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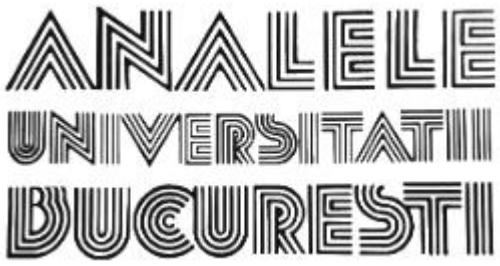

A CASE AGAINST CULTURAL EVOLUTION AS A SOURCE OF FREEDOM

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss how the process of cultural evolution can be seen as leading to the Hayekian idea of individual freedom understood as lack of arbitrary coercion from the part of others. My contention is that the process of cultural evolution gives rise to an improper form of freedom that does not make justice to the idea of individuals seen as ends in themselves. I argue that this happens because the concept of individual freedom is shaped by an essentially impersonal process and tailored for the needs of a collective mechanism.

Keywords: Hayek, cultural evolution, freedom, individualism, private sphere.

Hayek's political philosophy can be described as having a dual nature, comprising both liberal and conservative elements. He argues for a liberal extended society, thus implying a universalistic stance, but at the same time claims that the only desirable source of rules and institutions is the societal evolution, a slow organic growth dependent on the contingencies of an impersonal process of selection. Along the same lines, Gray[2] and Kukathas[3] consider that Hayek's work is indebted to both Hume and Kant, in that the Austrian thinker explains the morality both in empirical terms and from a universalistic standpoint. In this paper I will explore an aspect of this interweaving of conservatism and liberalism, of contingency and necessity, in Hayek's take on individual freedom. More exactly, I will show in what sense the process of cultural evolution can be seen as leading to individual freedom understood as "the state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or others."[4] My claim is that cultural evolution implies an improper concept of freedom, in that the valuation of the individual as an end in himself is more than this process can generate.

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2 John Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*, Routledge: London, 1998.

3 Chandran Kukathas, *Hayek and Modern Liberalism*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989.

4 F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of liberty*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2011, 58.

My paper will proceed as follows: first, I show in what way the process of cultural evolution makes freedom possible. Then, I analyze the weak points of this causal relation and give a brief account of the problems that the evolutionary genesis of freedom poses for Hayek's individualism.

Cultural Evolution as a Source of Individual Freedom

An explanation of how cultural evolution leads to individual freedom is based on the following two elements of Hayek's thought:

1) Cultural evolution operates by selecting those rules and institutions that have allowed the group in which they were observed to survive and prosper.
2) General rules allow a more efficient use of knowledge. According to Hayek, knowledge is dispersed in society. The larger the society is, the more difficult is for an individual or a group of individuals to centralize knowledge and to carry out the task of coordinating people. On the other hand, general rules allow individuals to make use of local knowledge while attaining their personal goals. As a result, the spontaneous order that ensues gets to use a large amount of knowledge transmitted across the society in the form of abstract signals.

We can infer from the elements above that institutions protecting a personal sphere will eventually get selected, as they provide an advantage to the society in which liberal rules are observed. Ensuring a personal sphere leads to a more efficient use of knowledge and hence a society wealthy enough to attract immigrants and to defend itself from its enemies. Rules pertaining to individual freedom are prone to be transmitted not only in time, from one generation to another, but also among the neighboring communities, as liberal societies extend their limits in order to include new members attracted by their wealth.

The problem with this reasoning is that we have to make several assumptions for the causal relation between cultural evolution and individual freedom to hold. First, the process should be long enough for liberal institutions to arise. The road from the initial small groups to the extended liberal society is not a necessary one, as there is no guarantee that the mutation pertaining to the personal sphere will arise. The second problem is that liberal societies might not persist despite their wealth and their more efficient use of knowledge. The outcome of the cultural evolution depends not only on rules and institution but also on the interplay between them and the environment. The most obvious example in this sense is Hayek's fear that Western democracies could collapse into totalitarianism because of people being attracted by big utopian projects of reforming the society. Although cultural evolution had led to liberal societies,

there was no guarantee that liberal institutions would not be lost in the state of political turmoil that marked the first half of the 20th century.

In order to avoid the above-mentioned problems we should state the relation between cultural evolution and individual freedom in a more precise way. The process of cultural evolution leads to freedom not in the sense that it generates with necessity a big society in which the private sphere of each individual is protected from the infringements of others. Cultural evolution functions as a source of freedom in the sense that, once liberal institutions have arisen, their success can be explained in evolutionary terms. For example, the spreading of liberal democracies in the Western world can be traced back to a set of institution that proved to be good replicators.

