedom is used by American politicians, it really means the freedom of corporations and their investors to enter into an area and exploit it in every way they can. Elaborations on the same theme tend to emphasize free choice in terms of consumer goods or free choice in elections, again, between candidates as different as Coke and Pepsi in comparable (but not quite as creative) ad campaigns.

Of course, there is more to it than this. Over the past five years, Americans have heard a lot about the freedom of our way of life, on the one hand, and the necessity of sacrificing certain liberties in the interests of security, on the other. The willingness to suspend civil liberties might seem to break with the fanatical emphasis on market freedom. But I think it is an extension of the same logic.

The U.S. has always allowed for restrictions on market freedom—particularly if those restrictions are argued for in the name of safety and security. To be sure, restricting the market—requiring companies to attend to the safety of their workers and their products—is usually a matter of political struggle. From unions securing the workplace to consumer advocates (like Nader and the Corvair) demanding testings and recalls, Capital has not acquiesced easily. But, it has adapted and responded. For every recalled plastic toy with easily swallowed components, there are fifty more covers for electric outlets, protective covers for sharp corners, non-flammable pajamas, audio monitors, bicycle helmets, and government approved car seats (now required in some states for kids up to 10 years old). At any rate, my point is that security has always been one of the values capable of functioning as a restraint on market freedom precisely because it produces new market opportunities.

Politically, today we see security functioning again as that value in

the name of which freedom can and should be curtailed. Folks who follow discussions of networked communications and new media are familiar with this in terms of regulations on decency, hysteria over kiddie porn, over kids accessing porn, over pedophiles accessing kids. A decade or so ago (in the U.S. and England; the debate is now taking a new form for Moslem women) women complained that the Net was unsafe for women, that it was too rough, too crude, not a safe space. Some argue for ratings on games, music, video, and movies. Wal-Mart (the biggest retailer in the U.S.) refuses to sell items (magazines, books, music, videos) that it deems indecent or not in keeping with Wal-Mart values (which includes locking workers into stores over night, so the restriction on freedom here shouldn't be surprising). In fact, we see restrictions on freedom in the name of security and safety everywhere, once we look—no smoking (health safety), no swimming without a lifeguard, no money shots on porn purchased on pay-per-view (or so I'm told...).

With regard to the so-called war on terror, not only have we who fly given up expectations of privacy and autonomy (sure, go ahead and frisk me, remove my belt and shoes, root through my luggage, monitor my communications and purchases), but limitations on these freedoms have provided economic benefits to all sorts of different groups—those who make surveillance equipment, those who train event planners, those who keep up with new regulations and consult with local governments. Again, security is a value that can restrain some freedoms as it produces new ones.

To be clear, my point here is not to champion freedom. Rather, it is to note that a willingness to curtail freedom in the name of security is neither a political anomaly nor a view at odds with market freedom. And, it seems to me that at this historical juncture we may be seeing a willingness to jettison even market freedoms. Perhaps we can understand this in terms of “freedom fatigue”—overcome with the burdens of consumerism, sickened by our own excesses and gluttony, and having lost any sense of the demands and responsibilities of actual political freedom, we give it all up.

What do I mean by give up market freedom? I have in mind a sense of being overwhelmed by consumerism, of finding relief in restrictions on consumer choice (this might explain why there has not been an outcry over the price of gas as well as the appeal of the restrictive practices of orthodox religion and, why not, of the Atkins diet). Many of course never had it—poverty and racism constrain such that the word freedom is both an ideal of an escape and an ideological trap, a ruse. And the middle class is dwindling. Yet, it seems to me that we can also find in the present moment appeals to rules, appeals to limits, the attraction of fundamentalisms, of regulations, of someone who would choose for us, tell us what to do, someone who won't just give us advice, but will take the responsibility for us. At this point, I'm only revisiting Zizek's discussion of the rise of small authorities (which wasn't my intention when I started this post and so is kinda disappointing).

Yet, I think it is important to consider whether we might be in the midst of freedom fatigue. I notice that my students don't want to assert themselves—in the classroom, in campus politics, in opportunities for serving on hiring and tenuring committees. Junior faculty as well tend to want to keep a low profile and let administrators make the choices—faculty governance is too much of a pain. And, in local governance, it's easier to complain about city council than it is to sell the tickets for a fundraiser, circulate petitions, and identify better candidates. Freedom is a pain. It requires responsibility. And most of us just don't seem quite up to it.