Symposium on the Challenges Facing Democrats

Freedom Now

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Left-wing politics is resurgent. Self-proclaimed socialists are unexpectedly popular. Proposals like universal health care are a commonplace of Democratic campaigns. But there is not yet a clear, unifying idea behind this political shift. We propose that that idea is freedom. While the left once understood freedom as emancipation from the economy, the right spent the twentieth century neutralizing and appropriating the idea of freedom by reinventing the economy as the true site of freedom. To reclaim freedom as a value of the left, we have to begin with the daily experience of most people: the unfreedom of the workplace. The authoritarian organization of work is not just an offense against freedom; it also helps us understand how freedom requires emancipation both from the economy and within the economy, and why that emancipation requires mass struggle.

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The left is having a moment in the United States. Policies that went unmentioned or were declared out-of-bounds during the presidential campaign of 2016—a federal jobs guarantee, single-payer health care, free college, massive tax hikes on the rich, and the Green New Deal—are commonplaces of the Democrats’ 2020 campaigns. According to recent Gallup polls, socialism is now more popular than capitalism among Democrats and young people, and support for “some form of socialism” among all Americans is at 43% (compared to 25% in 1942).1 Across the country, self-declared socialists are being elected to office.2 There is a new militancy


in the labor movement, with teachers striking even in the reddest of states—producing the largest number of striking workers since 1986—and flight attendants helping to bring Donald Trump’s government shutdown of 2018–19 to an end. Often led by women, in occupations traditionally associated with women, these strikes and job actions suggest a potential convergence between issues of labor and gender that is the hallmark of socialist feminism.3

Yet there is a mismatch between the ambition of the moment and the ambit of its arguments. The left is hesitant about broader claims that might justify these policies and movements. There is talk of socialism, and debate about what it entails, but less discussion of socialism as an ideology and why it is desirable. The same goes for the Democratic candidates, from whom one has not heard anything on the order of Franklin Roosevelt’s Commonwealth Club speech or Reagan’s story of the free market. Instead, there is the nostalgic turn of “Green New Deal” and “Medicare For All,” talismans of the past meant to inaugurate a future. But aura cannot do the work of argument. If these policies are to have a chance of breaking through, they will need a grounding principle, which does what an ideology is supposed to do: name the enemy, organize the policies, orient the actions, state the destination, and provide the fuel for the movement to get us there.

We argue here that, for modern Democrats and those further to the left, that principle is freedom. Freedom is a global principle that reaches back to the birth of the left during the French Revolution and runs through various emancipation struggles since. It also has a special resonance in the United States. According to historian Eric Foner, freedom is “the central term in our political vocabulary.” While voices of the left periodically worry that freedom has been lost irretrievably to the right, there is an ongoing contest in this country between elite claimants invoking freedom as a possession already had and subaltern counter-claimants envisioning freedom as a struggle to be won.4


Yet the real reason for Democrats and the left to defend a politics of freedom is not that it fits into a national narrative or is an available vernacular—there are many of those, after all. The real reason is that it names the problem that an increasing number of people face today: systemic unfreedom in the neoliberal economy. By confronting that unfreedom, the left can do more than identify, in a coherent and cohesive way, the myriad problems that individuals are currently facing. It can offer people an opportunity for acting collectively, for creating the sort of realignment that in the past has reordered the policies and priorities, the broad language, of public life.

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The promise of freedom begins with the fact of unfreedom. The source or locus of that unfreedom changes over time, but unfreedom today is most widely experienced in and because of the economy. The unfreedom of the economy has two dimensions: domination in the workplace and the extension of market discipline to all areas of social life. The upshot of this unfreedom is a world awash in choice yet organized by subordination and limitation. Freedom on the left once meant emancipating people from economic discipline and constraint. That conception was so influential, as we will show, that generations of conservative intellectuals launched their counter-revolutions against it. Now, however, freedom has become coterminous with the domination of individuals in and through the economy. The left has to launch its rebirth against that renaming of subjection as freedom.

The most obvious dimension of unfreedom is in the workplace. Workplace unfreedom is seldom discussed. Because the exchange of money for work is thought to be analogous to the exchange of money for goods, employment seems to lie beyond the realm of power and politics. “An economic transaction,” the economist Abba Lerner once said, “is a solved political problem.” Unlike politics, which involves the enforcement of law through coercion, the market is “a form of unanimous consent arrangement,” declared the chair of Jimmy Carter’s Council of Economic Advisers. On this account, we are to believe that a worker is no less free with respect to her boss than is a customer with respect to his grocer.

