

INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORY



FREEDOM AFTER THE CRITIQUE OF FOUNDATIONS

**Marx, Liberalism, Castoriadis
and Agonistic Autonomy**

ALEXANDROS KIOUPKIOLIS

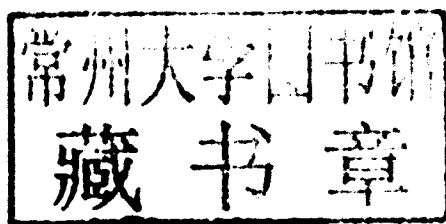


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Marx, Liberalism, Castoriadis and
Agonistic Autonomy

Alexandros Kioupkiolis

Lecturer, School of Political Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece



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First published 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–0–230–27912–4

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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Acknowledgements

It is almost impossible to acknowledge my various debts to the numerous people who have played a substantial role in the conception and realization of this book project.

My interest in politics and freedom dates back to my early childhood, in the heavily politicized context of the Greek *Metapolitefsi*, the years after the fall of the colonels' regime and the restoration of democracy in Greece, when there was a shared sense that politics matters a lot, and democracy and freedom were the object of strong collective investment. A turning point in the intellectual trajectory that gave rise to the present book came in a hot summer in my late teens, when I first read Castoriadis's *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, which would have a formative impact on my understanding of freedom. Ideas, questions and concerns which arose in me at that time would undergo a protracted process of elaboration throughout my graduate studies in political theory, at the Universities of Essex and Oxford, before taking shape in the final book project three years ago. To some extent, the story of this book is the story of my life so far and of the fragment of contemporary Greek history it contains. So, I will limit my expression of gratitude only to those who were directly involved with the publication of the book.

Many thanks are due to Amber Stone-Galilee, Commissioning Editor for Politics at Palgrave Macmillan, who has supported this publication from the outset, and to Liz Holwell, former Assistant Editor at Palgrave Macmillan, who has offered technical guidance and has been very kind and obliging up to the last months of its preparation. Elaine Towns of Keith Povey Editorial Services copy-edited the book and she and Keith helped a great deal to make my English more readable than usual. I am particularly grateful also to Zenos Frudakis, a Greek-American sculptor, who was pleased to offer pictures of his sculpture *Freedom* for the cover of the book.

Chapter 8 has been published previously in *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 147–68, May 2008. Chapter 9 contains revised parts of the articles 'The Agonistic Turn of Critical Reason' (forthcoming in the *European Journal of Social Theory*) and 'Ontology, Ethics, Knowledge and Radical Democracy', published in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 37, no. 6, pp. 691–708, July 2011. Palgrave Macmillan and Sage Publishers have kindly granted permission to reproduce them here.

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Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century signalled the collapse of the neoliberal utopia that rose to global prominence in the 1990s. The values of freedom and democracy remain as powerful and resonant as ever, yet their distance from the tangible realities of most people across the world grows ever larger and more painful. Massive death, misery and oppression afflict poor and developing countries, but they are also festering in many prosperous, liberal-democratic states. Here, moreover, vast majorities have become even more disaffected with representative governance and more disillusioned about the prospects of realizing freedom in the present conditions. It is not only that consumer choice, enjoyment and self-invention are thought to be hollow modes of living, poor sources of meaning and constricted forms of liberty, controlled as they are by alien interests and predetermined laws – the dominant interests and impersonal logics of the market; it is also that they have become materially untenable for large segments of the population.

Enhancing the freedom of all in the current situation calls for a thorough rethinking of freedom and a parallel reconfiguration of its practices. Established capitalist-democratic regimes of liberty have plunged into a deep-rooted crisis. On different grounds and in different respects, historical alternatives – Soviet socialism, social democracy, leftist and anarchist aberrations – have been equally condemned because of their failure to create enduring societies with equal freedom. Drawing on the lessons of the present and the past, illuminated by historical insights and achievements, the emancipation of the many needs to make a fresh start in perplexing circumstances of extensive social fragmentation and intense diversification, amid disagreement, fear, cynicism, insecurity about the future and uncertainty as to the real possibilities it might hold in store.