Shearmur identifies a strand in Hayek's thought which relates freedom with civilization[5]. According to the Austrian thinker, individual freedom is what makes civilization possible, because it allows the coordination of large numbers of people through "markets, traditions and evolved systems of rules"[6]. By guaranteeing individual freedom, the states what enables the individual to make a contribution to the progress of civilization[7]. Hayek makes his case even clearer when he argues that the extended society cannot be maintained without individual freedom because it will lack a tool for coping with the problem of the dispersed knowledge[8]. The causal link between freedom and social progress is of interest to the problem of the evolutionary origins of liberal institutions. If individual freedom contributes decisively to social progress, if the extended society could not exist in the absence of liberal values, then individual freedom will make societies more apt to persist and more appealing to immigrants.

However, Shearmur makes a number of critical observations concerning Hayek's claim according to which individual freedom leads to social progress. I will present these observations in the form of two main critiques and I will give a more detailed account of how individual freedom contributes to social progress as I address them.

1. The object of the first critique is the extent of the individual freedom. Shearmur notices that a person can be hindered to contribute to the progress of civilization not only by being coerced by other people. For this reason, Hayek should also take into account the situations in which people cannot use their local knowledge, their unique perspective of the world, because they do not have resources and starve to death. A person that does not have access to health

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5 Jeremy Shearmur, *Hayek and After: Hayekian Liberalism as a Research Program*, Routledge: London, 2003, 70.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 *Ibidem*, 71.

8 F. A. Hayek, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*, Routledge: London, 1978, 65.

care and education is obviously prevented from making a contribution to social progress. Should not Hayek also rule out these limitations, as part of his program of protecting individual freedom?

Hayek's response to this critique is based on the way in which local knowledge is used and transmitted in society. The transmission of abstract signals is efficient only against a background of stable general rules. If the rules have been changed, the signals will also include this variation and hence the message concerning the local knowledge will be more difficult to discern. For example, by imposing a minimum wage, the state alters a number of signals pertaining to the demand for workforce. This also applies in the above mentioned example of the individual prevented to make a contribution to social progress by the fact that he has starved to death. The state cannot provide positive liberties without altering signals. From a Hayekian point of view, the individual contributes to social progress mainly by functioning as a junction in the net of knowledge transmission. This is the reason for which Kukathas characterized Hayek's view as molecular individualism[9]. Individual freedom is protected not because the individual is sacrosanct, but because of the importance the individual has as part of a system.

2. The second critique present in the observations Shearmur offers concerns the universality of individual freedom. Shearmur suggests that not every individual makes a contribution to social progress. As a result, the attainment of civilization does not justify the protection of a personal sphere for all the individuals. However, Shearmur seems to give an incorrect interpretation to the way individuals contribute to social progress.

Civilization, someone might agree, is a wonderful thing. But is the contribution that this person would make, if I were not to coerce them, of any real importance? Surely, the answer is yes if the person in question were Beethoven just before penning his Ninth Symphony; I am fairly sure that the answer would be no, if it were Jeremy Shearmur, just before penning the present volume. But most of what even Beethoven did – in the sense of each particular action – is of little import, in the sense that it is not clear what would have been lost to others had he been prevented from undertaking it.[10]

Shearmur assumes that individuals contribute to social progress through discrete acts whose importance is recognizable. According to Hayek, on the other hand, individual contributions are much more modest. Individuals contribute to social progress not in a deliberate way, by providing a product of their work, but by following rules that help the coordination of people in a complex social mechanism. Only this mechanism will function as the real

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[9] Chandran Kukathas, *op. cit.*, 127.
[10] Jeremy Shearmur, *op. cit.*, 72.

source of the new. The inventions that have marked the technological development of the civilization are usually attributed to the individuals that patented them, but their creation would not have been possible without a background of concepts, rules concerning research, and a set of institution enabling the scientific inquiry. The background against which the inventor works has a social genesis and has come into being as a result of people transmitting abstract signals while they followed their personal goals. It follows that by improving the social mechanism of transmitting abstract signals an impersonal mechanism of research and discovery is also enhanced. For this reason, not only the personal freedom of individuals recognized as creators is relevant for social progress. Their success depends on a social mechanism that is most efficient when each individual's personal freedom is protected. Speaking in terms of the example Shearmur presented, Beethoven's symphonies would not have been possible without a certain musical tradition and a particular social environment. In order for people like Beethoven to have more chances to create works like The Ninth Symphony, it is necessary to protect not only their freedom, but also the freedom of the other members of their community.

