

Freedom Is a Breakfast Food

“Freedom” advertises everything from high-performance automobiles to tranquilizer drugs (“freedom from anxiety”). Modern culture tends to capitalize “Freedom,” sanctifying it as our daily bread. “Freedom is a breakfast food” wrote American poet E.E. Cummings, who punctured large-letter abstractions that hover above consumer society like banner blimps fat with marketing mirages. Cummings the writer spelled abstract words, including his own pen name, in lower-case letters. Our social conventions – including spelling, punctuation, and language itself – often fail to deliver what they manifestly pronounce. If “freedom is a breakfast food” then, wrote Cummings, “the seeing are the blind / and being pays the rent of seem / ... and tomorrow will not be too late”. We should read big-letter Freedom with an eye to the details in small print. Otherwise we may succumb to the illusion that abstract values, such as Freedom and Democracy, can be packaged, sold, and delivered like oatmeal and corn flakes.

Where is such linguistic skepticism needed more than in politics? Political language seeks to persuade and so partially obstructs what is visible to everyone. Rhetoric emphasizes some things and hides others to win its point. In the wrestling match of politics, freedom often collapses into liberty, into the permissions inscribed in the legal system. The movement to amend the U.S. Constitution to ban same-sex marriage, for example, seeks to affect personal freedom by pulling the strings of liberty. Liberty is the social understanding of freedom – “Freedom” in capital letters - while the actual choices people make about themselves expresses the inner shape of their personal self-creation – a lifestyle which sometimes discloses publicly who the person truly is, and which sometimes evades the intrusive eyes of public perception.

If freedom is a breakfast food, then California is the colorful label on the box. From the 19th Century onward, the Golden State has been a major sponsor of the pioneer spirit that attracted immigrant Americans in their journey west. Hollywood romanticized the journey in early cinema and became itself a beacon for anyone seeking the freedom to create a new identity. Such personal freedom does not necessarily imply open political expression, something which has proven dangerous to careers in the Hollywood industry, as can be

seen in the history of black-listed film directors, actors, and writers in the 1950s. Creating a new identity is also the implied theme of the conversation game played frequently in the Los Angeles area: “So where did your family come from ‘back East’” – which could mean anywhere east of Denver, Boston, or Berlin.

Freedom to shape a new identity or lifestyle is the kind of freedom that resonates in the theatrical professions. It’s a kind of shape-shifting that relies not on abstract assertions or wistful future goals but on acting here-and-now. The transformation ranges from changing your name, submitting to cosmetic surgery, or starting a new career. Some see in this kind of freedom an excess of post-capitalist political economy where individualism flies off into a void of meaningless vanity. But taking a closer look at different directions of self-creation – call them different “lifestyles,” if you will - can show us directions where we are headed when no alternate political economy exists to seriously challenge ever-expanding Freedom and Democracy.

Consider two divergent lifestyles: the Extropians and the Tai Chi players. Both involve its members in self-transformation. Both are based on distinct ideas. But each of the trends plays midwife to identities that hardly resemble each other. While relatively tiny on the map of the Greater Los Angeles area, both groups reveal the outer fringes of widespread transformations extending throughout Southern and Northern California (which some consider two separate States). Each of these groups offers a different approach to transforming personal life. Each represents the freedom to act and become a new self within the larger context of a liberal society but not based on the conventional freedom to shop and buy. Both approaches are varying fruits of liberty, offering freedom in multiple guises. Neither way of transformation is as commonplace as breakfast food but both nourish certain segments of the world population.

To understand Extropians, look to the current Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger. He may not be a card-carrying member of the Extropy Institute (www.extropy.com), but he clearly exemplifies much of its lifestyle. Extropians define “extropy,” as the opposite of entropy, a word German scientist Rudolf Clausius introduced into thermodynamics in 1865. Entropy means the inevitable winding down of the universe

into disorder and chaos, the gradual loss of forward momentum, while “extropy” by contrast means the forward momentum that resists entropy and surpasses current limits. Schwarzenegger has, over and over again, for decades, gone beyond personal limits to transform himself. First as body-builder, then as businessman, film actor, and now as Governor of California, he challenges limits, the limits of the physical body, geographical origin, career definition, and every stage of life. The founder and current president of the Extropy Institute, Max More considers Extropians to be humanists in that they favor reason, progress, and values centered on human well being rather than on external religious authorities, but More wants to go beyond humanism into a “trans-humanism” that challenges limits through science and technology.

Extropians challenge, for example, the inevitability of aging and death. They seek to enhance intellectual abilities, physical capacities, and emotional development by applying scientific discoveries to humans. More writes: “We advocate using science to accelerate our move from human to a transhuman or posthuman.” Behold the cybernetic organism, the cyborg enhanced with drugs and implanted with smart chips! In fact, one sibling of the Extropian movement is the Cryonics Institute, also known as the Immortalist Association. Since the 1960s, this group has offered cryonic suspension services. As soon as possible after legal death, a member patient is prepared and cooled to a temperature where physical decay essentially stops, and is then maintained indefinitely in frozen stasis. When and if future medical technology allows, the member patients will be healed and revived, and they will hopefully awaken to extended life in good health. In an interview email, Governor Schwarzenegger was asked whether he had made plans for his own cryonic suspension as an extension of body-building. To date, the question remains unanswered.

Freedom for Extropians is to awaken after death to a breakfast of medical drugs. But if future pharmacology pushes life beyond limits, whatever those limits, freedom also means to affirm limits not as constraints, but as opportunities to celebrate what Heidegger calls *Befindlichkeit*, the existential situation of how we find ourselves planted in this world. The Extropian, Schopenhauer might say, triumphs in the will to phenomenal achievement while the Tai Chi player journeys into the noumenal realm, that inner vitality called “chi” or “ki” in Asian martial arts. Chi refers to the warm currents of body feeling that flow inside those

who train for balance, flexibility, and centered awareness. Instead of action-oriented futurism, the Tai Chi player finds freedom in playing outdoors with flowing body movements that awaken rich perceptions of the Now moment. The act of freedom for the Tai Chi player comes from giving up the tense posing of the body-builder who has become “muscle bound” and frozen as a Greek sculpture. Accepting the limits of muscular strength, the martial artist seeks through softness and suppleness to harmonize with opposing forces, thereby undermining the advantages of superior strength through agile balance.

The Tai Chi player also seeks harmony with nature. In Los Angeles area city parks, Tai Chi players arrive early in the morning to work out under the trees, much as their counterparts in China. These naturalists seek inner body awareness rather than outer body shapes. Some Tai Chi groups even harmonize their practices with the yearly seasons, training the vigorous sword forms in winter, the twisting circle walking in spring, and the long, slow postures in summer. The human then blends with the outer world in a deep ecology that affirms the limited “place” of humans under the sun and stars. Here satisfaction is not so much in outer political and technological achievement as in a balanced lifestyle that adjusts to personal limitations.

The resurrection of the body can mean not only Extropian cryonics but it can also mean Tai Chi’s tranquil vitality. Both are kinds of freedom that open new lifestyles into the future. Both of these paths to freedom go beyond Hegel’s notion of freedom as the intellectual reconciliation with life’s necessities (*Einsicht in die Notwendigkeit*). Both, in fact, leap far beyond basic needs. Instead of freedom as breakfast food, these journeys celebrate the sumptuous feast that is the miracle of our being alive beyond all expectations.

Michael Heim

Redondo Beach, California

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