Chapter 3

Freedom
- Feeling free in an (un)free world

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Introduction

'Freedom is not free'. This is the brief and poignant inscription on the memorial wall erected in Washington DC to commemorate the military casualties of the Korean War. This inscription contains not only a specific meaning from a specific historical time and place but also a much broader and deeper meaning. However, this inscription also raises (at least) as many questions as it answers. For example: can freedom ever be free? Is there actually anything as total freedom? Are we as humans – individually and collectively – not always in some form or other restrained and relatively unfree? Is it possible to unlock all doors, cut all shackles, remove every obstacle and experience (natural, biological, social, experiential, etc.) freedom *pure and simple*? One may ponder if death may in fact not be one of the only times when people are absolutely free – free from worry, problems and constraint. As Norbert Elias would once have it: 'Dead people have no problems' (Elias 1985/2001:3). This is true. On the other hand, however, the dead are no longer in a position to act freely, to make free choices or to decide for themselves (at least as far as we know), and in this respect their freedom is also severely limited. Other yet closely related questions to those above would be: is it desirable if one was in fact completely free? Is freedom always something good and the freer we are the better? Does freedom always carry with it positive, productive and happy experiences? These questions (and many others) are complicated and tricky to answer without resorting to philosophical doctrine, political ideology or personal conviction and since it is not our purpose here to speculate freely, they will remain mostly unanswered in this chapter.

This chapter instead deals with and explores what it means and feels like to be free in social life. Despite current collectivist backlashes from both the political right (neo-nationalism) and left (identity-politics), individual freedom is still probably the 'ultimate value' (Talcott Parsons) of contemporary liberal democracies. Whereas economists, political scientists and political philosophers discuss freedom in the context of markets, the state and legal rights, and whilst philosophers discuss the metaphysical question of 'free will', in what follows we take a different approach and look at freedom from a social or sociological perspective, that is, freedom as a social phenomenon and social relation. Our basic idea is that individual freedom to a

large extent is created, sustained, obstructed, destroyed and experienced in social relations. The first part of the chapter explores what it means to be free and examines different conceptions of freedom in social theory and sociology. The second part brings in the social dimension. Starting from Isaiah Berlin's distinction between 'negative freedom' and 'positive freedom' and Zygmunt Bauman' idea of 'freedom as a social relation', we look at important ways in which social relations both enable and constrain freedom. In the final part of the chapter, we address and discuss the topic of this book, namely how it feels to be free. We show that in addition to its many positive emotional consequences (such as happiness, joy and emotional surplus), freedom also causes much emotional frustration and distress – both when we are allowed to choose freely, but cannot decide what to choose, and also when we sense that our freedom is limited and thus feel unable to live up to its potential. A basic overall lesson from the chapter is that to be free is to be pulled in many directions at the same time: from the competing and sometimes incompatible dimensions of freedom; from the enabling and constraining mechanisms of society; and from the positive and negative emotional consequences of freedom.

What is freedom?

Freedom is one of those 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie 1956) that on the one hand is so fundamental, even constitutive, for the discipline of sociology that sociologists cannot do without it. It is a 'unit idea' (Nisbett 1993) of sociology. On the other hand, it is so complex and tangled up in sociological, philosophical, political and moral controversies that it 'inevitably involves endless disputes' (Gallie 1956:169) about its proper use. Indeed, one historical count found more than 200 different ways of defining freedom (Berlin 2002:168). We can illustrate this diversity by looking at the classics of sociology, who used the notion of freedom in different ways. According to Karl Marx, the freedom withheld from the alienated modern industrial worker is freedom as self-realization. According to the proto-existentialist Max Weber, the freedom the modern person is required to display when he/she chooses between the many 'daimons' (values) in a secular 'neo-polytheistic' order is the freedom to make decisions. Finally, Émile Durkheim brings in the Kantian idea of freedom as autonomy, i.e., to be in control of oneself. Lack of definitional consensus is a semantic predicament 'freedom' shares with other core concepts in sociology and the social sciences such as 'institution', 'action', 'structure', 'culture', 'class', 'society' and 'power'. Moreover, for many purposes, conceptual pluralism is beneficial because it sensitizes sociologists to various dimensions of complex phenomena. Nevertheless, the downside is that it can be very difficult, even confusing, to navigate among the bewildering multitude of different conceptions of freedom we find in sociology and social theory. For instance, when Marx, Weber and Durkheim make often contradictory claims

about how enabling or constraining modern societies and institutions are for freedom, it is sometimes difficult to compare and assess them because they have different things in mind. Before we get into the question of the relation between social relations and feelings of (un)freedom, which is the main topic of this chapter, we will therefore put some effort into clarifying the concept of freedom.

What makes essentially contested concepts so difficult to agree about is not only that they are so fundamental that much is at stake, but also their 'internally complex character' (Gallie 1956:171-172). This means that they consist of many dimensions and aspects, which again invite sociologists to disagree over which are the most important. To be sure, such concepts typically do have an intuitive core that most people agree upon. But controversies arise as soon as we try to flesh out the details specifying what that core is and to single out the most important dimension or combination of dimensions of the phenomenon in question, e.g., 'freedom'. What we will do in the rest of this section, is to try to spell out the basic intuition of freedom that most conceptions of freedom seem to presuppose. In the next section we analyse how this core intuition has been developed in different directions by central traditions in sociology and social theory.

What, then, is the core and pre-theoretical intuition of freedom? This is a difficult question. Nonetheless, we conjecture that most people would agree to something like this: Most fundamentally, to be free is to be in *control* of and *responsible* for one's *actions*. To start with action, to act is to deliberately change the world according to an intention, as when Nora finally decides to leave Thorvald at the end of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* or Karl Ove deliberately stays in the kitchen preparing food in order to avoid small talk with dinner guests in the second volume of Karl Ove Knausgård's novel *My Struggle*. Freedom immediately enters the picture because actions can succeed (Nora is able to leave the house) or misfire (the guests come into the kitchen and talk to Karl Ove anyway). To be free is to *successfully* change the world in a deliberate way according to an intention. If I act successfully, I can *do what I want*. If my action misfires, on the other hand, I am unfree because I cannot do what I want or control what I am doing. Moreover, when I can do what I want, I am in control of and responsible for what I do, which are the two basic elements of freedom (Svendsen 2014, part 1).

