

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 690

August 15, 2022

“Freedom Is a Give and Take”

Many years ago, when I was just emerging from childhood, I read a book called “Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Childrearing.” The nutshell on the Amazon website today says of the 1960 book, “The fundamentals of child rearing based on freedom and nonrepression are discussed by the head of the famous English experimental school.” (The school is called Summerhill.)

Several years later, having heard from parents (largely in the U.S.) that his advice was producing a bunch of narcissistic kids, Neill published a second book called “Freedom—Not License.” Here are a few excerpts from the introduction to that 1966 book.

Neill asks, “How can one distinguish between freedom and license?” In response he says “My publisher in the U.S.A. implores me to write a whole book in explanation of these terms, saying, ‘You must, for so many American parents who have read SUMMERHILL feel guilty about the strict way they have treated their child, and then tell their child that from now on he is free.’

“The result [says Neill] is usually a spoiled brat, for the parents have scant notion of what freedom is. They do not realize that freedom is a give and take—freedom for parents as well as freedom for the child. As I understand it, freedom does not mean that the child can do everything he wants to do, nor have everything he wants to have.

“Yes, that, simply stated, is the crux of the matter: Freedom, over-extended, turns into license.”

In the United States we have placed Freedom at the center of our national identity. But many of us “have scant notion of what freedom is.” In fact we have elevated to iconic status an individualized and simplistic idea that we call Freedom—with a capital “F”—but which more closely resembles license. In the process we have stripped Freedom of its power and complexity, transforming it into a one-dimensional fetish at whose feet we worship. In order to even begin to understand the give and take that is real freedom, some of that power and complexity must be restored. To begin, I’ll start by recalling a lesson I first offered in these pages back in 2002. ♦

Two Freedoms

20 years ago, in Nygaard Notes #146, I published a piece called “Fetishes, Cults, and Infinite Possibilities.” (One of my all-time favorite titles for a Nygaard Notes essay!) In it I explained that, when someone exhibits “excessive devotion or blind adoration” to something, that “something” is called a fetish. What I argued then, and still argue, is that it is a certain simplified *idea* of Freedom, more so than the complex reality, that has come to be blindly adored in American political culture, and it is in this sense that Freedom in the United States has become a fetish. The result is that the thing that so many blindly adore is not a real thing. It’s a symbol, a monument, an abstraction. With each passing year, we can see that this blind devotion to that abstraction leads us

to exalt one form of Freedom while limiting another, equally important, form.

Consider that Freedom takes two forms. One form is the freedom TO. This is the freedom TO do something, or the freedom TO go somewhere, or the freedom TO have something. This is the aspect of freedom that is fetishized in public discourse in the United States.

The other form that freedom takes is the freedom FROM. This includes such freedoms as the freedom FROM fear, or the freedom FROM want, or the freedom FROM exploitation, or the freedom FROM toxic pollution.

continued on page 2

Greetings,

In the previous edition of Nygaard Notes, I promised to talk about Freedom, Democracy, Coercion and Consent. As it turns out, I'm mostly talking about Freedom and Democracy, and not so much about Coercion and Consent. When I started thinking about how a majority-rule system deals with minorities—who may be aspiring to exercise their rights or may be deprived of their rights by the majority—it quickly became clear that it is a discussion that, while related to both Freedom and Democracy, is a discussion for another day.

On the other hand, I discuss in this issue not only Freedom and Democracy, but also Power! They're all connected, of course.

Stay cool,
Nygaard

Two Freedoms *from page 1*

Another way to understand this idea is to talk about “positive liberties” and “negative liberties.” A former constitutional law professor named Barack Obama explained the distinction in an interview back in 2001: “...generally the Constitution is a charter of negative liberties. It says what the states can't do to you, says what the federal government can't do to you. But it doesn't say what the federal government or the state government must do on your behalf.”

Whether you say “freedom from” or “negative liberties,” that's not what most USAmericans think about when they think about freedom, and it never has been. I explained this more fully in my series “On Freedom” back in NN #421 in 2009, Part One of which was called “The Complexity of Freedom.”

It's easy to see expressions of these different interpretations of Freedom. Public protests against

COVID mask mandates, for example, might highlight a protester shouting, “You can't make me do something I don't want to do!” They want the freedom TO shed their Covid masks.

Activists demanding stronger public health measures, on the other hand, might shout, “You can't make it more difficult for me to do something I want to do!” They are calling for the freedom FROM Covid infection that masks offer.

When we understand that Freedom is a complex living thing rather than the fetishized symbol, monument, or abstraction that we've been taught to revere, then we can begin to see how such unlimited freedom—what Neill calls License—can sometimes end up making everyone less free.

But is the converse also true? Can less freedom make us *more* free? In order to think about that, we have to think about power. And about Democracy. ♦

Freedom, Power, and Democracy

If we want democracy, we have to give up some of our freedom.

Now, that's a losing political message if I ever saw one!

But it's true. And I believe the truth of it is obvious if we just think about it for a few minutes. So let's think about it for a few minutes.

People often confuse freedom and power. Simply put, freedom is being able to do what you want to do, while power is being able to get other people to do what you want them to do.