This state of affairs is echoed vibrantly in the state of social and political thought in recent decades, whereby the idea of a universal human essence and of universal truths as such have attracted extended and multivalent criticism (Foucault, 1980, 1982; Rorty, 1989; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985;

Mouffe, 1993; Tully, 1999; Newman, 2007). Hermeneutical philosophy, social constructionism, post-structuralism and multi-culturalism are a few of the currents that have contested with renewed vigour the notion of objective knowledge and the presence of fixed structures of thought and action that define, as a reality or an ideal, all human beings. Contingency, uncertainty, contestability, radical pluralism, dispersion, strife among divergent perspectives, and struggles without final redemption are the key landmarks of the conceptual landscape in which contemporary thought engages with questions of truth, value, being and subjectivity, realigning political categories such as freedom, equality and justice.

Needless to say, these historical and conceptual shifts are not celebrated across the board. They have come under heavy liberal-democratic fire on the charges that they lapse into a self-defeating relativism and threaten treasured Enlightenment ideals (Habermas, 1990c; Norris, 1997; Barry, 2001; Lukes, 2003). Among others, the cardinal value of freedom is apparently jeopardized in a variety of ways. Presumably, its worth cannot be securely established if values are cultural oddities and lack objective foundations. Emancipation cannot be advanced on the scale of humanity, as socialism and liberalism aspired to do, if it is not possible to lay down certain universal conditions of freedom. Moreover, anti-essentialists have taken issue with a picture of the human subject that endows individuals with universal reason and considers them sovereign and independent of society in their constitution. Rather, the rules of reason are conventional and local currencies. Subjectivity is suffused with social content and is prey to the unconscious and the irrational. Such convictions can throw into doubt the very idea of individual freedom.

These objections have recently been duplicated in radical discourses with emancipatory intents. Slavoj Žižek, to name a prominent figure in this camp, has argued insistently that the loosening of stable general norms, the expansion of variety, change and erratic self-creation reflect the very logic of late digital capitalism, which is flexible, constantly self-revolutionizing, and in favour of self-organization and anti-hierarchical networks of production. This new organizational modality of capitalism has proved to be more efficient, productive and lucrative. The lack of a fixed identity is mobilized by the hegemonic ideology to 'sustain the endless process of consumerist "self-re-creation"' (2009: 65; see also Žižek, 2004: 183–5, 213). He cites Deleuze and Guattari's riposte that, in capitalism, the self-altering creativity of the multitude remains caught up within the confines of a set framework, the laws of the market and the pursuit of capitalist profit. But he retorts that these constraining conditions are also enabling conditions for the revolutionary, nomadic productivity of late capitalism, which is bound to vanish if it is subtracted from the reign of capital (Žižek, 2010: 264). What we need today in order to confront and to burst through the bonds of an erratic, constantly self-reinventing capital is in effect a 'stable ethical position' (Žižek, 2004: 213).

This is also the main tenet of Alain Badiou (2006: 14–17, 43, 531–3; 2011: 17–21), who labels the *doxa* of the dominant state of affairs ‘democratic materialism’. This materialized global ideology advocates sceptical relativism and postulates that there are only finite bodies and contingent individual preferences or opinions, in a fragmented and diverse world which demands pragmatism, anti-dogmatic flexibility and modesty. However, a perpetual agitation and innovation on its surface conceal the lack of deep and significant change in core domains of human thought and agency, such as art, science and politics. To break through this ‘atonal’ world, we should embrace a materialist dialectic which posits that, on top of bodies and diverse languages, there are also eternal truths. Real emancipation involves participation in the exception of a universal truth, and, more precisely, incorporation in a collective subject which incarnates this truth in history.

Whatever grains of truth such arguments may carry, the questioning of essentialism carries a forceful liberating potential. This has been highlighted eloquently by a number of anti-essentialist thinkers in the recent past, such as Michel Foucault and Cornelius Castoriadis, who have traced out various strains and thralls in modern templates of freedom, and have sought to adumbrate constructive alternatives. This is still argued today by radical theorists, such as John Holloway, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who insist, in contrast to Žižek and Badiou, that ‘[Capital] does have a rigidity ... capital is a set of rules that channel the flow of our activity’ (Holloway, 2010: 147); ‘Our self-fulfilment as human doers implies creative change. Self determination, even in an emancipated society, could not be static’ (Holloway, 2010: 209); and ‘[L]iberation aims at the freedom of self-determination and self-transformation, the freedom to determine *what you can become*. Politics fixed on identity immobilizes the production of subjectivity; liberation instead requires engaging and taking control of the production of subjectivity, keeping it moving forward’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 331–2). The final sentence sums up the gist of the argument in this book. Its sustained development will seek to furnish a cogent reply to the various critics of freedom as liberation from static limits, drawing out the virtues and the potencies of a vision of autonomy that pivots around contingency, multiplicity, openness, social construction, reasonable scepticism, creative agency and contest.

