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Emancipation

Simon Susen

In the most general sense, the concept of emancipation refers to an entity's liberation from control, dependence, restraint, confinement, restriction, repression, slavery, or domination. The term has its etymological origin in the Latin word *emancipare*, which is derived from *ex manu capere*, that is, from the prefix "*ex*" ("from"), the noun "*manus*" ("hand"), and the verb "*capere*" ("to take"). Thus, while the Latin verb *emancipare* literally means "to take from the hand," the English verb "to emancipate" is used to capture the idea of "freeing or releasing something or somebody from dependence upon something or somebody else." The Latin terms "*mancipium*" ("slave"), "*mancipator*" ("slaveholder"), and "*mancipatio*" ("verbal contract concerning the handover of ownership") indicate that the notion of *emancipare* originally referred to the idea of "transferring ownership of something or somebody to someone else," notably the conveyance of an object, a person's release from slavery, or an individual's exemption from paternal authority. In modern English, the term "emancipation" commonly describes the transition from heteronomy to autonomy, from dependence to freedom, or from alienation to self-realization. Rather than establishing a universally applicable definition of the term, however, it is important to bear in mind that the concept of emancipation has been, and continues to be, used in different contexts and given meaning from diverging ideological angles. In order to illustrate the complexity of the term, this entry will consider the following: different *elements* of emancipation, different *conceptions* of emancipation, and different *movements* of emancipation.

Different Elements of Emancipation

As stated above, in the most general sense, the concept of emancipation designates an entity's liberation from control, dependence, restraint, confinement, restriction, repression, slavery, or domination. Yet, such a broad definition tells us little about the nature of emancipation. Hence, it makes sense to examine three central dimensions of the above definition in some detail: (i) the type of "entity" considered as the *carrier* of emancipation, (ii) the form of "liberation" underlying the *process* of emancipation, and (iii) the mode of "control" constituting an *obstacle* to emancipation.

i. Carriers of emancipation are generally thought to be *human*. The view that human beings have the capacity to convert themselves into protagonists of emancipation is expressed in various intellectual traditions that are based on different understandings of the subject. Among the most influential conceptions of the subject in modern social and political thought are the following: the thinking subject (Descartes), the rational subject (Kant), the sociohistorical subject (Hegel), the working subject (Marx), the unconscious subject (Freud), the linguistic subject (Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur), the experiencing subject (Husserl), the bodily subject (Merleau-Ponty and Foucault), the desiring subject (Lacan and Deleuze), and the communicative subject (Habermas). Regardless of which particular account of the subject is chosen to identify an individual or collective carrier of emancipation, entities capable of liberating themselves from repressive forms of power and control tend to be conceived of as *human* actors. In fact, in modern social and political thought, most theories of emancipation have been inextricably linked to the concept of the subject. Of course, one

may have good reason to be critical of such an anthropocentric interpretation of emancipation: on religious or quasi-religious grounds, one may claim that spiritual or divine forces can be a source of emancipation; on vitalist grounds, one may assume that, in principle, all living beings can be emancipated, or even emancipate themselves, from exogenous forces controlling their development; on environmentalist grounds, one may contend that the natural world can, and indeed should, be emancipated from being exploited by humans. Nonetheless, the predominant position among social and political philosophers is that emancipation is a process depending on and carried out by human actors, who, as rational entities, are capable of shaping the conditions of their existence.

ii. In the broadest sense, processes of emancipation are social practices oriented toward *liberation*. The supposition that emancipatory processes are tantamount to liberating practices is expressed in the use of concepts such as "autonomization," "self-realization," "transformation," "revolution," "enlightenment," and – more recently – "empowerment." What kind of processes can or should be characterized as "liberating" remains a controversial question; there is little doubt, however, that one feature that all forms of emancipation have in common is that they involve an individual or collective entity's assertion of *sovereignty* and its exemption from one or various sources of relatively arbitrary control. Indeed, from a historical perspective, there is no doubt that individual or collective actions oriented toward liberation from repressive powers have always been, and will always continue to be, a major normative impulse of social and political change. To be sure, one may have justifiable reservations about the possibility of emancipation: on ideological grounds, one may challenge the political legitimacy of projects aimed at individual or collective emancipation; on ethical grounds, one may be wary of the fact that most emancipatory processes involve conflict with, or in some cases even the suppression of, oppositional forces; on pragmatic grounds, one may question the long-term viability and sustainability of emancipatory processes. Nevertheless, whatever one makes of these objections, it appears to be the case that, rightly or wrongly, all processes of emancipation are oriented toward achieving particular forms of liberation.