Thoughts on freedom

So far, we have argued that to be free is to be able to do what one wants and thus be in control of and responsible for one's actions (although not necessarily their consequences). No doubt this is a very general and abstract way to think about freedom, which leaves the substantial content and context of freedom a black box. Nonetheless, it puts freedom right in the centre of

sociology which according to Weber (1978:7) and Durkheim (1982:45) is the study of humans acting together and the social orders they create, sustain, change and sometimes dismantle. Consequently, our approach differs from the abstract metaphysical question of 'free will' and its connected philosophical positions such as determinism, indeterminism, compatibilism etc. (see Kane 2005). To give more substance to this core, we will now look at how important yet different forms of freedom have been conceptualized by different thinkers and traditions in sociology and social theory. We will briefly present five important concepts of freedom (which, however, is not an exhaustive listing of possible definitions of freedom). In connection with each of these we describe the aspect of action it corresponds to, the subjective experience that goes with it, the tradition in sociology and social theory that most explicitly has articulated it, and the more overall philosophical position it belongs to. The two first are the most fundamental and widespread, whereas the last three presuppose and in different ways supplement the first two.

Freedom as objective opportunities: One very important type of freedom is to have *many alternative courses of action open* across important domains of life such as education, occupation, consumption, partner, residence, cultural activities, religion, information and politics. Alternatives are conducive to freedom, because more alternatives mean better chances at success in action by getting to realize our goals, whatever they may be (for instance study law, live with the person we love, read modernist novels, and be governed by a political ideology and party we identify with). From the phenomenological (subjective) perspective, this type of freedom is experienced as a 'transformative capacity' (Giddens 1984:91), that is, as the world's plasticity. When I act and intervene in the world, I experience that the world changes and conforms to my goals at least to some extent. And the more alternatives I have, the more plastic the world appears and the more I can control it. Historically, this conception of freedom is most intimately connected to the empiricist (David Hume), liberalist (Thomas Hobbes and John Locke), and utilitarian (Jeremy Bentham) tradition in moral and political philosophy. In sociology, even though most sociologists agree that the menu of alternatives is important, two traditions more than any other accentuate this particular aspect of freedom. At the micro-level, rational choice theory depicts the opportunity set as an objective filtering mechanism that determines what humans can do (Elster 2015:190). At the macro-level, conflict theory looks at how resources and thus freedom is differentially allocated across individuals and groups in the stratification order. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) model of social space maps not only how many (net capital) but also what kind of alternatives (type of capital) are available to individuals in different positions in the class structure of society.

Freedom as choosing: When we are facing different alternatives, we must decide which course of action to embark on. This brings us to a second aspect and concept of freedom: to make choices. By making choices we think of the part of action where we make up our minds about which alternatives are available to us, rank them, select one and then seek to implement it. Subjectively, this kind of freedom is experienced as three 'gaps' in our actions (Searle 2007:41-43). First, there is a gap between the reasons we have for choosing different alternatives of action and selecting one of them (creating an intention). Second, there is a gap between our intention to do something and then actually doing it (implementing an intention). Finally, in extended actions, there is a gap between starting and fulfilling an action (upholding an intention). These three gaps must be filled by us using our 'free will' to make choices. In sociology and social theory, this aspect of freedom is emphasized in classical and postclassical diagnoses of the time addressing the need to make choices in the 'polytheistic' (Weber 2009:147-148), 'liquid-modern' (Bauman 2000), 'post-traditional' (Giddens 1994: chapter 2) and 'individualized' (Beck 1992) terrain of a culturally pluralistic and institutionally differentiated modernity. These sociologists are again, in different ways and degrees, inspired by the long existentialist tradition in theology and philosophy represented by such thinkers as St. Augustin, Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Objective opportunities and choices are the most basic aspects of freedom in the sense that when we choose what to do and have the objective opportunities to do it, we can do what we want and are in control of and responsible of our actions. However, these two concepts of freedom are formal because they in fact say nothing about which choices to make and what objective opportunities are important to be free. The next three concepts of freedom we present address these questions. Although they presuppose the ability to make choices and having objective opportunities to implement them, they emphasize the substantial aspects of freedom: the *content* of choices and opportunities. What they have in common is that to be free is to be guided by the 'right' self. Where they differ, is in their views of this self, which may be either "higher", "lower" (anarchic-impulsive), or "real" (authentic).

Freedom as autonomy: What does it mean to be in control of oneself and one's actions? One influential answer is to let the 'higher' self rule over the 'lower'. The higher self consists of the moral, political, philosophical, legal, normative, religious, existential, etc., principles that specify what a person 'ought' to do. The lower self, on the other hand, comprises instincts, impulses, desires, passions, and inclinations that often counteract those higher principles. Freedom according to this conception consists in subjecting the lower self to control and discipline by the higher self. Those who succeed are autonomous subjects acting according to inner laws

and principles and not heteronomous objects in the causal grip of inner psychological and/or physiological or outer natural or social forces they cannot control. The subjective experience that corresponds to autonomy is to be torn inside between principles and impulses but still have the willpower to let principles tame impulses and not give in to them. In the history of ideas, all kind of 'idealistic' thinkers from Plato to Immanuel Kant have split humans in two and said that to be free is to let the 'immaterial', 'spiritual' or 'transcendental' self subject the 'material', 'bodily' or 'empirical' self to discipline and control. In sociology, this conception of freedom is particularly strong in functionalist sociology in which socialisation into the values and norms of society provides individuals (often defined as a *homo duplex* – a split person) with what Durkheim (1973: chapter 10) in his sociological reformulation of Kant's concept of autonomy calls a higher 'social self' that controls the lower 'biological self'.

