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Abstract

Commentary on Clive Hamilton's book *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a post-secular ethics and the 1960s and 1970s*.

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1968 and The Paradox of Freedom*

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*[*This is an edited and updated version of a talk delivered in a session at the Brisbane Writer's Festival in 2008. The session was entitled "Philosophy Forum: The Disappointment of Liberalism".]*

Introduction

To speak of the disappointment of liberalism is to infer expectation – an expectation of liberalism. And, indeed, this expectation runs through Clive Hamilton's book *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a post-secular ethics*:

"Why is it that, despite the wealth and freedom now enjoyed by most citizens of rich countries, we do not appear to be the autonomous, fulfilled individuals we were told our wealth and freedom would bring?"¹

Having, as a student, cut my political and philosophical teeth on the texts of Western Marxism (and in certain works of Existential Marxism and French Feminist Philosophy) I, for one, have never harbored this expectation of liberalism. So, to speak of disappointment, in the way that Hamilton does in his book, is for me not really an option.

¹ Clive Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a Post-Secular Ethics*, Allen & Unwin, 2008, p. xi.

For all the good in Clive Hamilton's work – and there is much – the problem that runs throughout this book is what we might refer to as the insistence of the individual. What do I mean by this? And how does this manifest in Hamilton's analysis?

In *The Freedom Paradox* Clive Hamilton asserts a problem – the problem of rampant consumerism and the (paradoxical) discontent this seems to generate. From here, he goes on to diagnose the sources of the problem, and then to offer a solution to it. A neat almost medical analysis. So, what are the elements of this diagnosis and cure and how do they relate to the insistence of the individual?

Step one: Diagnosis

Hamilton draws a direct link between the radical liberation movements of the 60s and 70s and what he refers to as our current cultural malaise. The complexities of the critiques emerging from these movements are reduced to liberal demands for personal autonomy and rights. A clear line runs throughout *The Freedom Paradox* suggesting that these movements (that he characterizes as desire-driven) are responsible for the “post modern individualism” that runs rampant today. Thus, they are responsible for what he sees as our current cultural malaise.

But, this depiction of the liberation movements of the 60s and 70s conveniently leaves out the really radical nature of the critique of capitalist consumption (and its complex links with patriarchy and colonialism) that emerged at that time. Take the Situationist International. As Arthur Hirsch has argued, “The situationists did not moralistically oppose consumption *per se* but rather the ‘totalitarian management’ of society which manipulates and conditions the individual to seek fulfillment in consumption instead of in creativity and authenticity. In consumer society the meaning

of life tends to be reduced to a quantitative expansion of material survival, leaving the question of the quality of life untouched. Everyday life is thus rendered boring and banal, an unending monotony of joyless consumption.”² Bernard Lacroix expressed a similar sentiment in relation to the 1968 rebellion: “... just because it took many people a certain amount of time to understand that May did not announce a coming ‘revolution’, this does not then lead to the conclusion that it inaugurated its opposite, a ‘return to individualism’. It is wrong to conclude, in other words, that because the movement failed to seize state power it was either radically indifferent to the question of power or the prototype of a 1980s form of consumer consciousness”.³ When in 1967 he prophetically announces that “Freedom is Violence”, Jean-Luc Godard sums up an entire revolt against a system run rampant.⁴ This is no simple liberal claim for autonomy. Far from it. It is, rather, a refusal of the ground or logic of advanced industrial society. It is a refusal of transcendent value packaged up in the form of commodities and things. It is a refusal, as well, of commodified relations between individuals. To reduce the liberation movements – the students revolts, the women’s movement, the movements for gay and lesbian rights, the ecological movement – to simple liberal assertions of personal freedoms and rights is to do violence to the complexity of their respective critiques. “The May Movement”, as Alain Touraine observed, “dispelled the illusion that improvement in production and

² Arthur Hirsch, *The French New Left: An Intellectual History From Sartre to Gorz*, South End Press, Boston, 1981, p. 145.

³ Bernard Lacroix quoted in Kristen Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 74.