iii. Obstacles to emancipation tend to be regarded as detrimental sources of *control*. The common assumption that obstacles to emancipation are *negative* forces, based on the relatively *arbitrary* and arguably *illegitimate* exercise of power, is illustrated in the fact that, in most cases, processes of liberation are invoked in opposition to disempowering experiences, such as "repression," "domination," "alienation," "illusion," and "deception." Notwithstanding the fact that, in modern social and political thought, there is substantial disagreement over the nature and significance of the main obstacles to emancipation, the theoretical critique and practical rejection of existing barriers to human development aim to deconstruct and remove both material and symbolic arrangements that obstruct the unfolding of the self-empowering potential of a given individual or collective actor. Especially those subscribing to conservative values may believe to have convincing reasons to be suspicious of both small-scale and large-scale attempts to undermine, or even get rid of, established sources of authority and control. Nonetheless, from a historical point of view, the denunciation of and opposition to obstacles preventing individual and collective entities from realizing their potential have been on the agenda for a long time and are likely to continue to be of central importance to the political organization of social life in the future.

Different Conceptions of Emancipation

Similar to other terminological tools in social and political thought, the concept of emancipation has acquired various meanings in different contexts and in diverging intellectual traditions. In Roman law, it was used primarily as a technical term referring to the granting of legal rights; in the modern era, it obtained a new and broader meaning: the emphasis shifted from a person's (passive) obtainment of legal rights to a subject's (active) self-liberation from disempowering forms of control. By the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of emancipation had become a political term describing individual or collective processes oriented toward the assertion of personal or social autonomy. Among the most influential thinkers shaping modern approaches to emancipation were the philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and Karl Marx (1818–83). Their writings gave rise to the intellectual development of Rousseauian, Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist approaches to emancipation.

Philosophical approaches to emancipation drawing on the work of *Rousseau* typically refer to his famous assertion that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (1996 [1762]: 465). Rousseau is widely recognized as one of the first philosophers to draw a distinction between "natural" and "social" inequality. This distinction allows him to argue that, in collective life forms whose economic organization is based on private property, inequality derives mainly from *social*, rather than from biological or physical, differences between people. Rousseau eloquently articulates this perspective in the following passage:

> The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: "Do not listen to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!" (Rousseau 1996 [1755]: 431, emphasis original)

Thus, far from regarding private property as a natural right and social inequality as an inevitable given, Rousseau considers both as historical products of bourgeois society. Furthermore, he takes the pessimistic view that, due to the historical transition from the state of nature to the establishment of society, human beings have gradually *alienated* themselves from the roots of their existence. The state of nature was essentially a primitive condition characterized by the absence of law, morality, and social conventions; the development of society, by contrast, is contingent upon the emergence of an ever greater division of labor and private property, both of which are protected by political and legal institutions. While rejecting any illusions about the possibility of returning to the state of nature, Rousseau suggests that, by joining together into civil society on the basis of a social contract, individuals are not only able to preserve themselves as human beings but also have the opportunity to remain free as citizens. Rousseau's defence of freedom and equality, epitomized in the concept of the "general will" (*volonté générale*), represents a cornerstone for modern conceptions of social and political emancipation based on normative ideals such as "popular sovereignty," "direct democracy," and "fairness of opportunity."

Philosophical approaches to emancipation referring to *Kant*'s oeuvre draw attention to comments made in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1979 [1798]). In this study, Kant considers the possibility of overcoming subjugation and immaturity; he does so by reflecting on the sociohistorical significance of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, both of which he believes to have substantially contributed to the gradual coming of age of the human race. Similar to other Enlightenment philosophers, Kant stresses the empowering potential inherent in human subjects' ability to raise themselves out of nature by making use of their rational capacity (*Verstand*) and thereby gaining control over their environment. Yet, from a Kantian perspective, society's

maturation process toward moral progress and enlightenment depends on the unfolding of reason (*Vernunft*): autonomy and responsibility are derived from the subject's moral capacity to shape the world on the basis of ethical commitments and ideals. On this account, actions driven by inclination or affection lack moral value; an action has moral worth only insofar as it is motivated by rational considerations based on universalizable principles. This conviction is most succinctly expressed in Kant's "categorical imperative," according to which humans are required to act in conformity with moral maxims that can be regarded as universal laws to be respected by everyone (see esp. Kant 2003 [1785]).