Shearmur's critique seems to assume a Cartesian conception of the person, according to which there is a break between mind and the world, the mind being able to explore the corporeal substance from afar. Only in the light of such a conception do particular inventions and works of art appear as truly individual contributions. On the other hand, according to Hayek, the mind to which the original work is attributed is a product of evolution, both biological and cultural. Man was "by nature lazy and indolent, improvident and wasteful, and it was only by the force of circumstances that he could be made to behave economically or would learn carefully to adjust his means to his ends."[11] Individuals naturally have a behavior dominated by instincts. Only the rules they subsequently internalize, which generally have a social origin, made them escape this inertial state, enabling them not only to follow their long-term individual goals, but also to set these goals in the first place. Without the social mechanism sketched above, inventors, scientists, artists and every other individual whose contribution to social progress is widely recognized would be deprived not only of conceptual tools, but also of the goals that motivates them to work and develop their career in the first place.

The utility of individual freedom for this social mechanism is owed to the superior efficiency with which the community is able to use knowledge when a personal sphere is protected. If an individual is subjected to coercion, he will not be able to incorporate into his actions the local knowledge he would otherwise use in order to attain his personal goals. Individual freedom is thus

[11] F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 121.

protected because of the importance the individual has in a collective mechanism of discovery.

However, the above described evolutionary process which generates individual freedom also limits its extent, excluding from the definition of freedom positive liberties that do not pertain to an individual's functioning as part of a mechanism of using and transmitting local knowledge. In other words, the same mechanism of selection that makes freedom possible is the one that narrows down its definition. Even if cultural evolution will select at some point in time a broader range of positive liberties, this will have happened as a result of their proven utility. The upshot of this line of reasoning is that we do not have yet the conceptual tools with which people will successfully argue at that point in the future for more positive liberties. The type of evolutionary consequentialism on which Hayek holds forth limits our capacity to engage in an argument concerning the rights of individuals.

The Limits of Cultural Evolution in Generating Freedom

I have shown in the previous section that individual freedom is useful for large communities because it allows a more efficient employment of knowledge. For this reason, societies that have protected a personal sphere for all their members tended to prosper and extend their reach, winning out new members in the detriment of less liberal communities. This eventually led to the extended society Hayek writes about, which comprises so many members that the only way to ensure their coordination is by limiting the action of the state to the imposition of general rules. The first problem of the Hayekian individual freedom pertains to the evolutionary process from which it derives. As I already mentioned in the previous section, the personal sphere is limited to what cultural evolution can generate. The problem with which we deal now is not that societal evolution cannot lead to individual freedom, but that it will make us operate with an improper concept of freedom, from which certain positive liberties are excluded from the start. If we accept a definition of individual freedom according to which the only type of coercion consists in the arbitrary transgressive action of other persons, we will fail to recognize access to education and healthcare as liberties. For this reason, the individual freedom that results from societal evolution does not permit plenty of leeway. Speaking in more concrete terms, we can ask what freedom an unemployed person without education has to follow his goals. He is not subjected to coercion and hence he is free according to Hayek's definition. However, individual freedom proves to be an empty and deceiving concept if it allows this sort of limitations. In such cases, liberty seems to belong to signals, which, given the general rules, are unencumbered in their transmission across the markets. The fact that some

persons should be abandoned to desperate situations is rather a prerequisite for the mechanism that ensures the liberty of signals.

One can argue that by limiting the action of the state to imposing general rules we maximize the chances to prosper for all the members of the community. Hayek himself supports this claim when he argues that "an optimal policy in a catallaxy may aim, and ought to aim, at increasing the chances of any member of society taken at random of having a high income, or, what amounts to the same thing, the chance that, whatever his share in total income may be, the real equivalent of this share will be as large as we know how to make it."[12] According to Hayek, in a free market society even the least privileged will end up bettering their situation, acquiring more resources than if the society were more egalitarian. In other words, the individual freedom of not being subjected to coercion is likely to bring with it an effective freedom to follow one's goals. However, this correlation is only a contingent one and will hold, at best, in most of the cases. On the other hand, the freedom of signals to be transmitted arises as a necessary upshot of imposing only general rules.

One can also argue that societal evolution will eventually select more positive freedom, as a broader range of liberties will make communities more efficient. Free health care and a safety net consisting in an unconditional income can alter the transmission of signals across the markets, but their guaranteeing could prove to be beneficial in other aspects. For example, Ha-Joon Chang argues that in societies where social protection provides the unemployed individuals with the prospect of a decent life, people are more inclined to take risks concerning their career, changing their field of work and leaving dying industries[13]. On the other hand, societies that do not provide a safety net tend to make individuals more conservative and more reluctant to head for another career. For them, losing the current job implies much higher costs.

More than that, to alter signals is not as unusual as Hayek makes it seem. If heath care is provided for free, this good is removed from the sphere of the market processes, but there are many other goods that enjoy the same treatment. Organ trade, drug trafficking and prostitution are also excluded from the market, because we have moral principles according to which these transactions are wrong. It follows that societal evolution can generate positive liberties as well if it evolves moral principles which will make us remove more basic needs from the market game.