Freedom as anarchistic impulsivity: But is not this act of taming one's inner nature also a kind of unfreedom? Indeed, it can be. This critique of autonomy is the starting point for a fourth concept of freedom according to which to be free is to liberate one's "lower" self, i.e., impulses, instincts, and inclinations, from the dictatorial powers of the higher self. For lack of a better concept, we will call it 'anarchistic impulsivity', and it turns autonomy on its head. The impulsive part of this aspect of freedom refers to emancipating one's lower self from the higher and to act spontaneously according to impulses and instincts, whereas the anarchistic part refers to the disorder and unpredictability in one's actions, identity and life that follow from doing this. The subjective experience that goes with anarchistic impulsivity is the feeling of 'letting go' for instance in a rock concert, religious ceremony, erotic-romantic adventure, shopping, physical-athletic-sexual activity, when we eat good food or are intoxicated. If we look at the history of ideas, this concept of freedom is strongly connected to the romantic (Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schiller and Lord Byron) and postmodern (Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) critique of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, control and science. And if we look to sociology, we find it clearly articulated in early Critical Theory's recourse to 'mimesis' and the 'nature in the subject' (Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse), poststructuralism's decentring of the subject (Michel Foucault) and postmodern social theory's emphasis on consumption and seduction (Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman).

Freedom as self-realization: Finally, humans have more than higher and lower selves. They also have talents, skills, capacities and interests that can be more or less developed and used. To this aspect of human action corresponds a fifth concept of freedom: self-realization. Self-realization is s two-step process in which we first develop our latent talents, potentials and interests (such as playing tennis, writing poetry, designing houses or doing sociology), and then

use them regularly (organize our lives so that we can play tennis, write poetry, design houses or do sociology). From the subjective perspective, self-realization is experienced as the increasing marginal utility of skills-based activities that from the start are hard and frustrating but become more and more rewarding the more we develop the skills and capacities we need in order to perform them well. Self-realization contrasts with activities that have sinking (such as consumption) or persistently low (such as repetitive, monotonous low-skill activities) or persistently high (such as being with friends and family) marginal utility. In the history of ideas, freedom as self-realization goes back to Aristotle's metaphysis and the idea of an entity actualizing its latent potentiality, which was re-actualized and individualized by 'expressivist' modern thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and G. W. F. Hegel (see Taylor 1975: chapter 1). It was incorporated into sociology by the 'young' Marx and his analyses of self-realizing and alienation (its opposite) in work, and then later systematized by Jon Elster (1986: chapter 3, 1989).

This concludes our sketchy overview of some important ways that the pre-theoretical intuition of freedom as being able to do what one wants (and the control and responsibility this implies) has been articulated within important traditions in sociology and social theory. A few brief remarks are in place. First, we see that freedom is *multidimensional*. It consists of several aspects depending on which aspect and experience of control and responsibility we emphasize. Second, freedom is *hierarchical*. Objective opportunities and choices are necessary for any form of control and responsibility and thus more primary. Third, freedom is *complementary*. The 'formal' freedoms of objective opportunities and choosing are enabling conditions for autonomy, anarchic impulsivity and self-realization, whereas the three additional more 'substantial' freedoms give choices content and make opportunities significant. Finally, freedom is *conflictual*. Different aspects of freedom pull people in different directions. The higher and lower selves continually fight, too many alternatives ('temptations') can make it hard to put in the effort to develop and use one's talents, and so on.

The social conditions of freedom

Let us now return to more sociological questions. What enables individuals to be free? And what makes them unfree? Here we will look only at the social – and not the psychological, biological, ecological, etc. – conditions of (un)freedom. That is, we will analyse how certain 'structural principles' (Giddens 1984: 17) of society and its culture and institutions both enable and constrain people's ability to do what they want. To start out very generally and taking our inspiration from Isaiah Berlin's (2002:169-181) famous distinction between 'negative freedom' and 'positive freedom' (what was described by him as respectively 'freedom from' and

‘freedom to’), we will here distinguish between two basic forms of social freedom. *Negative social freedom* refers to *lack* of constraining social structures. This is a *zero-sum* type of social freedom: the less society the more freedom, and vice versa. The basic idea is that individuals have projects, plans, goals, and intentions, and they are free to the extent that nothing outside them (and in some cases inside them, as in the case of compulsive behaviour, fear, anxiety, internalized taboos, unbreakable habits, etc.) stands in their way when they try to fulfil them. Now, perhaps the most important obstacle they encounter is ‘society’, that is, other people and social relations. By means of rules, sanctions, surveillance, aggregated consequences, asymmetrical power relations, hierarchies, ideology, discourses, norms and the like, society can obstruct freedom. Indeed, some sociologists consider social control – to tame the disruptive powers of individual freedom and thus create a stable and harmonious social order out of the nasty and brutish pre-social state of nature – to be the essence of society (Durkheim 1982: 51-54; Parsons 1968: 91-92; Bauman 1988). According to this model of understanding, social structure and institutions should be small, deregulated, decentralized, and leave as much room for discretion as possible in order to enable individual freedom. Examples of such institutions are markets, families, and local communities. In addition, institutional safeguards must be designed to protect the individual’s freedom against society, such as civil rights, rule of law and democratic accountability. Intellectually, negative social freedom is closely associated with the liberal tradition in moral and political philosophy (and in its extreme form sometimes with what is called ‘libertarianism’ and ‘anarcho-capitalism’). Institutionally, it is an important part of all Western democracies, but most notably the Anglo-American countries.