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7. Charles Schultze, cited in Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 42 (see note 4 above).
Yet in nearly every capitalist country, one of the leading elements of the legal definition of employment is subordination to the will of a superior. In exchange for remuneration, employees agree to perform a job under the authority of another. That authority is extensive, because what constitutes “the job” is not—cannot—be stipulated in advance, even by contract, with any specificity. It is the employer who determines, on the job, what the job is. The first obligation of the employee is to abide by the rule or obey the command of their employer. That can mean that they must urinate—or are forbidden to urinate. It can mean that they should be sexually appealing—or must not be sexually appealing. They may be told how to speak, what to say, whom to say it to, where to be, where to go, how to dress, when to eat, and what to read—all in the name of the job.

Skeptics may reply that because it is temporally and spatially limited, workplace authority is less onerous than it seems. But the authority of any institution—be it the family, the prison, or the state—does not become less authority-like because it is limited in time and space. The authority of employers, moreover, does not begin

and end with the workday or the workplace. It often extends, by law, beyond the workday and the workplace. According to a recent unanimous decision of the Supreme Court, an employer may require its employees to wait in line, without pay, after the workday ends (the Court put no restriction on the amount of time) while the employer searches the effects of those employees.14

Even after the workday ends and employees leave the workplace, employers may instruct them how to vote, enjoin them to donate money to candidates, require them to attend rallies for those candidates, hold signs at those rallies, and lobby those candidates if and when they are elected.15 Off the job, employees may be forbidden to drink. Or ski. They may be compelled to post statements on social media—or prohibited from posting statements. They may be forbidden to participate in group sex at home or cross-dress outside the home. They may be prohibited from challenging government officials.16 This is just a smattering of the off-the-job activities that an employer may compel or forbid—on pain of being disciplined or fired—as an exercise of employer authority. Whether these activities have any relationship to the work the employee performs on the job makes little difference. Given the indeterminacy of work contracts and the rules of at-will employment that are operative in many states—where employees can be fired for good reasons, bad reasons, or no reason at all—employers have tremendous power to direct their employees' behavior off the job.17

But isn't the worker free to leave a bad boss? Formally speaking, yes, but even if they are free to exit this workplace, they are not free to exit the workplace. Roughly eighty percent of American adults have no reasonable alternative to entering and staying in the labor market; they need employment to meet their living expenses. Only the top 10 to 20% of the population, who are disproportionately white, can live for any time on their savings.18 Because employment provides for so many

17. Ibid., 57–67.
of our necessities, and because it is a provision the employer has the power to deny, workers often have no choice but to do whatever their employer asks of them.

The employer’s control over the workforce is an instrument of productivity and profits. At Amazon warehouses, an automated surveillance system tracks the workflow. Any break in the workflow—“TOT” or “time off task”—is noted, and the worker receives a warning. Too many warnings, and the worker is fired. In one warehouse, the annual firing rate for such infractions was about 10%; extended across North America, such a rate would mean “thousands lose their jobs with the company annually for failing to move packages quickly enough.” To avoid even the perception of TOT, workers forgo their bathroom breaks.19

This connection between control and productivity suggests that employer coercion is not the expression of any individual pathology or arbitrary will; indeed, all of the surveillance, most of the scheduling, and much of the firing at Amazon are performed not by a person but by machine.20 The subordination of workers to employers, with the attendant coercion, is the way that a capitalist economy works. (As is sometimes observed, the only thing worse than working at Amazon is working at a competitor, where margins are tighter, surveillance and control more severe.)21 The more bosses can discipline and limit the power of workers, the more money there is to be made. If those bosses do not do it, their profit margins will suffer relative to other bosses, and they will be driven out of business. That is the discipline of the market; the coercion of the worker by the capitalist, as Marx noted, is a translation of the coercion of the capitalist by the market.22

The discipline of the market also structures the provision of social goods. Those lucky enough to have savings, or a job with benefits, face an endless set of choices: educational accounts, retirement plans, flexible spending accounts, and health-care


20. Ibid.


and long-term care plans. Though held responsible for these choices, the outcomes are usually beyond their control. One health-care or long-term care plan may be available this year but not the next, and the flushness of each account hinges on arbitrary fluctuations in financial markets. And should one of these people lose or switch their job, they will have to make these choices all over again, under whatever terms are available at their next employer. Even without a change of employer, they may have to make these choices annually or biannually, as one plan disappears or is swapped for another. Hours of time and effort will be dedicated to these choices. Where the jurisdiction of the boss imposes one sort of unfreedom, the spreading discipline of the market imposes another: the loss of time in which to engage in projects of one's own choosing.