This objection also presupposes an image of the individual according to which he is merely a means of transmitting signals. His fate is not determined by a definite set of inviolable rights, but by the outcome of an evolutionary

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[12] F.A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1967, 173.

[13] Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You about Capitalism*, Penguin Books: London, 2010.

process. As I already said, the relation between individuals and their positive liberties is a contingent one, depending on the proven value of these positive liberties. Gray notices that, despite Hayek's consequentialism, Hayekian social philosophy implies that individual rights should be protected in every circumstance. Particular infringements should not be permitted for "the sake of an apparent gain in welfare"[14]. However, this universalism holds only at a definite point in time. For bigger periods of time, Hayek seems to allow a certain laxity of laws, which, if seen from an atemporal perspective, implies great inequalities before the law and infringements of rights.

The second critique of the way cultural evolution generates individual freedom is based on the pace of the evolutionary process, on the inertial elements that delay the acknowledgment of new liberties. Even if we had formal rules supporting the equality of chances, the inertia of language and of moral norms could perpetuate certain inequalities. The language we speak now, in a society that recognizes equal rights for men and women, still has the traces of women's oppression. For this reason, both men and women are prone to unintentionally say offensive things and to discriminate against certain categories without being aware of it. The solution is not to wait for the language to exclude the traces of oppression in an organical manner, as a result of an evolutionary process. The intervention of the state is needed here not only to protect individual rights, but also to enhance the functioning of the social mechanism. Once the traces of the oppression have been excluded, formerly oppressed members of the community can use the knowledge they have access to in a more efficient manner.

The critique I am discussing here does not call into question the capacity of cultural evolution to generate individual liberties understood as absence of arbitrary coercion. Despite the fact that the language is still loaded with traces of oppression, all the individuals are equal before the law irrespective of gender, race or religion. In other words, the state protects each individual's right not to be subjected to coercion as a result of other people's arbitrary action. When a language loaded with oppressive traces is being used, the harm that is done is an impersonal one, nonarbitrary in nature. However, the fact of maintaining as a result of inertia a language with oppressive traces is contrary in its spirit to the equality before the law. The role of the latter is to allow all the individuals to use the knowledge they have access to and to further transmit it in the form of abstract signals. Yet, an inertially preserved inequality as the one pertaining to the oppressive language impedes the functioning of this social mechanism. For this reason, cultural evolution as a source of freedom should go along with a rational intervention aimed at calibrating the language to the legal structure of

[14] J. Gray, *op. cit.*, 58.

the rights. This deliberate activity would consist in identifying and incriminating the usage of apparently neutral elements that actually perpetuate inequalities.

Although rational intervention is aimed in this case at protecting individual rights, it operates in a rather communitarian way. The goal can be described as a collective one: the attainment of a new language, of a good that is to be used by everyone. The means through which this is being done consists in sanctioning wrongdoings that individuals might not perceive as such. Many traces of oppressive talk will come up in speech without the speakers acknowledging it. Yet, the perpetrators will be penalized as if something immoral or illegal has been committed, because, although unintentionally, they have contributed to the perpetuation of an inequality. Although this kind of language police operates for the benefit of individualism, since it enhances individual rights, it implies a reduction of the person to her social genesis. The individual is made responsible for his actions merely because, by making him accountable, we attain a socially desirable outcome. Like in the case of the previous critique, the individual is viewed only as a means of transmitting signals.

Conclusions

I have shown that cultural evolution can lead to the protection of individual freedom because communities in which a personal sphere is protected use knowledge more efficiently and thus are better equipped for survival and expansion. However, the same reason for which cultural evolution leads to individual freedom narrows down its extent. Individual freedom generated by cultural evolution is tailored to what this evolutionary process can produce. Individual liberties depend on their proven contribution to the success of the community as a whole. As a consequence, evolution is prone to lead to a type of individual freedom considered by us improper in the light of our moral intuition. Individuals are allowed to a personal sphere only in so far as this has been proven to enable them to use and transmit local knowledge.

This upshot may seem to be without hope. However, there is at least one reason for which our mistrust in the results of the cultural evolution should be mitigated. According to Hayek, the societal evolution from small bands to the extended society is marked by the rising of new rules that administrate the way we are following our instincts. Individual goals rank among these new elements, which have a social genesis, being the results of cultural evolution. It follows that the process of cultural evolution configures not only the extent of individual freedom, but also the very personal goals for whose attainment we need liberty. To challenge the type of individual freedom that cultural evolution has generated also involves a questioning of our goals, since they are tailored after what was traditionally permitted and encouraged. Yet, a complete

detachment from our aims is problematic as rationality operates only in a space already furnished with personal goals and interests.

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