There is in fact a burgeoning literature on freedom with a similar focus and grid of analysis (Kateb, 1992; Laclau, 1996; Tully, 1999; Unger, 2001; Honig and Mapel, 2002; Flathman, 2003; Hirschmann, 2003). But still missing is a systematic statement of the debilitating effects radiating from received notions that inscribe a settled substance in the agent of freedom; of the reasons why traditional alternatives do not make good these defects; and of the ways in which the critique of essential closures in freedom can dissolve the perceived blockages of modern thought on this subject. Moreover, present work in this field slips into an unwarranted conflation of the layers of epistemology, ontology and ethics in the critique of universalist

views. And while various inquiries challenge modern thought on the plane of its underlying certainties, they may not be equally reflective about their own presumptions. Their epistemic, normative and ontological affirmations are not adequately thematized and vindicated. Finally, there is little engagement with analytic thought on freedom. Contemporary analytic philosophy has introduced a more socio-historical notion of the self in its rendition of freedom, and has crafted accounts which resonate with post-structuralist and kindred restatements of freedom in continental thought. Little research has been carried out to think through the differences and affinities between the various responses to an overlapping complex of themes.

This array of concerns forms the backdrop of the argument and explains the way it is set up. An in-depth interrogation of discourses that are cast around the image of a definite human subject is followed by a new articulation of freedom which works from other ontological premises. The initial scrutiny of essentially bound models serves to flesh out their limitations and to urge the need for a new beginning. Comparison and contrast illuminates the virtues of thought that operates another regime of subjectivity, in which the subject is a contingent outgrowth of socialization and is capable of change. The critique of essential 'onto-pictures' that is offered here seeks to avoid the elision of the epistemological and the ontological angles. Discussion also delves into the alternative assumptions that inform the recast idea of freedom as agonic and creative self-definition. Finally, the analysis scans the ties and disjunctions between an open, agonistic reconstruction of freedom and congruent contemporary schemes in English-speaking theory.

A distinctive mark of the argument is that it takes its bearings from the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis. This provides the mainspring for the activity of critical inquiry undertaken here, and inspires the rethinking of freedom that is staged in response. Castoriadis (1922–97) was a multi-faceted personality of post-war France. Of Greek extraction and education, he spent most of his adult life in France, where he engaged in left-wing activism and social criticism, produced philosophical writings, worked as a professional economist for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and practised psychoanalysis (see D. A. Curtis's 'Foreword', in Curtis, 1997). Together with Claude Lefort, he was among the founders of the leftist group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which published a journal of the same name (1949–65) and influenced with its autonomist ideas the May 1968 revolt in France. The members of the group were broadly Marxist in their theoretical leanings. They advocated workers' self-management and were fierce critics of Soviet socialism, official communist parties and social democracy. Castoriadis and Lefort were among the first voices on the left to use the language of totalitarianism to denounce the then existing communism.

Castoriadis blazed his own path after the dissolution of the group in the late 1960s. His magnum opus, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*,

published in 1975, sets out the major statement of his critique of Marx, his social philosophy and his psychoanalytic understanding of the subject. Castoriadis's theory falls within the purview of praxis philosophy. He assigns a primary place to human action and creativity in the construction of reality. The human world is eminently historical, contingent, contrived and subject to ongoing change. His work from then on chimes with motifs of French post-structuralism, deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis (see, for example, Castoriadis, 1997a). But Castoriadis negotiated his own way to the 'critique of Western metaphysics' and had no serious exchanges with cognate trends in continental thought (Whitebook, 1998).

