International Journal of Social Sciences, Language and Linguistics (2051-686X)

Liberty" ή "Freedom": lost in translation?

Grigoris Zarotiadis
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Doi https://doi.org/10.55640/ijssll-05-11-05

ABSTRACT

On the one hand, "Liber Pater", the Roman god of wine and fertility, the protector of plebeian, 'vulgar' freedom, being 'free' himself, perhaps 'unlimited', 'uncontrolled', even 'lewd'. On the other hand, the adjective "free", which has its conceptual basis in sympathy and friendship, covers the conceptual spectrum from individual to social liberation. In the 18th century, the European Enlightenment revealed the dual nature of 'freedom'. This was probably because the importance of individual freedom grew in the context of the historical process leading to the foundation of bourgeois society, as a prerequisite for the development of its driving force, the basis for the formation of its ruling class against the domination of aristocracy, but also in the face of the rising popular demands that will very soon seek to set limits to the lawlessness of the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, at the dawn of the 21st century, processes are intensifying for a new reconciliation of the two hypostases of "freedom", in a new era where social liberation will complement the individual one and where respect for the other will not be imposed but sought.

Keywords: Liberty and Liberalism, Freedom, Economic Liberalization, and Social Liberation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Carlo Tuzzi's "Bandiera Rossa" (1908), one of the most famous songs of the Italian labor movement, based on a Lombard folk melody, the refrain is "evviva il comunismo e la libertà." Obviously, the meaning of the word "libertà" here has nothing in common with its Anglo-Saxon counterpart: the concept of "classic liberalism" describes the political philosophy and ideology that primarily emphasizes safeguarding individual freedom, limiting government interference, and reducing state intervention. Through it, a series of forces on the conservative political spectrum are identified – from early bourgeois liberalism to the modern mainstream, systemic political expression of neoliberalism, and from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE / ADLE) in the European Parliament to the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs).[1]

On the other hand, modern English incorporated the word "freedom" as an alternative concept, derived from the Proto-Germanic and Saxon concepts "frijaz" and "vri" respectively. "Freedom" is therefore more related to sympathy and friendship and thus fills the conceptual gap left by the historically arising and justified obsession of Anglo-Saxon bourgeois culture with the tradition of bourgeois liberalism and the protection of individual freedom. Initially, the movement opposed aristocratic and monarchical structures, but it also challenged the unbearable (from the bourgeois point of view) social impositions, even when democratically legitimized.

This article aims to clearly demonstrate the differences between the two concepts, revisit their etymological foundations, and emphasize the historical socio-economic process that necessitated their differentiation in modern English. Instead of an epilogue, we will examine how the relevant discussion evolves in the Greek public debate, concluding on the extent to which misunderstandings arise simply due to the lack of corresponding conceptual differentiation or as a result of their intended use by organized social interests and political forces.

2. ETYMOLOGICAL NOTES

The concepts of "liberty" and "freedom", although generally considered, incorrectly, synonymous, have a clearly different etymological origins and conceptual bases.

Continuants of the triadic tradition that characterized Roman religion, the deities of agriculture and fertility, "Ceres" and "Libera" (analogous to Demeter and Persephone), were established from the 5th century BC, together with "Liber" (Dionysus in Greek theology), who was the companion for both, in separate and distinct fertility cults. These were deities mainly

[1] On its website, the party in question describes itself as "social patriotic" ("die soziale Heimatpartei"). Any parallel with the National Socialist tradition is justified, at least as a working hypothesis.

of the social group of the plebeians, who were widespread throughout "Magna Grecia", long before their official approval, or rather, their partial assimilation by Rome (Cornell, 1995).

For the present discussion, the etymology of the names of these deities is of particular interest: "Libera" is simply the feminine version of "Liber", that is, the 'free' or 'liberated', also known as "Liber Pater" (the free father), the Roman god of wine and male fertility, the protector of plebeian, 'vulgar' freedom. Derived from the Proto-Indo-European root "$h_1$lewdı" meaning human or people, the adjectival designation "liber, -a, -um" covered precisely the conceptual spectrum from free to unlimited, uncontrolled, unbridled, and perhaps even degenerate. From its origins, the concept of freedom here emphasizes its individual nature and the liberation of individual will.

In Britain, this specific concept likely originates from the old French version of the Latin word "liberalis," which describes a person for whom (individual) freedom is appropriate. In an aristocratic society, it refers to the noble, pleasant, and/or generous individual. Consistent with its French and Latin roots, the adjective "liberal" initially came to be associated with a selfless, noble-born person in the 14th century. However, it likely won't be long before it acquires a somewhat negative connotation again in English, since, from the early 15th century, it has also been used to describe outrageous or unrestrained behavior (Online Etymology Dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php, 2001-2013, Douglas Harper). Regardless, what remains clear is the person- or individual-centered nature of the concept.