Besides *negative social freedom* there is also *positive social freedom*, which refers to the *presence* of socially created economic, cultural, social, political, aesthetical, technological and other resources that the individual needs in order to succeed in action. Here we have a *positive-sum* type of social freedom: the more society the more freedom, and vice versa. To give some examples, the institution (rules and regularities) of sports makes it possible to play (or watch) football or tennis; having a job provides self-respect and income; the institution of art provides books for aesthetic pleasure; because of the electric lightbulb, we can read books after dark; and so on. According to this conception, society enables freedom by creating a wide variety of strong institutions that provide ‘capabilities’ (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011) across a wide range of domains such as economy, politics, education, family, health, art, sports, transportation, law, media, science, and religion. Intellectually, it is associated with socialist and social democratic political philosophy. Institutionally, it is associated with the dense institutional regulations of the Continental and Nordic welfare state societies.

So, if we start out from Berlin's aforementioned distinction, we see there are two basic ways in which society can make individual freedom flourish: the negative (to dismantle repressive institutions and/or subject them to checks and balances) and the positive (to build and sustain strong institutions that create resources and capabilities). Consequently, there are two ways to make people unfree: to build repressive institutions and not subject them to checks and balances that protect the individual; or not to create or dismantle existing enabling institutions. From this follows that we can assess empirically the social conditions of freedom in a historical epoch, society, institution, organization, or group as a function of the constellation of the negative and positive social freedom characterizing it.

This brings us to the *actual* social conditions of freedom in contemporary modern or late-modern societies. A thorough empirical analysis of this big question lies outside the scope and aim of this chapter. Nonetheless, some brief remarks follow. If we simplify the history of sociology and social theory a lot, we find two broad ways to connect modernity and (un)freedom: a pessimistic and optimistic. According to the *pessimistic* tradition, modernity has liberated the individual from the self-inflicted constraints of pre-modern religion, tradition, mythology, tight close-knit communities, traditional authority, poverty, etc., only to inflict new and even more constraining social condition upon itself. Examples of such pessimists abound. Among the classical sociologists, Karl Marx looked at how workers are alienated and exploited in the capitalist class-society. Max Weber worried about loss of meaning and freedom in a demythologized modern society held together by the iron cage of rational capitalism and the bureaucratic modern state. Émile Durkheim addresses the 'forced division of labour' of a society in which social background is fate. And Georg Simmel laments what he calls the 'cultural tragedy' of modernity, i.e., how the 'subjective spirit' (the individual) pales in significance compared to the incessantly increasing 'objective spirit' (the accumulated results of modern institutions, culture, science, economy, technology, and architecture). In postclassical sociology we find many more examples of the same pessimism. James Coleman described a 'asymmetric society' in which the individual is powerless vis-à-vis the many corporate actors (formal organizations) in its social habitat. Early Critical Theory depicted a totally administered world colonized by instrumental reason. C. Wright Mills criticized the creation of 'cheerful robots' as part of the white-collar world in large modern organisations. Modern class analysts disclose the material and symbolic repression and exploitation suffered by the working class (Wright 1997; Mills 1951; Bourdieu 1984). Michel Foucault depicts modern societies as networks of 'prison-like' panoptical surveillance and power held together by the biopower of the modern state. Zygmunt Bauman (1989) views the Holocaust and the Gulag as the logical culmination of the inherent authoritarian and even totalitarian tendencies in the modern 'project of order'. And we could go

on. But we will not. Suffice to say that according to sociologists in the pessimist tradition, modernity systematically destroys opportunities, choices, autonomy, anarchic impulsivity, and self-realization, and it does so by creating new and powerful repressive institutions not subject to proper checks and balances that safeguard individuals.

An obvious critique of the pessimistic tradition is that it underplays the significant progress of modernity (e.g., Pinker 2018; Deaton 2013; Ridley 2010; Rosling 2018). Hence the *optimistic* tradition starts out from the exact opposite premise and looks instead at how modern societies enable individual freedom and enhance the 'emancipation from self-inflicted immaturity' (Kant 1884/1991: 54). Among the classical sociologists, Simmel described the freedom of the individual in a modern metropolis released from the tight informal social control of village life. Durkheim analysed the opportunities for choice, independence and self-realization that comes with the division of labour and its corresponding moral individualism ('the cult of the individual'). And Weber looked at the individual freedom provided by the efficiency, predictability, impartiality, affluence and pluralism of a 'rationalised' modern society built upon secularisation, independent value-spheres, rational capitalism, and a bureaucratic state. We find the same optimism in several postclassical sociologists. For instance, in explicit opposition to the first-generation Critical Theorists, Jürgen Habermas points to the communicative freedom in a rationalized lifeworld governed by the democratic power circuit and hence concludes that modernity is an 'unfinished project'. Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann looks at how functionally differentiated subsystems like the economy, education, law, religion, and the health system produce opportunities for action. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman have crafted theories of individualisation that highlight the need (and possibility) to make choices in a 'de-standardized', 'post-traditional' and 'liquid-modern' social habitat in which nation, class, gender and other 'zombie categories' have lost their hold. Axel Honneth analyses the institutionalisation of social freedom in three spheres of recognition (family, economy, and politics). Jeffrey C. Alexander points to a universalist 'civil sphere' for inclusion and integration in modern societies. And Francis Fukuyama proclaims the 'end of history' as the combination of liberal democracy and market capitalism that has now won a final ideological victory over its collectivist adversaries communism, fascism and Nazism. Some sociologists in the optimist tradition emphasise positive social freedom, such as functional differentiation and the construction of democratic institutions and democratic power circuit to coordinate them. Others emphasise negative social freedom by means of dismantling repressive traditional (Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel), industrial (Beck, Bauman, and Giddens), and collectivist (Fukuyama) social structures.