There are various reasons for leaning towards Castoriadis in the present context. The overriding goal is to trace and reflect on a late movement of thought on freedom which assails static figures of being and underscores contingency, strife and diversification. This movement has various proponents (see Chapter 8 for an overview), but a thorough survey of their different schemes could not be pursued in tandem with other concerns and topics in our inquiry. The focus on Castoriadis makes sense on the grounds that his take on freedom has not been adequately explored and authenticated. For example, it has received much less attention than Foucault's ethics, which could also serve to tackle the tasks ahead. Crucially, Castoriadis's thought is uniquely suited to the present problematic. A major thread of his theorizing is the polemic against the effective presence of universal laws that would permanently configure human society and individuality (see, for example, Castoriadis, 1989). But, as distinct from fellow travellers in the critique of the universal rational subject (the early work of Foucault, Lacan and Althusser is paradigmatic in this respect), he does not escalate this questioning into a full-blown negation of individual autonomy. And he spells out his own ontological and normative commitments, against which he elaborates his outlook on freedom. This facilitates a reflective engagement with fundamental assumptions that subtend the new account of freedom. Finally, his formulation of the concept displays unique strengths in comparison to germane views, as the relevant chapters will argue.

An overview

The following inquiry identifies and appraises three paradigms of freedom in modern thought: an essentialist strand; negative liberty; and freedom as agonistic self-creation. This is the starting point and the organizing axis of a book-length argument. The distinctions are by no means exhaustive. But they are applicable to hegemonic discourses and they cut across established categorizations, such as the dichotomy between Marxism and liberalism. This triplet captures key ideas and affords illuminating insights into the modern perception of freedom.

For our present purposes, essentialism is taken to be the supposition that there are an unchanging core of values, modes of reasoning and types of

conduct that determine human nature in actuality or ideally, and that can be laid down in an objective fashion. This definition is obviously ambiguous. Any portrait of the human subject could be made to fit its mould, even the premise that human nature is subject to variation as a constant feature of its constitution. The term 'essentialism' as deployed here relates to a type of ontology that tends to limit the possibility of change in the forms of life. It imputes to individuals certain perennial features which tie thought and action to definite norms that are not, or should not be, open to transformation in history. That the axioms of Euclidean geometry are eternal conditions of human cognition, that the accumulation of wealth is an eternal human drive, and 'free market' capitalism the natural form of a developed economy, are examples of essentialism in the present account. All anthropologies assign abiding traits to the human being. But to decide whether an anthropology is essentialist in the sense intended here, one should probe the degree to which it attributes fixed patterns to human life that foreclose the possibility of doing things differently in particular domains of thought and practice.

The first chapters of the book treat particular cases of essentially defined freedom and set out in detail the settled identity they ascribe to the subject of freedom. This demonstrates the existence of an essentialist outlook and lays out its defining traits. The analysis will explicate how the spectre of an abiding human essence bears on the constitution of freedom in particular theories. Human essence fills out the identity of the 'self' in free self-realization, self-legislation and self-determination. Alternatively, the sense of a durable common nature, with definite capabilities and needs, may fix the limits of freedom by pre-empting the limits of the possible. Human nature can also set the social scope of freedom by dictating the fundamental interests that society should minimally allow or enable individuals to pursue. In short, the idol of a determinate human subject prescribes the forms, the objects, the conditions and the frontiers of freedom.

This paradigm of thought is taken to task from various standpoints, which coalesce to throw into question the hypothesis of a definite human subject and the corresponding figurations of freedom. Among other moves, the argument doubts whether it is possible to cognize human nature objectively and to settle on its definitions. There are hardly any incontestable premises for an account of freedom built on the foundations of a perennial human nature. From a separate aspect, the very existence of such a nature is disputed from the site of alternative affirmations that foreground the variability of conduct, values and reason.

But the crux is the following: by settling in perpetuity the laws of free thought and action, the doctrines in question contract the space of freedom. They narrow down free choice and activity, because they shackle free singularities to specific pursuits and patterns of behaviour. They foreclose the expansion of social liberties and the attainment of better conditions

for freedom. Evoking nature and universal truths, they negate the freedom of agents and collective assemblies to make their own laws and to revise their axioms.