And those are the better off workers. Most workers are not lucky enough to spend their time managing accounts and reading the fine print. They do not earn enough to save. They have few or no fringe benefits, and hence they assume debt merely to secure basic goods. Forty percent of Americans who have had to pay unexpected medical bills are in debt for those bills; illness or medical bills contributes to 50 to 75% of all household bankruptcies. Of those bankrupted, roughly three-quarters have health insurance. College indebtedness has skyrocketed. In 2017, average educational indebtedness for millennials was nearly $11,000, which was more than twice that of Gen-Xers in 2004. Roughly 2.5 million students today will owe at least $100,000 for their education. Twenty-eight percent of African-American borrowers are not able to keep up with the payments on their student loans.23

Debt doubles down on market discipline and unfreedom, since those in debt must work for both a boss and a creditor. Evidence shows that indebted students do not pursue their studies with the same intellectual freedom and experimental attitude as debt-free students. These constraints follow them to their career choices and beyond.24 In order to service their debt, millennials have to put off


other life choices such as marriage, childbirth, and homeownership. On the other side of the life cycle, many find they cannot afford to retire because their retirement benefits are too paltry.

The combination of indebtedness and increasing market discipline, coupled with the jurisdiction of the employer, suggests that one of the greatest sources of unfreedom today is the economy itself. We are not unfree simply because we lack basic economic resources. We are also unfree because we are subjugated in the production of those resources in the workplace and by the spreading market discipline that consumes so much of our lives.

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That omnipresence of the economic, and its contributions to unfreedom, is not accidental. For several generations, a bipartisan array of policy makers and intellectuals has sought to bring the force of the economy to bear on more and more areas of life. The ambition of these actors was less to limit government involvement in economic matters than to restrict the sphere of political contestation over economic matters. “What the market does,” wrote Milton Friedman, “is to reduce greatly the range of issues that must be decided through political means.” That did not mean that the political dimensions of these issues would go away; it meant that they would be resolved through extra-political state institutions (courts, in particular) or the market. The political question did not disappear; it found a new home.

25. Mitchell, “Mike Meru Has $1 Million in Student Loans”; and Adamy and Overberg, “Playing Catch-Up in the Game of Life” (see note 24 for both sources).


29. Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom, 15 (see note 6 above).
The energy of a highly politicized society was now to be diverted into the economy itself. The market, Friedman wrote, is “a system of proportional representation” in which “each man can vote.” The demands of social democratic decision making would now be expressed in the intrusiveness of market decision making. The too many meetings of socialism became the too many creditors of a debtor nation, the too many bosses of the workplace, and the too many hours spent trying to placate both.

To bring about this transformation, intellectuals and policy makers had to tackle what Hayek described as the prevailing “belief that the consummation of individual freedom requires relief from the most pressing economic cares,” the notion that if their economic needs were provided for, people would be able to enjoy a “higher” freedom in politics and culture. Against that view, Hayek insisted that there are no “purely economic ends separate from the other ends of life.” Every decision about the allocation of resources reflects a belief about the value of those resources and the ends to which they are being put. If one chooses to forgo dining out for the sake of saving for retirement, they are prioritizing the leisure of the future over the enjoyment of the now. They are declaring, morally, what matters to them. Only in the economy, thought Hayek, must one confront the fact that resources are not limitless; trade-offs have to be made. By forcing people to make choices with scarce resources, the economy not only models moral choice; it is the best site for the development of their moral capacities. “The sphere where material circumstances force a choice upon us,” Hayek said, “is the air in which alone moral sense grows and in which moral values are daily re-created in the free decision of the individual.”

The second step in valorizing markets was to remind liberals of their original insight: modern society is irreversibly plural. From Hobbes to Berlin, we have been told that we live in a world divided by the question of the good. Our moral visions are different and incommensurable. If economic decisions are moral decisions, any government allocation of resources will be akin to the establishment of religion or legislation of the good. If government devotes money to building multi-family dwellings in cities, it is privileging a vision of urban life over the vast suburban tracts of single-family homes. When it devotes more policing to wealthy white neighborhoods over poor black neighborhoods in order to protect the property of the former, or when it does the opposite in order to control the lives of the latter, it is making

30. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 216–17; emphasis added.
a statement about what and whom it values most, about the kinds of lives and communities it favors.

The conclusion that followed from these two arguments is familiar, but now takes on a different cast. Not only should government refrain from distributing economic resources, not only should individuals be free to make choices in the market, but it is in the market that we express our moral selves and find our freedom. The highest morality, the most intimate expression of the self, comes in the form of choosing between economic options that we cannot escape. Freedom, in other words, is not the sphere in which we are free to choose; it is the sphere in which we are forced to choose. The more economic options that are forced upon us, the more each of us will choose responsibly; the more alternatives we have to navigate, the freer we are to choose in a way that matters. To the extent that government limits the discipline of the market and the economy, it makes choices for us. It diminishes the opportunities for freedom by diminishing the opportunities for existential choice.