We will not assess which of the two traditions receive most empirical support. Rather, we claim that 'ambivalence' resides at the heart of modernity (Bauman 1991; Levine 1988; Wagner 1994). Ambivalence in many ways captures the constant pushes and pulls, the victories and the defeats, the possibilities and the limitations of modern society. Already the observation that some key sociologists – classical as well as postclassical – figure in both the pessimist and optimist tradition should alert us to the possibility that we do not face an either/or but a both-and. On the one hand, modern societies more than any other societal type in the history of mankind liberates people by a combination of dismantling repressive institutions, building new institutions that provide capabilities and then subjecting them to checks and balances that safeguard the individual and his/her freedom. The result is a widespread democratisation of freedom, which is no longer an elite privilege but now a mass phenomenon. Despite their many shortcomings, this is the case for most contemporary Western liberal democracies (Welzel 2013). On the other hand, however, when the capacity for collective action and power in modern societies is seized by repressive elites and used to supress and exploit the rest of the population, the result is catastrophic for freedom, as the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (such as Germany under Hitler, the Soviet Union under Stalin and China under Mao), contemporary authoritarian regimes (such as China, Turkey, Russia, Indonesia, to mention but the largest), and some inegalitarian liberal democracies (such as United States and the United Kingdom) clearly display. Thus, the pessimist and optimist traditions capture two basic aspects of modernity. Indeed, to be modern is to be pushed in both the liberal and illiberal directions at the same time (Bauman 1991; Wagner 1994).

Freedom as a social relation

The topic of freedom in itself has not been a primary or even prevalent concern among sociologists. It has mainly been something that has preoccupied philosophers or political scientists. However, a noteworthy attempt to sociologize, as it were, the phenomenon of freedom within a sociological context was made by Zygmunt Bauman in the book with the short and saying title *Freedom* (1988). In this book, as well as scattered in other pieces of work, Bauman (1990, 1997) aspired to show how an appreciation of freedom was important to sociology and to discuss how sociologists may understand this often elusive phenomenon. In *Freedom*, Bauman defined sociology as a 'science of unfreedom' thereby suggesting that sociologists conventionally had neglected the topic of freedom and been more concerned with outlining the limitations to human freedom such as power, class, domination, authority, socialisation and so on (Bauman 1988:5) rather than taking an interest in what freedom actually is.

The purpose of Bauman's perspective is to show that freedom cannot be understood isolated from the social circumstances under which it is experienced. Freedom is always something that is somehow restricted or limited, not least because very few people live their lives without contact with others or without being part of society that, as mentioned, in different ways delimits its members' freedom. Moreover, in our part of the world, freedom is something we mostly take for granted until we encounter limitations, come across obstacles or feel that we cannot do or achieve what we want to do. Bauman thus initiated his book with the following statement:

> In a sense, freedom is like the air we breathe. We don't ask what this air is, we do not spend time discussing it, arguing about it, thinking of it. That is, unless we are in a crowded, stuffy room and find breathing difficult (Bauman 1988:1).

Since we tend to take freedom for granted, it is exactly the encounter with or experience of unfreedom that triggers our considerations about the nature and extent of freedom. In his book, Bauman also highlighted another important social dimension of freedom by showing that 'freedom' (which we, as mentioned, seldom stop to think about) and our conception of it is in fact a social construct – something that changes its meaning, emphasis and usage over time from early capitalism to contemporary consumerism. Bauman here relies on the notion from Norbert Elias that there is a 'sociogenesis' of freedom – that when society changes, so does our understanding of 'freedom'. Whereas some of the earliest uses of the notion of freedom dating back to the 15th century related to being free to move around, later the emphasis shifted to the ability to act without restrictions or ties (Bauman 1988:9), and in contemporary society 'consumer freedom' perhaps marks the most idealized (but also distorted and deceiving) expression of freedom. We, in Bauman's view, are now led to believe we are free when we are free to buy whatever we want.

In *Freedom*, a book written around the time when millions of Eastern Europeans were on the brink of obtaining 'freedom' after decades of Communist oppression, Bauman wants to show that freedom is nothing in and by itself by denaturalising the notion. According to him, freedom is first and foremost a 'social relation'. How should this be understood? This means that freedom is always something that is experienced and expressed as part of relationships of relative dependency to others and/or to experiences of unfreedom. In and by itself, freedom does not make much sense. As Bauman contended:

> Freedom exists only as a social relation; that instead of being a property, a possession of the individual himself, it is a quality pertaining to a certain difference between individuals; that it makes

> sense only as an opposition to some other condition, past or present … For *one* to be free there must be at least *two*. Freedom signifies a social relation, an asymmetry of social conditions; essentially, it implies social difference – it presumes and implies the presence of social division. Some can be free only in so far as there is a form of dependency they can aspire to escape (Bauman 1988:7, 9).

In his novel *Animal Farm*, George Orwell (1945) had famously stated that although all animals are equal, 'some are more equal than others' (in the pigs' rewriting of the Seven Commandments of Animalism). Transferring this to Bauman's idea of freedom as a social relation, one might say that although all people are free, 'some are more free than others', and it only for this reason that freedom actually makes sense. Freedom (and unfreedom) is thus not a possession, it is not an absolute, it is not universal, it is not static; rather, it is a relation, it is relative, it is contextual, and it is a process – something that can change. Moreover, freedom is always to be measured against some form of relative unfreedom or interdependency. Although it has been suggested that Bauman might perhaps be regarded as a 'libertarian' in his conception of freedom (Beilharz 2001:137), it is probably safe to say that this is not the case. It is important to stress that Bauman writes from a socialist perspective about freedom and thus freedom is for him seen through the aforementioned lens of 'positive social freedom' – that freedom requires social resources and opportunities in order to be obtained and experienced. It is thus his contention that freedom is necessarily a social thing, something that can only be achieved in connection to and comparison with others and also in solidarity with others – freedom is something we can help others to achieve. As he has once stated: 'without solidarity … no freedom is secure' (Bauman 1997:208).

