

What is Intellectual Freedom Today?

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Marx once said, “Frequently the only possible answer is a critique of the question and the only possible solution is to negate the question.” Why do I consider this to be the appropriate response to the question “What is intellectual freedom today?” In a nutshell, it is because I am suspicious of the question and consider it a trap.

Before formulating an answer to a question, I first need to consider what the intentions behind it are. This not only concerns the ambiguity of the question itself. After all, is the implication in the word “today” that intellectual freedom is now (if not before) under threat? In which case, I must reflect on what it is threatened by, for which purposes, by whom and in which contexts, institutional or otherwise. “Today” also suggests that what intellectual freedom means changes over time through different epochs. In other words, there is no timeless principle by which intellectual freedom can be defined. The question is not a neutral one. (Is any question neutral?) It draws whoever is tasked to answer it into the orbit of the Other’s desire. Which is to say, before the question can be answered another must first be asked: what do those who ask it or who read these words want from me? *Che vuoi?* What do you want? How do I demonstrate to you that I’m worthy of being asked the question? Perhaps by referencing Marx and Lacan?

Does one need to ‘be’ an intellectual to answer a question on intellectual freedom? I guess so. It’s a privileged position both in terms of being given an audience and in that the material circumstances have been favourable to

developing the intellectual faculties. I may have faced challenging circumstances during this process of (ongoing) intellectual development but now as a tenured academic have access to the resources to demonstrate in practice intellectual freedom. In other words, intellectual freedom persists for those born into privilege or who have undergone considerable sacrifice and overcome various traumas.

The question of intellectual freedom is a material one. It also centres on the human psyche. Must one have a *thirst* for knowledge? Must one, again putting it in Lacanian terms, be an *hysteric* who always feels the 'master' to be lacking (the reader's relationship to the author of this piece?) and who finds purpose or *jouissance* in questioning their knowledge? I suspect that everyone who regards his or herself to be an intellectual also regards his or herself to be an hysteric, so defined. Not a slave to the master's knowledge. Do you flatter yourself? Do you disavow your serfdom? I guess you wouldn't know. Critique, an endeavour of the intellect, is as much a critique of the self as it is of society, the two being inextricable to one another. This point, however, seems frequently lost on those who claim the status of an intellectual or appear so in respect to their narrow field of mastery. The trick of academia is in appearance and the confidence the academic has in others to confirm, if only by silence, the cultivated image.

Perhaps, against my better judgement, an answer can after all be found: intellectual freedom is the freedom, confidence and will to question the question and, also, we might add, formulate the problem. However, the obstacles to open, self-critical and productive dialogue can be found in the material circumstances of existence and also in the human psyche: arrogance / insecurity, ignorance, cynicism, hatred and resentment. A transformation must occur in the material and psychic conditions of life for intellectual freedom to constitute something more than what happens in spaces, institutional or otherwise, designated for critical dialogue populated by self-appointed heirs to masters of nothing, with others, if fortunate to be in this elevated / enervated company, silent spectators.

If intellectual freedom requires a transformation in the material and psychic conditions of life then such freedoms, for them to have substance, are not of this world or for existing generations but rather for the unborn in another world. The possibility of such a world nonetheless increases by our efforts in this one to establish opportunities for open and critical dialogue. This centres on the political task of ridding the world of the institutions of patriarchal-capitalism, the external and internal but never eternal obstacles to emancipatory thought and practice, or in so far that it is possible blunting their effect.

If this constitutes an answer, it is certainly an open ended one, a provisional placeholder even. But the simplest response I can give is that I don't

know what it means to be intellectually free today. This at least avoids all the intellectual posturing and prevarications found in this piece, one that would not be unreasonable to interpret as a fetishistic disavowal of the position I occupy in the university. Or, put in colloquial terms: intellectual wank. No, I was right in the first place, the only possible answer is to negate the question and even to posit another one: How do we create the conditions for open, critical and inclusive dialogue?

When we have ridded the world of capitalism and dismantled the repressive institutions and apparatuses of the Oedipalised psyche, there will be the prospect at least that such a question will not need to be asked because, by then, intellectual freedom will be a materially embedded practice that everyone partakes in.