I like to use the grocery store analogy: Anyone with money can buy anything that is on the shelves of the grocery store. That's freedom. But only the owners of the stores and the farms and the distribution systems can decide what is on the shelves of the grocery store. That's power.

So, if some people in a society have more power than others, that means that other people are going to have to be less free. That's why the author and activist Frances Moore Lappé says that “real democracy” requires “the continuous and wide dispersion of economic *and* political power.” ↗↗↗

→→ Here's another way of thinking about this, taken from a 2016 book called *The ABCs of Socialism*:

“At the core of these values [of freedom and democracy] is self-determination: the belief that people should be able to decide the conditions of their own lives to the fullest extent possible. When an action by a person affects only that person, then he or she ought to be able to engage in that activity without asking permission from anyone else. This is the context of freedom. But when an action affects the lives of others, then these other people should have a say in the activity. This is the context of democracy. In both, the paramount concern is that people retain as much control as possible over the shape their lives will take.”

As is the case with almost any discussion of social systems, the ideas of freedom and self-determination are easier to understand if we introduce the idea of socio-economic class into the discussion. Everyone wants more “freedom,” but the kind of freedom we want will tend to vary by class. People with more wealth and/or power will tend to give primary importance to the freedom TO. This is because the ability to do a lot of things is something that comes with wealth. Wealthy people (like the rest of us) naturally don't want anyone putting limits on their freedom to do whatever they like. It's also true that the wealth held by people in the upper classes offers them a certain degree of freedom FROM want, from exploitation, and so forth.

For members of the lower classes, on the other hand, the freedom FROM is often more important. This includes freedom *from* the harms that might occur if the freedoms of those above us in the social order are not limited. This form of Freedom is thus of relatively less importance the higher one goes on the social ladder.

When Lappé talks about the “continuous and wide dispersion of economic and political power” that is required for democracy, one of the things that this means is that decisions need to be made less often by individuals, and more often by collective processes that bring as many voices as possible into the discussion. This, too, affects different classes of people differently. And that's because, when a group makes a decision, each participating voice is one voice among many. For powerful people—people who are used to their voice being THE voice—that marks a reduction in their power. For people who have been marginalized—people who are used to having no voice at all in decisions that shape their lives—being part of a democratic decision-making process means they have MORE power than they had

before. Infinitely more power.

It is in this sense that Democracy—a system that emphasizes collective decision-making processes—increases the power of the weak, and decreases the power of the dominant. Or at least promises to. This dynamic explains in part the current efforts to limit democratic participation in U.S. politics. As traditionally-marginalized groups find their voices and insist on being allowed into the halls of power, traditional power centers fight back. Think voter suppression, anti-tax protests, calls for smaller government, etc.

I started this essay by saying that we have to give up some of our freedom if we want democracy. I hope that outlandish statement sounds a little less outlandish when we consider that, in many cases, a small sacrifice of MY personal freedom TO would be more than offset by an increase in OUR freedom FROM.

But this increase in freedom is obscured in a culture that fetishizes only the individualized form of freedom that I call Freedom TO. And one of the results is that many people who are struggling, who are alienated, who are feeling less free with every passing year, come to identify with the people at the top—the people who understandably emphasize the freedom TO and never the freedom FROM.

This is what a propaganda system does: It makes the fears and priorities of certain sectors seem universal, even logical, to millions of people, while making alternative thoughts seem outlandish or threatening, if not unthinkable.

And so the leaders who emphasize a limited vision of freedom attract millions whose understanding of freedom might otherwise focus on the ever-more-powerful structures and systems that pose the real threats to freedom. Freedom FROM... what? Capitalism?

Near the turn of the century Yale University political scientist Robert A. Dahl published a book called “On Democracy.” I leave you with some poignant words from that book, the wisdom of which we ignore at our peril:

“The relation between a country's democratic political system and its nondemocratic economic system has presented a formidable and persistent challenge to democratic goals and practices throughout the twentieth century. That challenge will surely continue in the twenty-first century.” ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “*Four Essential Human Freedoms*”

In this issue of the Notes I talk about two types of freedom, the freedom TO and the freedom FROM. It might sound like an original idea to some readers, but the idea is hardly a new one. On January 6th 1941, in his annual State of the Union speech, President Franklin Roosevelt said this:

“In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

“The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

“The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

“The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

“The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.”

By the way, it doesn't escape me that the United States would emerge from WWII as a major imperial power, often acting in direct contradiction to these inspiring words. At the same time, the idea that freedom manifests in different forms played a role in the adoption by the United Nations in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Preamble of which declared that “the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.”

Many of those “common people” were, of course, prevented from having a voice in the drafting of the UDHR, as a third of the world's population were still under colonial domination at the time of its adoption, according to the Encyclopedia of Human Rights. Even with all these caveats, the public proclamation of a universal right to these Four Freedoms was a remarkable step forward in the struggle of “the common people” for self-determination.

Read the UDHR HERE: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>

Nygaard Notes

P.O. Box 6103

Minneapolis, MN 55406

E-mail: nygaard@nygaardnotes.org

Web: www.nygaardnotes.org