By stressing the social character of freedom – the 'sociogenesis' of freedom, freedom as a social relation as well as its close connection to human solidarity – Bauman thus makes freedom a thoroughly social (and thus sociological) category. Bauman is far from alone in stating the social nature of freedom. For example, in Mariam Thalos' *A Social Theory of Freedom* (2016) we also find an argument for appreciating a social and political conception of freedom that is closely aligned with questions of social identity, self-development in contexts of intimate relationships and social solidarity.

Freedom as an emotion

Bauman's relational perspective on freedom takes us some way in appreciating how freedom is indeed a social phenomenon, but he does not really engage with freedom as an emotional experience (Jacobsen 2019). In this, he was far from alone. As mentioned, the topic of freedom has in general been neglected by sociologists. Moreover, looking through most introductions to

‘the sociology of emotions’, the topic of freedom is almost nowhere to be found as an independent entry. Besides the entries on emotions such as ‘fraud (feeling like a)’ and ‘frustration’ there is an empty gap where one might have expected to find an entry on ‘freedom’ (see Smith 2016:111-112). This is indeed strange, not least because freedom – besides being something that may be codified as a formal right within a democratic political system – is also something people do in fact *feel*. Throughout the years, scholars working within ‘the sociology of emotions’ have explored a multitude of different emotions (e.g., shame, guilt, pride, trust, sympathy, fear, regret, etc.), but so far freedom seems to have escaped their attention. Freedom is thus mostly regarded as a political right or as a privilege but in sociology it is, surprisingly, hardly ever analysed as an emotion in its own right. This also means that freedom as an emotion is largely undertheorized as well as relatively underresearched within sociology. Already some 45 years ago it was stated that – with a few notable exceptions – ‘there is no attempt by sociologists to provide empirical measure of freedom as such’ (Hillery Jr., Dudley and Morrow 1977:685). This situation has not changed fundamentally since then.

Freedom, however, is not something that could or should only be related to notions of liberty or to liberation (often framed within the context of the struggle for political rights and democratic freedom). Here freedom (often phrased as ‘liberty’) is often seen as something that is formally bestowed to people (by their rulers) or something they obtain through often intense or violent struggles for liberation. In many respects, freedom understood as an emotion and as an emotional experience is a much more mundane matter, relating also to everyday (work-related or leisurely) situations in which we find ourselves capable or incapable of doing what we want to do. There is no doubt that we experience and feel *something* whenever we peacefully or through intense struggle gain our freedom, when we are ‘set free’, when we sense that our freedom respectively increases or decreases, when we voluntarily give it up or when it is somehow denied or taken from us. Moreover, it is important to stress that the experience of freedom is often compartmentalised in our lives – it is thus seldom that we feel free *all the time* and *everywhere*. For example, we may feel respectively and relatively free/unfree in our work assignments, in our intimate relationships, in our financial situation, in our career prospects, in our health situation, etc. Sometimes we are generously granted freedom in such situations by others (e.g. being allowed to work flexible hours), other times when we decide to take freedom into our own hands (e.g. deciding to leave a relationship that curtails one’s experience of happiness or self-realisation). Some scholars have even talked about so-called ‘emotional freedom’, which is concerned with trying to liberate oneself from the impact of negative emotions in one’s life (see, e.g., Orloff 2010). Emotional freedom is thus about setting oneself free – for example through changing one’s behavioural patterns, mind-sets or values by making informed

decisions, reading self-help books or seeking therapeutical assistance – from the emotions that makes one feel unfree (and perhaps also unhappy) as stepping-stones on the road to a freer and more meaningful life.

As a 'feeling' or an 'emotion' (sociologists sometimes draw a line of distinction between these two otherwise related notions), freedom can be regarded as experiences of fulfilment with no or very few obstacles or limitations to achieving or obtaining what one wants or desires or attempts to do – from opening an annoyingly binding door to fulfilling the dreams, aspirations and hopes of one's life. This can lead to feelings of psychological well-being, pride and purpose in life. However, although this feeling of no limitations, no obligations and no strings attached can be blissful, it can also be experienced as a curse that may lead to feelings of emptiness, insecurity and loneliness. In this sense, freedom has aptly been described as the feeling of 'nothing left to lose' as the famous line from a Janis Joplin song goes. Freedom can thus be envisaged and experienced as a feeling of emptiness and of nothing to do with one's freedom (which obviously raises the question whether freedom is itself an end-goal or a means to obtain something else, such as happiness or a meaningful life). This frustratingly empty feeling can potentially lead to what Erich Fromm (1941/1994) once described as 'an escape from freedom' by seeking shelter and security in totalitarian or conformist ideologies. Unfreedom (or the limitations of one's sense of freedom) may be defined by intense feelings and experiences of frustration, injustice and even despair – but it may also trigger a deep-seated desire to overcome the obstacles and limitations to freedom through active involvement or even combat (e.g. to fight for one's own or other people's freedom). Moreover, it is a characteristic of most emotions (for example contrary to mere feelings) that they contain many different layers and characteristics (qualifying them exactly as 'emotions' and not simply 'feelings'). Some of these defining characteristics of 'emotions' relate to them being a composite of the following aspects: appraisal of a situation, changes in bodily sensations, the free or inhibited display of expressive gestures, and a cultural label applied to the specific constellation of the first three elements (see, e.g., Hochschild 1990). In addition to this, emotions researchers sometimes also separate between 'primary' (or 'core'), 'secondary' and 'tertiary' emotions, mostly based on the innate physical dimension involved and the presumed universality of the emotion in question. Freedom as an emotion does not contain a specific or predominant physiological component, and it is therefore important to emphasise that there are no visible bodily/facial signs that indicate that people feel free in the same way as there are signs whenever the feel fearful, horrified or surprised (as was shown by Charles Darwin back in the 1870s). Moreover, since freedom is a social construct, as we saw above, it is also difficult to define freedom as a universally identical phenomenon. Therefore, freedom is not a 'primary emotion', but this does neither mean that it is not an

emotion and nor does it entail that we cannot search for or discover certain indicators of the feeling of freedom in a variety of contexts.