⁴ Jean-Luc Godard, *Weekend* (1967).

consumption result in a society in which tensions replace conflicts, quarrels replace disruptions, negotiations replace revolutions”.⁵

Hamilton conflates sixties radicalism with the “me-generation”, arguing that the liberation movements of the 60s and 70s bore the seed of an egocentrism and a narcissism that gave birth to what was to become the moral confusion of Thatcher’s political and social individualism. The liberation movements, he claims, unleashed a self-centredness with the result that moral judgment could no longer be made.⁶ Yet, in this, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the events of May ’68 in Paris, it is timely to recall – and perhaps draw upon – the radical and very specific nature of the critique of society that emerged at that time. To put this another way, it is important to refuse the gesture that collapses all Sixties politics into the “same”, in order that we re-engage with that moment in sixties radicalism that calls for a changing of the horizon – a horizon that goes well beyond individual liberal values and beliefs. In order to place this in context, let me quote briefly from the philosopher Luce Irigaray, who draws our attention to “the world-wide cultural crisis... exemplified by the student revolts that have arisen, and re-arisen in France and elsewhere since ’68”. Here she connects a contemporary concern with cultural crisis *with* the sensibility of the sixties. Where Hamilton constructs a causality *between* these struggles and our current malaise, Irigaray argues something quite different. She claims that:

⁵ Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform*, Random House, New York, 1971, pp. 79-80.

⁶ Radio National Interview with Fran Kelly, Breakfast: 1 August 2008.

“... it is from this same crucible of cultural revolution that various struggles – students, feminists of difference, ecological movements – have erupted and re-erupted in our countries. Their concerns live on, concerns often suppressed by powers blind to their objectives or by militants **who barely understand the profundity and radical nature of what is at stake in these struggles**. For it is not a matter of changing this or that within a horizon already defined as human culture. It is **a question of changing the horizon itself** – of understanding that our interpretation of human identity is both theoretically and practically wrong.”

She goes on to point out that “If we fail to question what cries out to be radically questioned, we lapse into an infinite number of secondary ethical tasks...”⁷.

Arguably Hamilton in his analysis does just this – confuse the “secondary ethical tasks” (criticisms of consumer culture) with “what cries out to be radically questioned” (Western metaphysics itself)? It is possible that by blaming the liberation movements of the 60s and 70s for our current cultural malaise, he “barely understand[s] the profundity and radical nature of what is at stake in these struggles.” For, as Irigaray and many others point out, in this political radicalism it is precisely “a question of changing the horizon itself – of understanding that our interpretation of human reality is both theoretically and practically wrong.” Perhaps the problem is reducing the complexity of 60s and later 70s revolt to the terms “liberation” or “liberation movements”. In doing so, we cover over the complexity of the critiques that emerge at this time. To be sure, part of the “revolt” at the time is individual in nature – and, not surprisingly, for many women the lure of “personal freedom” for the

⁷ Luce Irigaray *I Love to You: sketch of a possible felicity in history*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 20.

(Darkened text is my emphasis).

first time in recorded Western history was significant. But, to reduce these movements and social critiques to notions of personal freedom entirely, is to do significant injustice to the larger concerns that fuelled discontent at this time. The liberal individual ideal of some feminism for women's personal empowerment always co-existed with the more radical demand that society and social relations – in their entirety – be challenged and changed, not simply that women be granted greater access to the existing pie. Of course, the complexities here have, historically (in the West), been depicted in terms of the alternatives of liberal equality-based feminism and its more radical other – feminism of difference.

While I have sympathy with Hamilton's concerns, I have serious misgivings about his analysis. To blame the so-called liberation movements for the vacuous understanding that mainstream society today has concerning freedom (freedom as freedom of material choice), is to ignore the radical change that feminism, ecology, and numerous other movements have had – and continue to have – on the lives of us all. In this, Hamilton's analysis is arguably complicit with and corrupted by the very liberal agenda he seeks to challenge.

Step two: Solution/Cure

Having diagnosed the ill, Hamilton goes on to suggest the cure, metaphysics as a counter to our malady of discontent. "Inner freedom" and the "moral self" are the base of an ethics of the individual, hoping (against all odds?) to do better.

"Only metaphysics, the establishing of a fixed point (or moral self) within us, allows us to develop an ethical position (a post-secular ethics) free from the dangers of moral relativism and theology."

Now of this metaphysics, Hamilton has the following to say:

“In addition to individual and political liberties, there is a neglected third form of liberty – inner freedom – and it is the erosion of this freedom that explains the widespread unhappiness and alienation that characterize societies that are otherwise free and wealthy. Moreover, far from being an unfortunate parallel development, the erosion of inner freedom is associated with the social transformations that have given us such unprecedented wealth and privilege.”⁸

“Inner freedom” (or “metaphysical freedom”) is the key to a new and different approach to political philosophy, and – along with the moral self – it provides a metaphysical basis for a new ethics capable of addressing the excesses of our contemporary consumption and social malaise. This metaphysics, however, repeats certain familiar gestures, in that it values a “considered self” over and above the “superficial self” of appetite and desire. It privileges the noumenal “thing-in-itself” over and above the phenomenal “world of appearances”. Now, for those of us historically overdetermined by, and equated with, the world of phenomenon – women – this metaphysic sounds an alarm.