On the other hand, the origin of the adjective "free" is quite different. As mentioned in the introduction, its conceptual foundation is based on sympathy and friendship. Derived from the Indo-European root "pri" (in Sanskrit "priyah," meaning beloved) and its Proto-Germanic and Saxon equivalents, "frijaz" and "vri," respectively, the word "free" ultimately reflects the social aspect of freedom. Likewise, in its Germanic and Celtic evolution, the term, which meant beloved or friend and referred to equal members of a society or tribe, was extended conceptually to 'free'.

Thus, the etymological distinction between the two different concepts of freedom in the English language, and consequently in modern global communication, is clear: "liberty" and "freedom." The first concerns the freedom of individual will, beyond authoritarian and other social restrictions, even beyond the bounds of morality. In contrast, the second pertains to sympathy, gaining social meaning and collective substance—ultimately defining community freedom, or freedom as social self-determination. The historical uses of these two terms in the British tradition, before they diverged into the distinct socio-political dimensions we highlight in this article, are illustrative. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the term "liberal" was mainly used in a negative sense, describing someone who did not adhere to restrictions on words or actions, even beyond what was considered decent. At the same time, in specific contexts, it took on neutral, functional meanings—such as in naval terminology, where it simply meant being on "leave of absence"—and later, during the Enlightenment era (second half of the 18th century), it regained a positive connotation, signifying tolerance and the liberation of thought and behavior from prejudices.

Since the end of the 14th century, the adjective "free" has been used in relation to the nation to signify the absence of foreign domination or imposition and the rejection of despotism. The same concept is later applied, in 1950, with clear political bias, when "non-communist" countries are described as the "free world."[2] Over time, the word "free" comes to encompass nearly all related ideas—such as "free of costs/charge," "free will," "free speech," "free trade," "free enterprise," and "free economy"—while "liberal" and "liberty" become more specific, primarily referring to the politically charged area of individual freedoms.

3. HISTORICAL, SOCIOECONOMIC PROCESS

The different etymologies of the words "liberty" and "freedom" provide a basis for understanding their specific significance in linguistically and socially acceptable ways. However, this alone does not explain the need for modern conceptual differentiation. After all, in linguistic traditions that lack the adoption of alternative, related words of different origin, the ambiguity of the word for freedom persists and is emphasized by the very different ways it is used.

For example, the meaning of this specific adjective related to the Cuban liberation army, in Spanish "Ejército Libertador de Cuba," in the late 19th century, is very different from that of the modern Christian liberation movement, "Movimiento Cristiano de Liberación," founded in 1988 by, among others, Oswaldo Payá, who was advocating political change on the island. In another Latin-based linguistic tradition, the evolution of French bourgeois liberalism, from the Republican Party of Freedom in 1945 ("Parti Républicain de la Liberté"), to the modern political expressions of bourgeois conservatives, does not align with the tradition of "combattants de la liberté."[3] Similarly, the different meanings of the concept "Freiheit" are precise when it is used to refer to the far-right Austrian party "Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs," contrasting, for example, with the Union of Social Democratic Freedom Fighters of Austria, "Bund

[2] Of course, the term "non-communist" shows what users of the term "free world" mean, even if the term "communist countries" is equally, if not more, erroneous and misleading than that of "free world".

[3] Freedom fighters is a movement that evolved at the end of World War II. The communist leader Charles Tillon issued a call in late 1947 for the creation of an organization dedicated to the protection of democracy by preventing the return of the fascists. On February 22, 1948, about 60 resistance fighters met at the l'Hôtel des 2 Mondes in Paris and founded the "Combattants de la Liberté".

Sozialdemokratischer Freiheitskämpfer/innen 1934-1945."

Even in English, despite using two different words, confusion can sometimes be unavoidable. Changing the ending often completely alters the meaning: for example, the liberation – "liberation" – of Athens from the Nazi occupation is conceptually different from the economic process of "liberalization of the labor market." Similarly, starting with "liberties," which referred to individual privileges and rights granted to land areas in the 14th and 15th centuries, the term later came to mean the self-determination and autonomy, even partial, of entire regions ("Northern Liberties of Philadelphia") by the 18th century.