The 'feeling-side' of freedom relates to how freedom is an important experiential part of human life as it is lived on a day-to-day basis – how *feeling* free/unfree is always something that we may think about, are able to verbalise or even act upon, thus making this feeling amendable to empirical clarification and investigation. The feeling of freedom (or unfreedom) thus triggers certain thoughts, use of words and lines of actions that we may inquire about or observe as indicators of what freedom (as is the case with any other emotion) actually feels like. Take as an example how informants in interview may state that they on the one hand 'feel empowered' or 'liberated' (e.g. from a burden) or, on the other hand, that they 'feel trapped' or 'restricted' (e.g. in their lifestyle choices). These and similar expressions bear witness to people's experiences with and feelings of respectively freedom and/or unfreedom – or something closely related to this.

As mentioned, freedom as a feeling or an emotion has so far been undertheorized and underresearched within the confines of sociology, but there is plenty of potential in studying freedom empirically and in analysing concrete contexts in which people feel free or feel that their freedom is limited or taken away from them – and how this makes them feel. Here we have only been able to scratch the surface of some of the different emotional dimensions of freedom, which far from provides an exhaustive account of their possible meanings or manifestations. We therefore mainly present these scattered and tentative ideas in order to serve as a clarion call to colleagues and students to engage in more theoretical elaboration and empirical exploration of this feelings-side of freedom.

The emotional consequences of freedom

Following our previous compact engagement with freedom as an emotion in the broad sense, in this section we will address some of the more specific emotional consequences of freedom. We describe and analyse what we call a *paradox of freedom* in relation to the subjective feeling of happiness. On the one hand, comparative empirical research on subjective well-being finds that people in free (affluent, open, individualised and liberal) societies on average are happier than people in less free societies (Diener and Suh 2003:443; Inglehart and Welzel 2005:140). Thus, freedom makes people happier. This claim is supported by experimental psychological research, which indicates that to be free makes people happier and that taking it away from them makes them less happy (Langer and Rodin 1976; Rodin and Langer 1977; Shulz and Hanusa 1978). Also, there is evidence to support that this positive effect of freedom on happiness is a cross-cultural universal (Welzel 2013:43; Haller and Hadler 2004). Two mechanisms

generate the positive connection. The first and most obvious is connected to what Amartya Sen (2002, chapters 20-22) calls 'opportunity freedom', that is, achieving desired outcomes. When people can read the books they like, marry the one they love, live where they want, etc., it makes them happy. The second mechanism is connected to what Sen calls 'process freedom', that is being in control of the process that produces outcomes. Hence, associated with experiences of 'self-efficacy' (Bandurana 1997) are positive emotions such as proudness, confidence, self-respect, vitality, and joy. Conversely, there are negative feelings connected to experiences of 'helplessness' (Seligman 1975), such as frustration, anger, shame, sadness and ressentiment.

On the other hand, when we look at historical trends within singular societies, research finds a much weaker connection between freedom and subjective well-being. This somewhat counter-intuitive result even has its own name taken from the economist who discovered it, namely the 'Easterlin paradox' (named after Richard Easterlin). The Easterlin paradox says that over time even as income (a proxy for freedom) grows in a society, average happiness does not (Easterlin 1974). The empirical support for the Easterlin paradox has been challenged. But even if there is *some* positive effect of income (freedom) on happiness over time, longitudinal studies of affluent societies indicate that the effect is clearly decreasing over time. Hence, the more freedom you already have, the less happiness you gain from additional freedom.

Subsequently, the paradox of freedom is that when we compare *different societies at a single point in time*, we find a strong positive effect of freedom on subjective well-being. However, when we look at trends *over time within single societies*, the relation is much weaker and according to some studies even absent. In this respect, freedom seems both to be essential for happiness or subjective well-being and not. We propose to explain this paradox by way of an analogy: that freedom in important ways behaves like money. As economists have pointed out, a significant characteristic of money is sinking marginal utility. The first money we acquire has immense utility because we can use it to fulfil basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, transportation, medicine, and the like. However, as we cover more and more basic needs, additional money has less utility as it can only be used to fill less important needs – such as simply having fun, wasting money, or engaging in what Thorstein Veblen called 'conspicuous consumption'. In the same way, our argument is that freedom has diminishing marginal utility for feelings of well-being. For a person who is not at liberty to decide where to live, whom to marry, what job to have, or which god to believe in (if any), the basic freedom of having opportunities and making choices in such seminal life spheres as work, family, education, and religion is crucial because it gives control and responsibility and the opportunity to live one's own life. This freedom is seminal for happiness because it replaces negative feelings of despair, helplessness, frustration, anger, sadness, etc. with positive feelings of joy, self-respect, proudness, and

confidence. However, when a person already displays basic control of his life, additional freedom is less useful – he has already cashed in the basic emotional rewards of living his own life. In addition, and this is important, as opportunities and choices increase, the negative emotional sides of freedom – the frustrations of freedom – start to be felt.

First, there is the *fear of missing out*. According to Max Weber (2009:140), Abraham of the Old Testament died 'old and satiated with life' because he had experienced all that life had to offer in the small tribal society in which he lived. Members of free modern pluralistic societies, however, dwell in the shadow of all the options and opportunities they will not be able to realize. In a free society, there are immensely many potential partners, friends, careers, places of residence, educations, hobbies, etc. – and thus potential lives to live – that one could have experienced and lived if one only had the time. But we do not – time is indeed a scarce resource. And the psychological mechanism of loss aversion (Kahnemann 2011: 282-286) makes this a cause of considerable frustration.

Second, there is the *unpleasantness of responsibility*. Part of the human condition is that not everything in life works out according to plans. In societies with little freedom, it is easy to blame circumstances and externalize responsibility, and especially in cases where things turn out badly. In a free modern society, however, responsibility is individualized, even for outcomes with systemic causes (Beck 1992; Bauman 2001). Thus, if it is up to you what to do and how to live, then you have only yourself to blame for mistakes and problems. This self-attribution of responsibility easily leads to unpleasant feelings of blame, guilt, regret, self-hate, and shame (Jacobsen and Petersen 2022).