Although the term "emancipation" is not part of Kant's conceptual apparatus, his "categorical imperative" is founded on the assumption that humans can liberate themselves from their "lower faculties," such as inclination and self-interest, because their rational capacity permits them to follow *unconditional* moral principles, which can be justified as ends in themselves. On this view, emancipation is tantamount to rationally motivated enlightenment. In his groundbreaking article *An Answer to the Question: "What Is Enlightenment?"* (2009 [1784]), Kant insists that the coming of age of humanity is inconceivable without people's ability to emerge from their self-incurred immaturity by making use of their rational capacity, which equips them with a sense of personal autonomy and moral responsibility. From this perspective, the free and public use of reason is a precondition for society's emancipation from prejudice and superstition.

Philosophical approaches to emancipation inspired by the writings of *Hegel* draw on his reflections on the so-called "master–slave dialectic," sometimes referred to as the "lordship and bondage" relation, which can be found in a famous passage of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977 [1807]). Given the abstract and metaphorical language used in this section, it can be interpreted in several ways; it is beyond doubt, however, that one of the essential themes of this passage is the encounter between two self-conscious entities whose struggle for power and survival epitomizes the subject's ontological dependence upon processes of *mutual recognition*. Applied to modern debates on emancipation, Hegel's remarks on the "master–slave dialectic" forcefully illustrate that human beings, whatever their position in society, are not only cognitive but also recognitive entities, implying that they are capable of cognition (*Verstand*) only insofar as they establish social relations founded on mutual recognition(*gegenseitige Anerkennung*). As recognition-dependent and recognition-seeking entities, humans cannot possibly strive for self-liberation without immersing themselves in processes of socialization, through which they can assert their capacity for emancipation from historically specific forms of domination (see also Hegel 1990 [1825–6]). Philosophical approaches to emancipation developed in the tradition of *Marx*'s historical materialism are based on the supposition that the possibility of individual and collective self-realization is not a merely theoretical matter of abstract speculation but, first and foremost, a practical challenge regarding the historical conditions underlying processes of social transformation (2000 [1845b]). Marx's sustained interest in the concept of emancipation is expressed particularly in his early works, such as his "Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*" (2000 [1843]), "On the Jewish Question" (2000 [1844a]), "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" (2000 [1844b]), "The Holy Family" (2000 [1845a]), "Theses on Feuerbach" (2000 [1845b]), and the "Grundrisse" (2000 [1857–8]). Given the considerable impact of Marxist thought on world history, it is worth examining Marx's conception of emancipation in some detail. At least seven key assumptions underlying his view of emancipation can be identified in his writings.

First, emancipation is *restorative*. It allows for the recovery of human autonomy, indicating that people have the capacity to liberate themselves from detrimental sources of power that estrange them from both themselves and their environment. In Marx's words, "all emancipation is bringing back man's world and

his relationships to man himself ” (2000 [1844a]: 64). According to this view, the restorative function of emancipation enables people to return to the essence of their existence. Second, emancipation is potentially *universal*. One of Marx's most famous claims is that there is a fundamental difference between "political" and "human" emancipation (2000 [1844a]: esp. 51–4 and 64). In fact, Marx sharply criticizes the "uncritical confusion of political emancipation and universal human emancipation" (2000 [1844a]: 50): the former is *limited* to civilizational achievements, such as the separation of state and church, freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to suffrage; the latter, by contrast, has a universal character in that it *transcends* the particular interests of individual citizens or social groups. From a Marxian perspective, then, political emancipation is restricted in that it rests upon "the reduction of man, on the one hand to a member of civil society, an egoistic and independent individual, on the other hand to a citizen, a moral person" (2000 [1844a]: 64). In order for human emancipation to be possible, "man must recognize his own forces as social forces, organize them, and thus no longer separate social forces from himself in the form of political forces" (64). In this sense, human emancipation allows for people's self-realization, regardless of their political, economic, or otherwise defined interests and affiliations.

Third, emancipation is *progressive*. Marxian thought stands in the Enlightenment tradition in emphasizing the empowering nature of individual and social forms of evolution. Following Marx, we should acknowledge that "political emancipation is of course a great progress" (2000 [1844a]: 54) and that, although "it is not the final form of human emancipation in general, it is nevertheless the final form of human emancipation inside the present world order" (54). According to this account, political concessions made to the working class in capitalist society can be interpreted as a sign of progress toward reaching the final goal of abolishing private property through revolutionary class struggle.