The second step of the argument turns to mainstream liberal alternatives to pre-ordained freedom and finds them wanting. Negative liberty and John Stuart Mill's intuitions are taken up in the light of the same concern with the constitution of the subject. Both negative libertarians and J. S. Mill avoid organizing freedom around a substantive universal idea of the subject. But negative liberty does not focus on the inner fabric of the agent and the subjective terms of freedom. It fails to liberate individuals from internal limits and the actual closures of being. Millian freedom stands clear of such defects, but it clings to the phantasm of an individual essence of sorts. Freedom is set to foster a particular mix of personal talents and inclinations.

The argument culminates in the pivotal thesis that a contemporary strand of thought, which we unfold by drawing on Castoriadis, maps out a fecund alternative to both essentially pre-ordained freedom and its mainstream contenders in English-speaking philosophy. This other way to freedom does not only renounce the belief in a determinate human subject. It also constitutes free individuality as the active questioning of this idea and its real effects through an endless interrogation of 'eternal truths' and a vigorous wrestling with actual fixtures of being, such as rigidified impulses and autonomized institutions. Critical reflection works in alliance with imagination to unleash a flexible self-creation through undetermined choices which can break free from any specific formulas, fetishes and conventions. Free individuality shifts into an incomplete, creative and open process. Freedom bursts beyond the limits of essential closure and negative liberty.

In a nutshell, the book peruses critically modern outlooks on freedom with an emphasis on their underlying ontology, and upholds a contemporary approach as offering the most cogent and empowering ideas.

Notes on the structure and frame of analysis

The critique of essentialism has proposed a certain mode of inquiry. Thought delves into deeper understandings about the human subject and its world. Doubt is cast on notions that conceal the cultural variation of all things human. Claims to truth come under suspicion with respect to their objective grounds and positive effects. The argument deploys this apparatus of analysis to define and explore three main modes of conceptualizing freedom by dwelling on deep-laid ontological and epistemological assumptions.

To avoid tendentious generalizations and bring out tangibly the operations of an essentialist matrix of thought, the first two chapters pursue an intricate and ambivalent analysis of salient examples. The arguments made about the distinctive features and limitations of essentially confined freedom are situated in a specific conceptual context that illustrates and substantiates

them. From there, we move to wider remarks. A close reading is undertaken of both of our exemplary figures, Karl Marx and Immanuel Kant, to bring out their settled idea of the subject and to illuminate the complex ways in which it governs their understanding of freedom, diminishing its ambit and possibilities.

The third chapter mounts an epistemic and normative challenge to essentially determined freedom. The epistemological prong justifies a reasonable scepticism over the possibility of establishing objective universal truths about human essence. The different variants of essentially defined freedom are intensely contestable in so far as there is no strong warrant for their specific descriptions of human beings. There are many good arguments in support of sceptical reason, which are set out at some length in a sequence of misgivings about universal reason and its ability to yield objective justification.

The stock Habermasian reproach to such sceptical arguments is that they founder on the error of performative self-contradiction (Habermas, 1990a: 76–109). The critique of objective and universal reason makes much of the plurality of standards and ways of reasoning, but it presupposes the general validity of its arguments and assumes that indefinite others will be able to see their logical force. In other words, it takes for granted universal grounds of reason at the same time as it disputes the existence of universal reason.

Different gestures can help to skirt around the aporia of self-contradiction. Most simply, one could allow just so much scope for universal reason (and no more): an indefinite number of others is able to make sense of the limits of universal truth. Second, the Habermasian censure of scepticism is premised on the universal validity of its baton, the criterion of consistency, which is held to be a necessary canon of rational thought. Contradictions abound in all discourse. They could be sanctioned as locally legitimate, useful and enabling conditions of creative thinking. The Habermasian response stands guilty of begging the question: it upholds universal reason against sceptics by postulating the existence of universal reason, as represented by the standard of full-scale consistency.

Others may also counter that there is a ring of self-contradiction to the normative critique of essential freedom, placed as it is straight after the expression of qualms over the objectivity of moral evaluations. But these ethico-political objections are contextualized consistently with the renouncement of strong objectivism. The values they call upon are not held as universal truths. They are intended to strike a chord with those who are against repression, authoritarianism and unnecessary fetters on thought and action. However, they can gain an even wider appeal, as Chapter 9 will suggest by way of reflecting on the scope of post-foundational reason.