That reasoning is how we have reached the point where freedom becomes a prison house of choices and liberty the domination of the workplace. The irony of this world is that it has not been created by any sleight of hand. There is no mystification in these writings, no hiding of esoteric meanings. It is as plain as day. The constraints imposed by the market are not denied; they are celebrated as morally salutary. Hayek conceives the pairing of freedom and responsibility as a project of almost Foucauldian self-creation through disciplinary subjugation: “We assign responsibility to a man, not in order to say that as he was he might have acted differently, but in order to make him different.”33 This is a freedom that finds its fruition not in emancipation or liberation but in the imposition of economic fetters.

Yet, even on its own terms, this fettered freedom cannot bear the weight of its claims. If the market rewards “adaptability,” as Hayek says, then the advantage lies not with those who take moral values as fixed points around which to organize some consistent shape of a life but with those who are ready to swap their purposes for preferences that can be abandoned when the signal is lit.34 The adaptable craft themselves not into purposive beings making weighty choices but into agents who wear their commitments lightly—lightly enough to shrug off those commitments if their job is rendered redundant, their talents are no longer considered

useful, their community is deemed unworthy of investment. With personal drift re-described as “adaptability,” it becomes possible to rewrite what Hayek called “submission to the impersonal forces of the market” as freedom. A situation “in which moral values are daily re-created in the free decision of the individual” means a life in which our values are temporary, contingent, and as unfixed as yesterday’s choice and tomorrow’s preference.35

The vehicle for this endless choice-making is the price signal. When prices go up on a commodity or a form of labor, market actors adjust their activities. But for all the concern of market theoreticians with the arbitrary power of organized majorities in government, the fact remains that the price signal reflects the arbitrary desires of an overwhelming number of individuals, which are then converted into forces that act upon market actors, pressuring those actors to change their choices. The market does not protect us from the whims of others; it communicates those whims to us, enforcing an adaptation to others similar to that of democratic decision making—except in one respect. Where democratic decision making requires organized deliberation over desires and preferences, a knowledge not only of what our fellow citizens seek but why they seek it, the price signal works precisely because we have no such knowledge of why. In the market, we must “yield to forces which we neither understand nor can recognize as the conscious decision of an intelligent being.”36

This is the medium in which Hayek believes we are making choices that reflect our ultimate values and priorities in life. This is the medium of our freedom: a sphere where we are not protected from but subjected to the preferences and pressures of others and without any of the features we normally associate with politics or democracy. Without collective deliberation, without democratic contestation. This is collective life viewed through a glass darkly. It is a vision—really, an anti-vision: inarticulate, indirect, mysterious, obscure—that we must confront if we are to be free.

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The left’s freedom program must begin with work. The reasons for this have nothing to do with any claim that humans are laboring beings or with some pre-commitment to class as the explanation of everything. We begin with work for other reasons. First, as noted, the workplace is a major site of human domination today. While other institutions—the prison, for example—are more coercive than the workplace, the workplace is where the vast majority of the population spend

35. Hayek, Road to Serfdom, 212, 217 (see note 31 above).
36. Ibid., 212.
the bulk of their waking hours. It is the most widely experienced institution of
domination and one that intensifies and enhances so many other experiences of
unfreedom. Second, the extent of the market discipline one experiences off the
job is substantially determined by what happens on the job. For men and women
in the top income and wealth brackets, the proliferation of market-based goods is
a boon. For the vast majority in the lower income brackets, market discipline en-
tails a loss of free time or subjugation through debt. Income and discretionary
time are not simple rewards of the market. They are related to power in the work-
place, to the presence of unions and collective bargaining, to the status and stand-
ing of women and people of color, and to other domination-related factors. Con-
facing unfreedom off the job requires confronting unfreedom on the job.

The third, and perhaps most important, reason for beginning with work is that
even while the workplace is a site of domination, it is also a classroom of freedom,
a space where we learn the political arts of struggle and emancipation. When we
work, we cooperate with other people. We subordinate our wills to a common pur-
pose—first and foremost to that of the boss, but en route to fulfilling the boss’s pur-
poses, we learn to coordinate our actions with those of our co-workers. These co-
workers may not share our race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or
ideology. But the need to cooperate in the context of pluralism makes the workplace
a proto-political space, not unlike the polis as conceived by political theorists such as
Wolin and Arendt. While these elements of cooperation amid difference are ob-
scured by the managerial structure of workplace rule, they were recognized, early
in the life of capitalism, by Smith and Marx. It is no accident that leading opponents

These proto-political aspects of work suggest that we can organize work differ-
ently. In learning to cooperate with others for a shared purpose, we see the possi-
ibility of taking a greater responsibility for economic arrangements as a whole.