Fourth, emancipation is *transformative*. This assumption is expressed in Marx's famous assertion that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (2000 [1845b]: 173). The decisive step leading to universal human emancipation is the "abolition of private property" (2000 [1844b]: 97), allowing for "the real reappropriation of the human essence by and for man" (97). Thus, it is through the transition from private to collective ownership of the means of production that genuine *human* emancipation, understood as a *social* process, can be achieved. Marx characterizes the absence of private property in an advanced stage of history as "communism," representing "the genuine solution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man" (97). If, following Marx, communism is regarded as the "whole movement of history" and "the consciously comprehended process of its becoming" (97), then human emancipation can be conceived of as a never-ending process. From this point of view, the abolition of private property can be only the first, albeit a fundamental, step toward the consolidation of an emancipatory society.

Fifth, emancipation is *empowering*. Given the foundational status ascribed to labor within the Marxian architecture of the social, alienation from labor is tantamount to alienation from the human condition. To the extent that alienated labor is "not the satisfaction of a need but only a means to satisfy needs outside itself" (2000 [1844b]: 88), emancipated labor is not a means to satisfy needs outside itself but the satisfaction of a need itself. According to Marx, the exploited worker is alienated (i) from his product, (ii) from other producers, (iii) from the production process, and (iv) from himself as a species-being (2000 [1844b]: 85–95). The exploited worker experiences (i) the alienation from his *product*, which appears "as an alien object that has power over him" (89), (ii) the alienation from other *producers*, who are caught up in "the alienation of man from man" (91), (iii) the alienation from the *production* process, which imposes itself "as an activity

directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him" (89), and (iv) the alienation from himself as a *species-being*, that is, it alienates from man his "human essence" (91). From this perspective, the emancipation of the alienated worker is inconceivable without the empowering recovery of the (i) *purposive*, (ii) *cooperative*, (iii) *creative*, and (iv) *species-constitutive* potentials inherent in labor. Sixth, emancipation is *unifying*. According to Marxian parameters, genuine human emancipation involves not only the elimination of social domination through the abolition of private property, but also the possibility of self-realization through the abolition of the division of labor. The proper unfolding of people's purposive, cooperative, and creative potentials requires the consolidation of a reality that succeeds in overcoming the material and symbolic antagonisms created by class-divided societies. The artificial separation between different types of labor – manual versus intellectual, concrete versus abstract, male versus female, paid versus unpaid, public versus domestic – has no place in a classless society in which everybody has not only the right but also the opportunity to develop their purposive, cooperative, and creative capacities and thereby transcend the stratifying logic of class-based realities. In this sense, genuine emancipation is a unifying effort guided by the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (2000 [1875]: 615). Seventh, emancipation is *self-initiated*. In fact, according to Marx, genuine emancipation *must* be self-initiated: "the proletariat can and must free itself. But it cannot free itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation" (2000 [1845a]: 149). Yet, Marx's contention that genuine forms of social emancipation derive from *self-emancipation* appears to provide as many answers as it poses questions. On the one hand, Marx suggests that genuine emancipation is not an exogenously orchestrated mechanism, imposed upon society by the state or an intellectual avant-garde "from above," but, rather, an endogenously realized process, carried out by the revolutionary subject, the working class, "from below." On the other hand, historical examples of socialist revolutions have shown that Marx's plea for a "dictatorship of the proletariat" is fraught with difficulties and has, in practice, often led to the establishment of totalitarian regimes, whose working classes were largely alienated from the political elites by which they were governed. Notwithstanding the controversial nature of revolutionary projects, the notion that a class "in itself" (which *exists* as a class) needs to convert itself into a class "for itself" (which is *aware* of itself as a class) remains crucial to the orthodox Marxist conviction that the historical mission of the working class is to take on its role as *the* revolutionary subject, whose political actions can bring about universal human emancipation.

Routes to socialist emancipation

By the early twentieth century, competing traditions and tendencies had emerged within the socialist movement, which was profoundly divided by two major issues: the question of its *goals and objectives* and the question of its *means and strategies*. The former issue, regarding the ideological question "*What* do we want?," illustrates that different socialist currents embrace divergent conceptions of socialism; the latter issue, concerning the strategic question "*How* do we get there?," is reflected in the rivalry between revolutionary and reformist routes to socialism.