Chapter 4 carries the argument a step forward by probing whether negative liberty and John Stuart Mill's vision set out liberating antidotes to the schemes that were found enthralling. Chapters 5 to 8 lay out

the new configuration that addresses the flaws of the various scripts of freedom examined in previous chapters. The argument reaches its peak in Chapter 7, which sums up the case for freedom as agonistic and imaginative self-creation. Here it is apposite to elucidate the rationale behind Chapters 5, 6 and 8, which is not immediately apparent.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore images of the self, society and the world that inspire the alternative ideal of freedom. These two chapters vindicate the ontological premises of the commended redefinition of freedom. Devoting this space to ontology presses home a certain point. Notions of the human subject and its world are core components of any substantive conception of freedom. Thus, sustained reflection on fundamental questions of being is central to a critical reconstruction of freedom, not a mere preamble to it. Underlying beliefs about the constitution of the person and objective reality define our understanding of the capacities, possibilities, drives and limitations of the subject of freedom. And this understanding informs the meaning of freedom. Convictions about significant goods and the likely impediments to their achievement identify the constraints that matter. Presumptions about activities that are possible or important for human agents point to the main conditions of freedom and its chief loci of expression. Critical theory should be able to give an accounting of its ontological premises and sustain reflection on them. The intense concern with subjectivity and ontology follows, finally, from the specific drift of the argument up to Chapter 5. Having discarded a certain sense of the human subject, it is necessary to spell out and to vindicate the notion that is put in its place, in order to move on to positive pronouncements about freedom.

Chapter 8, for its part, surveys other templates of thought, which, like Castoriadis, reconceptualize freedom following the critique of essentialism and the autonomous subject. This overview gives substance to a central claim of the book – the emergence of a broader, non-essentialist paradigm of freedom. Moreover, by scanning an ampler range of representative theories, Chapter 8 sheds more light on the new current in its different variants. Furthermore, from this wider perspective, the chapter grapples with a standard ethical objection to the newly emerging grammar of freedom, the rejoinder that it stages an amoral or plainly egotistical ethos.

On a penultimate note, the sceptical inflections of the argument are bound to raise vexing questions throughout its unfolding. The book impugns different interpretations of ‘freedom’ and argues for a specific construction of its meaning. Does it presume that the core of the concept is made up of certain necessary ideas which can furnish a measuring rod for evaluating different interpretations? Are there any objective, universal standards that lay down the substance of freedom? If the answer is ‘yes’, this presumption contradicts head-on both reasonable scepticism and the assault on fixed essences. If the response is ‘no’, the polemic against different accounts has no neutral place to stand and cannot maintain that freedom from essential

limits is an advance over other conceptual possibilities. If the divergences among the three paradigms derive from radically heterogeneous concepts of freedom, they offer incommensurable alternatives that are neither better nor worse than one another.

We start from particular intuitions about freedom that entwine the concept with independence of spirit, self-determination, undetermined choice and unhindered action on preferences. These pre-understandings are anchored in the historical setting of modernity. They lack any absolute standing, and lend themselves to a variety of specifications. Their validity may well transcend their historical anchorage, but the argument is neither committed to nor dependent on this assumption. Moreover, the particular articulations of freedom that are picked up in the following discussion share enough common ground, allowing us to bring them into dialogue and confrontation. Critique is largely immanent, departing from shared insights about freedom that are dispersed across the different accounts. The new conceptualization of freedom that we set out to vindicate is a critical modulation of inherited ideas rather than a totally new invention. On the other hand, certain arrows directed against antagonistic figures of freedom carry an independent force. For example, the epistemic and ontological objections to essentially closed freedom take aim at its founding axioms. Alternatives can be more plausible simply because they are clear of the shaky presumptions that underlie essentialist views.

The book engages in an extensive theorization of freedom, but its intent is not only theoretical. Freedom itself is no mere theory. It is a praxis of struggle, active self-definition and self-creation. The Conclusion to the book will make some links with the contemporary politics of agonistic self-creation, as it will rehearse its keynote features through an outline of actual experiments that pursue in practice this idea of freedom and open up promising routes for its effective enactment today.