While conservatives often accuse the left of failing to come to terms with necessity,
they confuse the contingent features of a capitalist economy—work under condi-
tions of subordination and private ownership, for whichever needs the market hap-
pens to register—with having to make some kind of social choice about what to
produce and under what conditions. Performing work that is socially necessary re-
quires some agreement about ends and the distribution of tasks, but that is all that
it requires. We could leave these decisions to the market and the private owners of
capital or we could make these decisions in a democratic and deliberative fashion. Given the understanding of freedom offered here, which begins with the effort to remove or limit unfreedom, the left’s position is straightforward: workers should control the conditions of their work. For all of Hayek’s invocations of responsibility and the market, it makes little sense to claim that people are responsible for their actions when their first obligation as workers is to do what their bosses tell them, and when what their bosses tell them is simply the translation of an obscure market signal that turns human preferences into non-negotiable demands.

However radical this vision may seem, some of the rhetoric and proposals of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, such as employee ownership and worker co-determination, have begun to point in this direction. The idea of self-government at work is not just a way of limiting the worst excesses of capitalists or reducing inequality; it is a way of making us free by making the workplace free. There are certainly limits to our ability to make us free at work. Some work is drudgery and self-governing majorities at work can oppress minorities. Moreover, freedom requires more than meaningful work. It also entails free time to do as one wishes, to pursue one’s projects and purposes, to socialize and explore, to do nothing at all. A critical aim of a freedom-based economy must be not only to make people free at work but also to free them, to some degree, from work. One of the purposes of the collective and democratic control over work is to allow men and women to reclaim non-work time from the all-encompassing pressures of the boss and the job and from the market itself, not to mention to improve the conditions of work (e.g., to make it less onerous or eliminate all forms of harassment on the job) that bleed into and affect the quality of their free time.

But truly free and equally available free time for everyone requires collective, democratic intervention at a broader level, through a restructuring of the economy as a whole. At moments in the New Deal and Great Society years, Democrats have moved toward that goal, and for compelling reasons. Policies like a universal basic income, as well as public education, public pensions, and socialized medicine, do more than meet people’s basic needs. They free people from the discipline of work and from domination on the job. With these goods publicly provided through the

state, rather than through the job or other market mechanisms, men and women would not only be free at work; they would be freer to choose the kind of work they would like to do. Because that would have tremendous ramifications for the economy, the democratic deliberation we call for at work must be extended over the economy as a whole.

The content of a freedom program is necessarily vague because the core of re-claiming freedom is a question not of policy but of politics. Whatever its precise content, the program must express the organized demand for freedom by those who seek that freedom. The politics of freedom is about collective struggle, not reasonable agreement or bipartisan consensus. No amount of rational policy talk, inspiring imagery, or principled discussion can alter this fact. Any truly emancipatory project will face resistance. Those few who benefit from our current arrangements—mistakenly called the 1% but closer to being 10 or 20% of the wealthiest—are likely to oppose the sorts of changes we envision. Their power, their wealth, their freedom, is too bound up with the current organization of the economy to countenance the dramatic changes in ownership, control, standing, and power that freedom requires. There will be conflict if the struggle for freedom advances. Those who stand to benefit most from social transformation will have to struggle collectively to claim their freedom. Many of these individuals will have reasons for not wanting to join such a movement or will actively resist it. Any social struggle is difficult, particularly when the animating social vision is not guaranteed. Collective struggle also requires overcoming the barriers that are created between people—including the idea that we can only be free if we are left to ourselves, that we should keep to our private lives, and that any broader efforts at democratic renegotiation of collective life is a recipe for coercion and arbitrary rule, even violence. Any freedom program must be willing to promote this democratic struggle, rather than elide or suppress it. We find the seeds of that idea in Bernie Sanders’s rhetoric about being “organizer in chief,”38 and in proposals from the Warren and Sanders camps that would strengthen workers’ right to strike and organize.39

A real politics of freedom posits a belief in the capacity of people to revise the terms of their existence and a commitment to the institutions that make these collective revisions possible. In this instance, that translates into the belief that freedom is best realized not through tending our own gardens but through disciplined

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commitment and collective struggle, in activities like mass strikes and party politics. These democratic struggles are not simply expressions and experiences of freedom, though they are that. They are also the means to the freedoms people deserve.

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