Among the most influential *revolutionary socialists* were Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805–81), Karl Marx (1818–83), Friedrich Engels (1820–95), Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919). Despite being separated by substantial ideological differences, they had, among other aspects, one important thing in common: they were resolutely opposed to the liberal promises of "bourgeois democracy" and in favor of employing revolutionary tactics to overthrow the "bourgeois state" and thereby convert the

"dictatorship of the proletariat" into a necessary step toward human emancipation.

Among the most prominent *reformist socialists* were Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–64), Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932), Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), Sidney Webb (1859–1947), Jean Léon Jaurès (1859–1914), Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925), and Léon Blum (1872–1950). They essentially took the position that the proletarian struggle for emancipation could be successful only through a shift of emphasis from "class struggle" to "class compromise." Bernstein famously claimed that "the movement is everything and the goal is nothing" (Heywood 1994: 110), suggesting that, in order to make genuine progress toward human emancipation, the proletariat should take a pragmatic and consensual, rather than a dogmatic and confrontational, stance.

Critical theory

Another key source of inspiration for many contemporary approaches to emancipation can be found in the works of the Frankfurt School, notably in the writings of the critical theorists Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), and Jürgen Habermas (1929–). Although their intellectual contributions are situated in the tradition of Marxist thought, their works are marked by a profound distrust in orthodox Marxist approaches to society in general and to human emancipation in particular. A central concern in their writings is the categorical rejection of economic determinism, thereby refusing to accept the orthodox Marxist premise that so-called "superstructural" dimensions of human reality – such as ideology, philosophy, politics, law, art, and religion – are largely determined by the economic "base" of society (see Marx 2000 [1859]). Furthermore, they discard the assumption, presumably shared by "vulgar Marxists" (*Vulgärmarxisten*), that history is on the side of the working class and that the collapse of capitalism is inevitable. If anything, the absence or failure of socialist revolutions in the economically developed countries of "the west" in the twentieth century is a sign of the integrative power and ideological elasticity of capitalism, which turned out to be a much more resilient and adaptable economic system than most revolutionary socialists had predicted.

In line with other critical theorists, *Benjamin* is deeply suspicious not only of reformist approaches to emancipation, particularly those advocated by social democrats, but also of allegedly revolutionary accounts according to which the working class should be "given the role of the saviour of future generations" (1961: 275), permitting it to fulfill its mission of converting its own liberation into the cornerstone of human emancipation. In contrast to this view, Benjamin insists that three dimensions need to be added to the premises of Marx's historical materialism: "the discontinuity of historical time; the destructive force of the working class; the tradition of the oppressed" (1972–89: I.3/1246). In other words, Benjamin seeks to transcend the evolutionist, romanticist, and idealist presuppositions underlying orthodox Marxist conceptions of social revolution. From this perspective, it is erroneous to conceive of emancipation in terms of an outcome produced by continuous historical development; rather, it is to be seen as the result of largely unforeseeable and discontinuously occurring eruptions. If "there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance" (1972–89: I.3/1231, emphasis original), then radical social transformations can, in principle, occur at any point in time.

Horkheimer and *Adorno*'s concern with the possibility of emancipation focuses on the place of the individual in mass society (Adorno & Horkheimer 1997 [1944/69]: 120–67). Their account is deeply pessimistic, seeking to demonstrate that the promises of the Enlightenment have been shattered by the historical experiences of fascism, state socialism, and consumer capitalism.

Horkheimer's writings contain at least two conceptions of emancipation: first, he

vehemently rejects the "bourgeois" conception of emancipation based on individual liberty as the supreme value of capitalist society (2004 [1947]: 13 and 92); second, he strongly supports a "holistic" conception of emancipation aimed at "the deliverance of society from atomization, an atomization that may reach its peaks in periods of collectivization and mass culture" (92). On this view, there is no individual emancipation without social transformation, that is, the possibility of genuine self-realization is inconceivable without the overthrow of the systemic structures leading to human atomization. In this sense, Horkheimer's conception of emancipation goes beyond Marx's paradigm of labor, for the former rejects the latter's productivist presupposition that the "working subject" can be regarded as the civilizational cornerstone of society in general and of human self-realization in particular.