In fact, the complexity of the concepts increases when we shift from British (UK English) to American (US English) linguistic tradition, where the adjective "liberal" broadens in meaning and encompasses a broader range of concepts, beyond its limited reference to individual freedom. A look at the relevant definitions provided in Students' Daily News shows the confusion that can occur for an unprepared reader: "Liberals believe in government action to achieve equal opportunity and equality for all... Liberal policies generally emphasize the need for the government to solve problems." In contrast, "conservatives believe in personal responsibility, limited government, free markets, individual liberty, the rule of law, traditional American values and a strong national defense. Believe the role of government should be to provide people the freedom necessary to pursue their own goals." (http://www.studentnewsdaily.com/conservative-vs-liberal-beliefs/) [4]

The thinkers of the early European Enlightenment emphasized the dual nature of "freedom," beyond just verbal distinctions. Perhaps because it is precisely within this social process that laid the foundation for bourgeois society that the importance of individual freedom becomes so significant for the first time, it's not merely about the human need to partially respond to morally and socially constrained desires, nor just about a socially accepted process of controlled behavioral release that acts as a "decompressor" or amplifies creative forces. For the new bourgeois reality, maintaining individual freedom is even more fundamental: it's the condition for its driving force's development, the basis for forming its ruling class against aristocratic domination imposed from above, and also in opposition to the rising popular demands that will soon try to limit its lawlessness.

At this point, it will be helpful to check closely the specific content of individual freedom in bourgeois liberalism. In contrast to the romantic liberation of the individual from the distortions of their natural existence and behavior imposed by any social standard, traditional or modern, here we are talking about the liberation of individual action and development within the context of the bourgeois social structure under formation. The genuine child of this liberalism is individualism, utilitarianism in a social cover.

The following rationale leads to a universal, social inference: the inevitable human nature, unleashed within the framework of a liberal state, coming together, constitutes impersonal social forces that lead – automatically – to the social optimum (Zarotiadis, "Neoliberalism: Vulgarly simple or simply vulgar", Gutenberg Publishing, Athens, 2012).

However, even for the fathers of bourgeois intellectualism – Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill will prepare, along with others, the way to economic liberalism – it is necessary to define the limits of individual freedom. The following passage from John Stuart Mill is perhaps the most characteristic: "... the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right.... Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign." (John Stuart Mill, 1859, On Liberty, ch. 1).

Of course, the discussion about what is considered 'harm' or about where precisely the limit of another's freedom, which one should respect, comes in, is particularly complex, historically and spatially differentiated, and relates to the degree of development and the political/legal culture of each society.[5] However, our aim in this discussion is different: to understand that, driven by the recognition of the necessity of establishing limits on individual freedom by the exponents of bourgeois liberalism themselves, just as human nature necessarily has an individual and a social hypostasis, so also has its 'freedom'.

In the context of its primary quest, the separation of the individual from social freedom is not clearly discernible, or rather, it is unnecessary. For each fighter in national liberation struggles, the goal is both his own personal liberation and the recovery of popular, national freedom. The two hypostases come to the fore in a later phase, either as complements or as competitive elements, after the initial goal of a grotesque liberation has been achieved and the conditions for more "refined" claims have matured. Precisely at the moment when revolutionary processes were dissolving the unbearable feudalism, the theoretical debates of the Enlightenment were

[4] In relation to the question of who is a conservative and who is a liberal, Ambrose Bierce ("Devil's Dictionary" 1911) uses an apt metaphor, although perhaps with a somewhat excessive dose of pessimism: "Conservative, a statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others".

[5] The classical liberal Feinberg (1988), assisted by Wertheimer, has contributed decisively to this debate by defining the content of "harm" (for a more detailed discussion of this issue, see the study by Aristidis Hatzis, "The Limits of Liberty", on the occasion of a relevant lecture at the Center for Liberal Studies, in February 2011, http://users.uoa.gr/~ahatzis/Limits_of_Liberty_gr.pdf).

transferred to the political arena. Quite early on, romantic humanists, in a head-on confrontation with the theorists of early bourgeois liberalism, would put forward the concept of equality ahead of individual freedom. Rousseau, probably the leading pioneer of this current, in his monumental treatise on the origin of inequality in 1755, highlights the unnatural nature of private property:

"The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying "This is mine", and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody."

In contrast to bourgeois individualism, the social dimension of freedom concerns both the equal integration of members, ensuring equal opportunities and possibilities, and the balanced development of the social whole, beyond any exogenous or endogenous constraints. For many analysts, the problem of social liberation today is more relevant than ever, especially in capitalist developed countries, in the era of systemic crisis and the consequent neoliberal aggression that negates the social conquests of bourgeois democracy itself.