Perhaps I can explain this with reference to Hamilton’s discussion of first versus second order preferences. In Part one of the book (dealing with the psychological reasons for the absence of inner freedom), he (in a discussion of our behaviour in the market place) pits second order preferences – reflective choice, free will, self-control, moral consideration and judgment, over and against first order preferences – impulsive purchase, urge, temptation, weakness and desire. What emerges here is an elevation of the “considered” or “true” self arising from moral consideration and restraint, over the superficiality of the “worldly” self of appetite. While the inner freedom, that ultimately comes

⁸ Clive Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox*, p. 63.

with the considered or true self, leads in the direction of redemption, understood here as detachment and self-control, the superficial self (prey to self-deception and weakness of will) is shot through with a desire or appetite that can only be understood in terms of error.

Anyone who knows their history of philosophy also knows that there is a tendency, in the West, to associate the weakness of appetite and desire with femininity and – more often than not – with women too. What’s interesting, in Hamilton’s analysis, is that his metaphysics aligns the error and insatiability of all those qualities associated with first order preferences with precisely those liberation movements of the 60s and 70s that we have already mentioned. These movements, caught in the lure of attaining personal autonomy, are depicted as responsible for the unbridled pursuit of desire. They have confused freedom with free choice and informed consent. In the process, he claims, they have “ceded to us unprecedented moral confusion”. Moreover, “The liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s targeted other sources of oppression – sexual conservatism, subjugation of women, homophobia, and racism in its many guises. It now appears that, by removing sources of oppression based on gender, sexuality and race, these social revolutions have left us free to be miserable in new, more insidious ways.”⁹ Of all these movements, it is arguably the women’s liberation movement – and its association with sexual liberation – that is of most concern for Hamilton. Indeed, his focus (in the book) on the insatiable sexual appetite of Catherine M stands in to validate his argument that the liberation movements can only be understood in terms of appetite, and thus moral error.¹⁰ The fact that he nowhere in the book attempts to engage the complexity and range of feminist work coming from the women’s liberation movement suggests, however, that his

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

analysis harbors error of its own. As one involved in feminist politics and philosophy for many years, I am troubled by Hamilton's failure to engage with these discourses and practices, and deeply concerned about the unconscious associations of his metaphysic – associations that, I believe, remain yet to be fully analysed.

Conclusion

So, what are we to make of all this? I want to suggest that a possible antidote to Hamilton's cure – the insistence of the individual that I have been arguing against – is to shift the terrain of our discussion from freedom and individualized notions of happiness toward responsibility. This is to focus on our obligations to and for the other, rather than withdrawing into the moral perfection of our own inner free self. In short, this suggests a move away from the disappointing individual of liberalism (*and* metaphysics) toward something quite different.

It seems to me that instead of focusing on questions of inner freedom and the interiorized happiness of the individual, we could – in the spirit of '68 – return to what *connects* us, one to another. In the place of this freedom we could speak of responsibility, of obligation, of the ethical demand of the other, of responsibility as prior freedom. Now here, I invoke the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose "Ethics as First Philosophy" remains, for me, one of the most critical texts of our day.¹¹ Levinas' claim, that ethics precedes ontology, simply stated suggests that the Other calls us, obliges us, to be responsible for his or her needs – without appeal to metaphysical justification - simply

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy", in S. Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, pp. 75-86.

because the other is there and in need. This, too, is a radical departure from liberal philosophical ground – one that sees our very subjectivity as constituted in and through the ethical demand of others in our world.

“One has to respond to one’s right to be... because of one’s fear for the Other. My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?... a fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence. A fear which reaches back past my ‘self-consciousness’...”¹² (“Ethics as First Philosophy”, p.82).

So, in this year - the fiftieth anniversary of the events of May ’68 – we might remind ourselves of a freedom that differs from the hollow freedom of consumption and choice that our market would have us celebrate. We might remember a freedom that involves rebellion rather than success. In doing so, we reject a one-dimensional freedom that means succeeding in material terms. We do so in order to resist the very system that threatens in us what makes us truly human – our obligations and responsibilities for others and for our world. And in remembering this kind of freedom we might also recall the movements and struggles that have over long years helped keep the resistance alive. To say this is to suggest that we move toward the other – embrace the other – for reasons infinitely other than our own moral perfection.

¹² Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy”, p. 82.