Similar to Horkheimer, Adorno is renowned for having little patience with both "bourgeois" and "orthodox Marxist" conceptions of emancipation. Yet, despite his skepticism toward utopian blueprints, which may be considered as deceptive expressions of "identity thinking" (1973 [1966]), he is willing to attribute a number of positive meanings to the concept of emancipation in his writings. First, emancipation derives from the subject's assertion of *autonomy* (*Mündigkeit*): emancipation occurs when the subject, "on the basis of its own impulse, liberates itself from social convention and controls" (1997 [1970]: 231). Second, emancipation can be brought about by the subject's use of *rationality* (*Vernunft*): "rationality would become rational only once it no longer repressed the individuated in whose unfolding rationality has its right to exist" (1997 [1970]: 305); from this perspective, the establishment of "a reasonable order of the public world" (305) is the precondition for the emergence of an emancipatory society. Third, emancipation does not transcend but reaffirms the subject's dependence upon *society* (*Gesellschaftlichkeit*): "the emancipation of the individual could succeed only to the extent that the individual grasps the universal on which individuals depend" (305). Fourth, emancipation cannot be divorced from the paradoxical need both to accept and to reject the subject's material *determinacy* (*Bestimmtheit*):

> He who asks what is the goal of an emancipated society is given answers such as the fulfilment of human possibilities or the richness of life. Just as the inevitable question is illegitimate, so the repellent assurance of the answer is inevitable … There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more. Every other seeks to apply to a condition that ought to be determined by human needs, a mode of human conduct adapted to production as an end in itself. (Adorno 1978 [1951]: 155–6)

Finally, emancipation cannot be divorced from the subject's capacity to convert artistic experience into a source of social explosiveness (*Explosivität*):

> The source of art's power of resistance is that a realized materialism would at the same time be the abolition of materialism, the abolition of the domination of material interests. In its powerlessness, art anticipates a spirit that would only then step forth … A liberated society would be beyond the irrationality of its *faux frais* and beyond the ends-means-rationality of utility. This is enciphered in art and is the source of art's social explosiveness. (Adorno 1997 [1970]: 29 and 227)

Paradoxically, then, the realization of materialism is contingent upon the abolition of materialism.

One of *Marcuse*'s main concerns is the study of the systemic elasticity and relative stability of late capitalist society (1991 [1964]). Not only has liberal democracy become the victorious political model and liberal capitalism the triumphant economic system in most advanced societies, but the belief in the possibility of a viable alternative appears to be largely discredited, both among an increasing number of left-wing intellectuals and among ordinary members of society, including the working classes. How, Marcuse asks, can we criticize relations of domination and claim to uncover the systemic forces leading to social alienation,

if most people not only consider the social order in place to be legitimate but also seem to enjoy actively participating in its reproduction? Why should we seek to emancipate those who do not want to be emancipated or consider themselves to be already emancipated when the satisfaction of the "false needs" created by consumer capitalism "might be most gratifying to the individual" (1991 [1964]: 5)?

Of course, although it may be relatively simple to pose these questions, it is extremely difficult to respond to them in a persuasive manner. Grappling with these questions, social commentators inspired by the writings of Marcuse share one key assumption: if the comprehensive integration of the working classes into the capitalist system is indicative of anything, it is the elasticity and adaptability, rather than the instability and illegitimacy, of liberal society. In his social diagnosis, Marcuse introduces the concept of "enforced tolerance" (1991 [1964]: 226) to account for the fact that advanced capitalist societies have unprecedented material and ideological resources to assert their systemic sovereignty and political legitimacy on the basis of a seemingly limitless, but structurally confined, celebration of individual liberty. From a Marcusian perspective, newly emerging social movements, including anti-authoritarian student and peace movements, can play a pivotal role in transforming behavioral, ideological, and institutional patterns under capitalism, thereby subverting the total domination of the established order and contributing to the construction of emancipatory life forms.

While *Habermas* has been criticized for abandoning the radical spirit of early critical theory, his writings demonstrate a firm commitment to exploring the possibility of emancipation from established mechanisms of social domination. In fact, as he asserts on a number of occasions, the central objective of his "linguistic turn" is to provide *normative foundations* for critical theory (1987 [1981a] and 1987 [1981b]). This undertaking is motivated by the assumption that any social theory concerned with the possibility of human emancipation needs to demonstrate on what grounds both its critique of social domination and its pursuit of social liberation can be justified. Paving the way for taking on the ambitious task of providing normative foundations for critical theory, Habermas examines the concept of emancipation on three inter-related levels.

