The Genealogy of Freedom: A Human Rights Perspective

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Freedom is a term often repeated throughout history, in several aspects of life.

It is known to be a fundamental right which our ancestors fought to have. The concept of freedom, as we know and understand it, is one that is cherished, valued, and viewed as the core of the individual in terms of dignity and worth.

Once we begin analyzing freedom, it is apparent that it has been taken out of context and does not reflect the ideal of freedom that we have today. Genealogical inquiries are necessary in our thinking about ideals, as they explain aspects of human life by presenting how they came to be.[1] This allows us to avoid ignorance on concepts, while exposing the "shameful origins of cherished idea."[2]

Universal Mainstream Definition

When we think of freedom, we often relate it back to slavery or wars that have led us to this praised concept.

Through this, we have been granted the ability to make our own decisions, to be free of any controlling entity, and to be able to express our thoughts and ideologies as we wish. For many, freedom may translate as travelling or as voting. Others believe that time and money bring them freedom. The core idea here is that without freedom—which in many cases can be seen as an intangible entity—an individual is restricted in their actions and thoughts.

Tackling the Universality

Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington both tackled the concept of freedom through exploring what adheres to the universal perspective of the term.

Thomas Hobbes believed that for an individual to be able to enjoy freedom, there had to be no interference by any external agent. If the individual is unable to do the action, then they are unfree. Hobbes believed that if you were disempowered it had to mean that someone interfered with the power held. It is apparent that Hobbes perspective of freedom was nested in the notion of power. This is why freedom is pronounced by the exclusion of any external impediment.

James Harrington believed that anyone living under the subject of a monarch had no freedom. He powerfully accentuated this claim by adding that any individual who lived in colonies under imperial power lived as a slave. Namely, if an individual was taxed by a colony and had no representation in law-making, regulations, or acts, then the individual in question is completely reliant on them and, consequently, has no freedom.[3]

A great example that puts this ideology in perspective is the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776. This declaration sought independence, but from what? Dependence. By not being dependent on a ruling, you achieve freedom. The country of the United States is founded and built on this view.

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[1] Mark Bevir, "What is Genealogy?", *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2, no.3 (2008), 263–275.
[2] Bevir, "What is Genealogy?", 264.

[3] "A Geneaology of Liberty: A Lecture by Quentin Skinner," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjQ-W2-fKUs.

Problematics Associated to the Universality of Freedom

In Hobbes and Harrington's ideologies of freedom, it is obvious that nobody has true freedom because everyone is limited by several factors. Whether that be time, money, our government, or even societal norms, individuals find themselves facing a variety of interferences.

Maldonado-Torres links this understanding of freedom to the rise of human rights. Human rights went from mediating the place of the human in relation to the animal and the divine; to declarations which called for political rights for people; to a defense against centralized and dictatorial ruling.[4]

> **One can see how universalist frameworks were not made to fit all individuals. Instead, such frameworks overlook and reflect colonialism.**

Consider that the main objective of colonialism was to bring the colonized closer to civilization, as the latter were seen as savages in need of European and Western help. It came as no surprise that this colonial-line created a sector of salvation, one where the existence of non-Europeans was seen as problematic and dangerous.[5]

Marie Battiste's notion of cognitive imperialism is helpful for understanding the scarring impact "human rights" had, and continues to have, on the colonized.[6] Despite the controversial and harmful actions that took place, once "human rights" were developed by the colonizers, they spread to the rest of the world. Governments from Asia and Africa—who were against colonialism—embraced human rights.

This is a clear representation of cognitive imperialism's perpetuation of "one frame of reference"—somehow, "human rights" become a gift from the colonizers.[7] The colonized walk away with hegemonic and universal knowledge framed by European-American male philosophers.[8] This, in turn, further emphasizes the idea that non-Europeans are in need of receiving progressive innovations.[9]

Nonetheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, leaders in Africa and Asia began rejecting "human rights"—seeing the close link they had to cultural imperialism.[10] Cognitive imperialism devalued and diminished diverse knowledge systems—as the "superior race," the colonizer, spoke on behalf of human rights.[11]

The irony is that "human rights" led to individuals speaking to the marginalized and colonized about their rights.[12] This coloniality—one established in "human rights"—is burdened with racism, secularism, and individualism.[13]

But can we dismiss humanity while simultaneously pursuing human rights?

[4] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights," *Revista Crítica De Ciências Sociais* 114, (2017), 117–136.
[5] Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights."
[6] Marie Battiste, "Cognitive Imperialism," in *Springer Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory,* ed. Michael Peters (New York, NY: Springer, 2016).
[7] Battiste, "Cognitive Imperialism."
[8] Nassim Noroozi, "Decolonial Philosophy and Education," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, ed.

George Noblit (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[9] Battiste, "Cognitive Imperialism."
[10] Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights."
[11] Battiste, "Cognitive Imperialism."
[12] Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights."
[13] Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights."

Conclusion

Both "freedom" and "human rights" are problematic. One can see how universalist frameworks were not made to fit all individuals. Instead, such frameworks overlook and reflect colonialism. These factors are uncovered as a result of a genealogical lens which critique universal truths and questions its own perspective.[14]

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[14] Bevir, "What is Genealogy?"