Third, there is the challenge of *frustrated expectations*. With more freedom comes greater expectations, and greater expectations easily cause more disappointments. This is the essence of Émile Durkheim's (1979) concept of 'anomie'. When social control and regulations in institutions such as the family and economy is weakened, people's expectations are set free and become boundless – everything is possible. But even though there are more objective opportunities as a society becomes freer, it is not possible to satisfy subjective needs that have become boundless. The subsequent discrepancy between needs and the opportunities to fulfil them creates a chronic state of discontent in the individual; indeed, in extreme cases it can lead to suicide according to Durkheim.

Fourth, there is *relative deprivation*. Even as our own freedom increases, in free and open societies there will always be others with even more freedom, or who are able to enjoy and get more out of their freedom than we do. Comparing ourselves to such people, as the theory of the reference groups says we will (Merton 1968: chapter 10-11), easily produces negative feelings like a lack of confidence, resentment, envy and even jealousy.

Finally, there is the *tyranny of choice* (Schwartz 2004). With more opportunities, we need to spend more time and effort collecting and processing information regarding potential partners, friends, religions, food, clothes, hobbies, holiday resorts, jobs, and the like. This is frustrating in its own sense but also because the time and energy spent on preparing and making choices could instead have been spent on enjoying the activities and opportunities that freedom provides.

If, as we have argued, freedom in important aspects behaves like money, this gives us an explanation of the paradox of freedom. When we make comparisons across societies, people in freer societies are on average happier than people in less free societies because they to a larger degree can live their own lives and enjoy the positive emotions produced by opportunity freedom and process freedom. However, due to the sinking marginal utility of freedom, as people in free societies become even more free, not only do the benefits of freedom diminish but the frustrations of freedom seem to grow. Hence, if our theory is correct, a freedom (or Easterlin) paradox is just what we would expect, even though the effect of freedom does not need to be absent or negligible for subjective well-being for our argument to bear out, only decreasing.

Since this might appear as an argument against freedom, we would like to add that the sinking marginal utility of freedom for happiness says little about its moral worth. One might argue, for instance, that even tough freedom is not always conducive to happiness, freedom is a key to having a dignified life worth living. Be that as it may, these are normative questions about the place of freedom in the good life and just society that we will not go further into here.

Conclusion

One of the main purposes of this chapter has been to explore and discuss freedom (and its twin experience of unfreedom) as something we *feel* and experience *emotionally* rather than something that is primarily related to formal political rights and institutional arrangements in democratic society, which has often been the main concern within social science research into freedom. Before we ventured into this more emotion-related aspect of freedom, we explored a number of different understandings of freedom from an abstract category to a more concrete experience, and we here outlined five main forms of freedom in social thought and we described and discussed some social conditions of freedom. Following this, we ventured into showing that freedom far from being something that exists in a vacuum can be conceptualised as a social relation. Here Zygmunt Bauman's work on freedom as a social relation shows us that freedom is never something in and by itself – it is always, in one way or other, tied up with the relations and structures that characterize society and with historical changes in our understanding f freedom. Freedom only makes sense if it is compared to different degrees or forms of relative

unfreedom. This also calls into question any notion of 'absolute freedom'. Finally, we looked at how the idea of freedom behaving like money (sinking marginal utility) could explain the 'freedom paradox', namely that even though people in freer societies are happier than people in less free societies, the increased freedom in postwar Western societies has not had the strong positive effects on the subjective well-being of individuals we would expect.

As a social (and thus sociological) phenomenon, freedom is always to some extent a bounded or limited experience – our lives are always embedded in differences in natural dispositions, dense networks of relations and webs of dependencies with others that in different ways impact our ultimate or absolute sense of freedom. On the other hand, however, it is exactly the self-same natural dispositions, networks of relations and webs of dependencies – as we saw above – that may lift us out of oppression and experiences of unfreedom. Experiences of freedom and unfreedom must necessarily be seen as social and emotional phenomena. As we mentioned in the chapter, there is still untapped potential – perhaps particularly within 'the sociology of emotions' – to explore and develop a more comprehensive and adequate understanding of freedom as an emotion. It is exactly when we *feel* free or unfree that freedom/unfreedom becomes important and interesting. Obviously, this feeling may be distorted, shallow or imaginary, for example we may *feel* as if we are free but in fact we are restrained (by external forces and/or internal pressures). At other times, we may refrain from acting or pursuing our goals because we *feel* unfree to do so – but are in fact capable of doing something. Freedom and unfreedom are always complex matters, which is why we need a sociological perspective in order to understand the many social and emotional dimensions of these experiences.

The chapter has emphasised how freedom is important to understanding individual and social life. Freedom, however, is also an awfully comprehensive and complex topic to cover, not least because it – as we stated already from the outset of the chapter – is an 'essentially contested concept' with many mutually conflicting meanings. It is almost impossible to imagine any consensus on what freedom means and how it should be conceptualised. For this reason, in this chapter we have only been able to scratch the surface of this comprehensive phenomenon called 'freedom' and provide some conceptual distinctions and examples to explore further through theoretical elaboration or empirical studies. The purpose of the chapter has thus been to provide a preliminary conceptual framework for appreciating and exploring freedom as an emotion that can be subjected to empirical studies. Instead of being relegated to the realm of abstract philosophical scrutiny, freedom (and unfreedom) as a feeling or an emotional experience (and as a sociological phenomenon) must stand its test in empirical studies of how people actually live their lives and encounter different opportunities for or obstacles to their freedom.

The example of the barrel-bearing hermit living in the desert and contemplating existence in isolation is mainly relevant for teaching philosophy.

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