First, on the epistemological level, the early Habermas distinguishes between three *knowledge-constitutive interests* (1987 [1968]: 301–17), whose historical significance is reflected in the emergence of three spheres of scientific activity: (i) the *empirical-analytic* sciences are driven by our *technical* cognitive interest in controlling the world; (ii) the *historical-hermeneutic* sciences are guided by our *practical* cognitive interest in reaching communicatively mediated forms of understanding about the world; and (iii) the *critically oriented* sciences articulate our *emancipatory* cognitive interest in liberating the human world from dependence on repressive forms of power. In brief, human beings are purposive, communicative, and reflective entities capable of controlling, coordinating, and criticizing the conditions of their existence.

Second, on the philosophical level, Habermas considers *language* to be the key anthropological force allowing for the construction of a symbolically mediated and normatively structured world. "What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility [*Mündigkeit*] are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus" (1987 [1968]: 314, emphasis original). According to this contention, people's communicative orientation toward reaching mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) is the basis of their discursive ability to reach agreements (*Einverständnisse*) with one another. In fact, Habermas goes as far as to assert that the emancipatory potential of the human condition is built into the very structure of language: "in every discourse we are mutually required to presuppose an ideal speech situation," in which communication is not impeded by external or internal forces other than "the unforced force

of the better argument" and which, consequently, "excludes systematic distortion of communication" (2001 [1984]: 97). It is, in other words, because our communicative competence equips us with a critical capacity that we, as a species, have developed a "rational will that allows itself to be determined by good reasons" (2000: 328) and that puts us in the privileged position of being able to claim authorship for our personal and collective life histories. In short, emancipation begins with rational self-determination.

Third, on the sociological level, Habermas conceives of the relationship between emancipation and domination in terms of the interplay between *lifeworld* and *system* (1987 [1981a] and 1987 [1981b]). The empowering force of communicative reason is anchored in the lifeworld, whereas the disempowering force of functionalist reason is imposed upon society by the system. On this view, the lifeworld, due to its predominantly communicative nature, is the cradle of social emancipation, while the system, because of its instrumental nature, is the main structural source of social domination. Thus, according to Habermas, social life is fundamentally shaped by two forms of rationality: *communicative rationality*, which is oriented toward mutual understanding, and *instrumental rationality*, which is oriented toward success. The former is the main symbolic resource of the lifeworld, in which we coordinate our actions by communicating with one another. The latter is the driving force of the system, which essentially consists of the state and the economy. The detrimental influence of the system manifests itself in the increasing bureaucratization and commodification of society, leading to the gradual colonization of the lifeworld by the systemic imperatives of functionalist reason. Despite his critical account of the pathological developments caused by systemically steered modernization processes, Habermas insists that the "necessary conditions of an emancipated form of life" (2001 [1984]: 99) are built into the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld. From this perspective, it appears that the empowering potential inherent in modern communicative processes is reflected in the discursive challenges posed by social movements. Their historical significance in shaping contemporary discourses of emancipation shall be considered in the following section.

Different Movements of Emancipation

Different movements of emancipation are aimed at different forms of transformation and opposed to different modes of domination. The plurality of modern discourses of emancipation manifests itself in the multiplicity of normative agendas produced by different social movements with competing conceptions of emancipation: individual emancipation, social emancipation, political emancipation, economic emancipation, cultural emancipation, national emancipation, religious emancipation, spiritual emancipation, sexual emancipation, and bodily emancipation – to mention only a few examples. In light of these multiple discourses, it is hardly possible to attribute normative primacy to one particular agenda of emancipation. Rather, we need to face up to the fact that we live in a world of inter-related, and to some extent interdependent, systems of domination and struggles for emancipation.

In contemporary political theory, it is generally accepted that modern discourses of emancipation cannot be separated from the emergence of social movements (Scott 1990; Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield 1994; della Porta & Mario Diani 2006 [1999]). Social movements are widely regarded as potentially powerful actors capable of generating discourses of emancipation and thereby asserting themselves as collective forces of political transformation. Most social movements have five essential features. First, they are composed of individuals who share similar interests (*collective interests*): for instance, an interest in emancipation from discrimination on ethnic, "racial," religious, political, economic, or sexual grounds. Second, they are held together by individuals who are united by a sense of common identity (*collective

identity): for example, by a sense of identity defined in ethnic, "racial," religious, political, socioeconomic, sexual, or gender-specific terms. Third, they are created and sustained by individuals who are both able and willing to mobilize themselves by virtue of collective forms of action (*collective action*): through violent or peaceful means, small-scale or large-scale events, ephemeral or continuous practices, physical or virtual gatherings. Fourth, they tend to be situated outside conventional institutions, such as the state, thereby asserting a sense of material and symbolic sovereignty based on the experience of a shared reality (*collective situation*): notably, the experience of ethnic, racialized, political, economic, and gender-specific realities. Fifth, they aim to defend or change society, or the position of a specific group within it (*collective project*): in any case, their projects are concerned with the material and symbolic construction of social reality. In brief, members belonging to a particular social movement seek to emancipate themselves collectively on the basis of shared interests, identities, practices, realities, and projects.