Going back to the beginnings of the bourgeois revolution, the collapse of traditional social structures was inevitable, as the antinomy between institutions and social reality intensified, and the concentration of money and economic power by the newly emerging bourgeoisie did not fit with the aristocratic, feudal order. In this historical process, the two hypostases of the concept of freedom coexist harmoniously within the framework of revolutionary demands, precisely because the head-on conflict with the old structures of power requires the coexistence of the progressive bourgeoisie, which perceives individual freedom as the basis of formation and as a driving force for further development, with the popular element aroused by the ideals of social liberation. This is particularly evident in the case of the French Revolution: the violent, genuine revolutionary process that stepped on the alliance of the new lords with the poor evolved beyond bourgeois control, introducing, by necessity, the 'disturbing' concepts of equality and democratic legitimation, which have left their marks on the ideological and political formation of continental Europe to this day.

On the contrary, the different process of social change in Britain shaped distinct mores. Although it resulted in similar socio-economic structures, which in the context of the modern internationalization of the system are increasingly associated with those of the continental European bourgeois tradition, British socio-political reality is still characterized by the specific ways the main factors of social change were combined and worked together: bourgeois and proletarian or petty bourgeois strata, rationalists and romantics, liberals and humanists.[6] British political liberalism represents a smoother, bloodless version of the bourgeois revolution, without regressions or uncontrolled advances, leading to a parliamentary democracy based on a largely effortless alliance between the old and new ruling classes. Therefore, in this more gradual process of social structure evolution—driven by rational behavior and understanding between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, and not requiring an aggressive, frontal clash—the protection of individual freedom maintains intellectual dominance, free from the complications of equality and social liberation concepts. It is the moment when the previously accepted, perhaps incidental or seemingly irrelevant to the current historical context, use of two etymologically different words for the same overarching, dual concept begins to make sense within the framework of social evolution at that time. In other words, it is when "liberty" and "freedom" gain a new, modern purpose for their linguistic existence.

4. INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE: GREEK TRANSLATION AND POLITICAL EXPEDIENCIES

In an era of deep systemic crisis where the search for a way out is intensifying, the phenomena of intentional or unintentional distortion of the meaning of words and the often deliberately exploited misunderstandings are also increasing. It is a time when the undoing of historical socio-economic advances is called "reform," when replacing democratic legitimacy with technocratic legitimation is regarded as political liberation, and when bourgeois economic liberalism portrays itself as rational, hiding its social subjectivism.

In this era, considering the dual nature of freedom, the growing debate on the essence of modern bourgeois society, and the tension between its inevitable questioning and the frantic effort to defend the bourgeoisie, the competitive relationship between individual and social liberation within a capitalist economy is brought to light. Particularly, since the country has become, among other things, a testing ground for a symbolically significant pilot application impacting the final outcome of global political confrontation, the use of these two concepts in contemporary Greek public debate highlights either intentional or unintentional misunderstandings, thus emphasizing the importance of this essay. To what extent, for example, does the "liberation of professions" truly lead to the unhindered professional integration of individuals if this process is not accompanied by institutional interventions that prevent the replacement of state prohibitions with oligopolistic structures of market domination? Does the "liberation of the labor market" free hundreds of thousands of workers or possibly just dozens of employers? Lastly, the independence of the central bank—whom does it free, and whom does it enslave? Does its independence from the democratically elected government, with all its flaws

[6] The analysis at this point is largely based on the more thorough discussion in the second chapter of the monograph "Neoliberalism: Vulgarly Simple or Simply Vulgar", Zarotiadis, Gutenberg Publications, 2012.

and inefficiencies, and its alignment with the rationality of technocrats representing finance capital, genuinely advance social freedom, or even towards the individual freedom for each citizen?

The 18th century marked the final dominance of the bourgeoisie, either through cooperation with the previous ruling class or in alliance with the middle class and working class, by strengthening political and economic liberalism or through its often inventive clash with romantic humanism, depending on the circumstances, needs, and opportunities that historical conditions created. In any case, these two parallel paths of social change largely shaped subsequent ideological references. The negatively charged rhetoric of European interventionism may mainly serve propaganda purposes, emphasizing the godly work of reformers who aim to free us from the dragon of the state. However, it is true that this divide between Anglo-Saxon economic liberalism and the European/continental Popular Right has, to this day, formed the main polarity in establishing systemic, bourgeois politics, which led to the creation of the last "knight defender" of bourgeois-conceptualized individual freedom in the West of the 20th-century: neoliberalism, which is unexpectedly violent, desperately courageous, and tragically certain of its mission. Meanwhile, the processes of alternative approaches are intensifying: they will simply involve a new reconciliation of the two forms of "freedom," in an era where social liberation will complement individual liberation and where respect for others will not be imposed but sought.

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