In the literature, it has become increasingly common to distinguish between "old" and "new" social movements. According to this typology, we can identify at least six *"old" social movements*, all of which have had, and con- tinue to have, a substantial impact on modern discourses of emancipation: (i) *ethnic* move- ments, which aim for the recognition of a common culture, language, or history; (ii) "*racial*" movements, which either support or oppose social discrimination on "racial" grounds; (iii) *religious* movements, whose members share a particular faith, expressed in specific patterns of belonging and believing; (iv) *suffrage* movements, which struggle for the universal recognition of democratic and participatory rights; (v) *class* movements, which seek to defend the collective interests of socioeconomically defined groups; and (vi) *feminist* movements, which are opposed to sexual and gender-based forms of discrimination.

In addition to these "classical" collective actors, we can identify a large number of *"new" social movements* that have had a significant impact on discourses of emancipation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Among the most significant of these movements are the following: environmentalist movements, peace movements, antinuclear movements, civil rights movements, human rights movements, animal rights movements, gay and lesbian movements, indigenous movements, and antiglobalization movements. To be sure, the emergence of "new" social movements does not necessarily mean that "old" social movements have disappeared or that "modern" political discourses can be considered to be irrelevant in an era variously described as "late modernity," "second modernity," "reflexive modernity," "postindustrial modernity," and "postmodernity." The rise of "new" social movements indicates, however, that the discourses of emancipation that emerged in early modern society are increasingly competing with the diversified political agendas of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

"Old" social movements (OSMs) and "new" social movements (NSMs) can be compared and contrasted on a number of levels. (i) *Objectives*: OSMs tend to aim at the transformation of social order, whereas NSMs are primarily concerned with the alteration of social values and norms. (ii) *Ideology*: While OSMs commonly subscribe to sets of universal values, NSMs tend to be rather diversified and normally lack ambitious agendas based on ideological metanarratives. (iii) *Social base*: OSMs are relatively homogeneous and largely monolithic, as their membership is commonly defined by social determinants such as ethnicity, "race," religion, class, or gender. NSMs tend to be heterogeneous and hybrid, and thus their members' interests and practices largely transcend sociostructural divisions.
(iv) *Orientation*: OSMs seek to engineer social transformations "from above" by conquering, or participating in, institutional forms of political power. NSMs aim to bring about social change "from below" by mobilizing the democratic forces of civil society.

(v) *Organization*: OSMs are not necessarily hostile to the logic of formal, bureaucratic, and vertical forms of organization, whereas most NSMs favor loose, flexible, and horizontal forms of collective deliberation. (vi) *Power*: OSMs tend to be "power-affirmative" in the sense that their ultimate aim is the seizure of, or at least the participation in, political power. NSMs tend to be "power-skeptical" in the sense that their discourses and practices tend to be suspicious of established forms of power, in particular those exercised by the state. (vii) *Context*: OSMs emerged in the context of "modern" or "industrial" society, arguably the age of ideological metanarratives and ambitious normative agendas. NSMs entered the historical scene with the rise of "late modern" or "post-industrial" society, arguably the age of postideological micronarratives and grassroots politics.

To the extent that the political landscape of advanced societies is shaped by "old" and "new" social movements, both the modern quest for universal human emancipation ("society-as-a-project") and the postmodern search for local and diversified realms of transformation ("projects-in-society") are crucial to the development of contemporary forms of political imagination.

SEE ALSO: Adorno, Theodor W. (1903–69); Alienation; Benjamin, Walter (1892–1940); Critical Theory; Enlightenment, The; Habermas, Jürgen (1929–); Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770–1831); Horkheimer, Max (1895–1973); Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804); Marcuse, Herbert (1898–1979); Marx, Karl (1818–83); Modernity; Power; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712–78); Social Movements

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