

Propertylessness Under Capitalist Societies

Karl Widerquist: Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income: A Theory of Freedom as the Power to Say No. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, 256 pp

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There's no need to draw on lessons from the current crisis to understand that capitalism has always been based on the dispossession of the vast majority. Widerquist's *Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income* offers a theory of freedom as 'the power to say no'—or 'independentarianism'—and, in the process, thoroughly dissects propertylessness as one of the fundamental mechanisms that, in effect, have shaped modern societies. Unequal access to external resources goes together with private and exclusive property rights, which leaves the many with no means to cover their basic needs. Once in this situation, individuals lose their effective freedom because they are forced to interact with the others—mainly within the realm of work—according to the rules and conditions the others want to impose. The antidote for such social disease is clear: material independence. If all individuals had a set of resources guaranteeing their existence, they could 'exit' those social relations that prevent their life plans from unfolding. According to Widerquist, 'independent individuals need an exit option with access to enough external assets to live a decent life on their own or with people of their choice' (36). This does not mean that individuals would not perform paid work; what it means is that individuals should be freed from the obligation to perform freedom-limiting kinds of paid work. The backdrop of Widerquist's analysis is a theory of 'effective control selfownership' freedom (ECSO freedom), which states that individuals must enjoy effective power to control their interactions. Such freedom requires personal independence, that is, unconditional access to resources to maintain individuals' effective power 'to make and to refuse active cooperation with other willing people' (187) or, in other words, to maintain individuals' 'power to say no'. Such a 'status freedom' protecting what a free person needs is closely linked to a seminal theory of justice 'as the pursuit of accord' or 'independentarianism', involving three central ideas: (1) people's first duty is to try to 'stay out of each others' way'; (2) when this is not possible, people's duty is to seek agreement with others; and (3) when universal accord is not possible, the wronged propertyless side must be unconditionally compensated—hence Widerquist's defence of an unconditional basic income.

Ultimately, Widerquist pleads for a 'voluntary-participation economy' where all individuals are enabled to decide 'when, whether, and under what conditions [they] will participate in social projects with others' (189). His analysis is cogent not only because it is internally coherent, but, more importantly, because it is true: it rests on empirical evidence that capitalism is an essentially dispossessing social formation. In the following sections I shall reconsider and problematise some of its implications. I hope it will help nourish the debate that Widerquist's work has contributed to opening.

Is Independentarianism a Form of Republicanism?

Widerquist asserts that 'independentarianism' constitutes a novel theory, yet many of his claims clearly echo the republican tradition. For instance: the need for individuals to build a life that is not imposed by others, but 'of their own'; the claim that political institutions must ensure that no individual is at the mercy of others; the idea that property constitutes an important condition for effective freedom; more broadly, the significance of material resources as crucial guarantors of socioeconomic independence, which, in turn, is essential for freedom-respecting interdependence; the assumption that all forms of material dispossession must be compensated to avoid propertylessness; Rousseau's requirement that none should be so poor as to be forced to sell himself (Rousseau 2003: 78); the conviction that forcing individuals to work for others leads to freedom-limiting social relationships—hence Aristotle's portrayal of wage-earning work as 'partial or limited slavery' (Aristotle 1984: 1260a–b); the premise that effective freedom must be understood as 'status freedom', which means that the focus must be put not on individuals' choices, but on institutional scenarios assuring (or not) individuals' condition as 'free-choosers'; the idea that such scenarios require the identification and guarantee of material thresholds covering our basic needs; in sum, the view that free individuals are those who are not subject to alien control, but who have effective control over their lives. These building blocks of classical and

contemporary republicanism are the basic elements from which Widerquist builds his theory. This is not problematic in itself, but can we really say that independence is a novel approach to freedom? We can go further. Some authors present socialism as a contemporary expression of republicanism: ‘the man who possesses no other property than his labour power’—Marx says in his Critique of the Gotha Program—‘must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He can only work with their permission, hence live only with their permission’ (Marx 2008: 18). This is why socialism’s project is that of freeing the propertyless from the ‘pauperising and despotic’ yoke of capital and building ‘the republican and beneficent system of the association of free and equal producers’ (Marx and Engels 1989: XVI, 195). When Widerquist explores the idea of a voluntary-participation economy, in which individuals that have been unconditionally freed from the obligation to accept other parties’ rules join partners they really wish to interact with, he once again reproduces some of the core republicanism-inspired ideas of modern emancipatory traditions.

Why, then, present independence as a novel approach? According to Widerquist, two elements differentiate freedom as non-domination from independence. First, the republican perspective of freedom as non-domination focuses on intentional interference only, whereas ECSO is concerned with intentional and unintentional interference. According to Widerquist, this opens the door to the consideration of systemic and unintentional sources of unfreedom; for instance, the kind of unfreedom an employee experiences when she undergoes harmful labour conditions because ‘impersonal market forces [...] [impel] employers to pay wages just enough to reproduce labour and to extract whatever value they can from the workforce’ (137–138). But one need not be a strong ontological individualist to understand that those ‘impersonal market forces’ do not exist, except within neoclassical economists’ fantastical models. All stipulations that drive markets and (re)productive units—no matter how difficult to reconstruct the causal chains that have led to the (maintenance of the) current status quo is—are of human doing. Reasoning that way is what permits moral critique precisely of social aggregates like markets and corporations, and thinking otherwise amounts to denying the space for individuals’ and groups’ agency and responsibility.

The second reason for Widerquist to distance his view from freedom as non domination is that Pettit’s focus on arbitrary interference makes his definition too narrow. In effect, ‘under republicanism, interference is not a threat to freedom if it is [non-arbitrary]’ (135). Does this mean that ECSO freedom is broader because it condemns all possible forms of interference, including non-arbitrary ones? If so, Widerquist risks cancelling his own political project, as it requires relevant doses of (non-arbitrary) state intervention to introduce those compensations aimed at eradicating propertylessness.

Whatever the case may be, there are reasons to think that Widerquist’s view differs from (certain aspects of) Pettit’s idea of freedom, but I think the elements presented above suggest that the core of his theory is not significantly distinct from republicanism. An Emancipatory Basic Income As noted before, the extension of ECSO freedom demands resolute institutional action. According to Widerquist, ‘basic income should be thought of as compensation for what would otherwise be the failure to satisfy the duty to stay out of each other’s way, transforming that negative claim into a positive claim to cash that can be used to buy services’ (70–71). Widerquist sees basic income as a way to end propertylessness and, by doing so, ‘to ensure that no individual is at the mercy of others’ (21). The argument is impeccable: ‘Independent people require [...] [unconditional] access to a sufficient amount of resources so that they can meet their basic needs without serving anyone else’s interests’ (188). Nonetheless, some concerns arise when it comes to the institutional implementation of such measures. I will outline three.

First, it seems incautious to assert, without further consideration, that independence ‘argues for securing independence with an unconditional basic income in cash, with which people can buy whatever active services they want from others’ (42). Securing a social position of invulnerability requires not only the guarantee of a relevant sum of cash, but also the presence of an institutional context decommodifying crucial domains of our lives such as health, education, housing, care, etc. In this way, instead of ‘a claim to cash [to be] used to buy goods and services from other people’ (67), what we need are state-secured social rights consolidating our status as free-choosers. Like some neoclassical economists, who sometimes ignore the real functioning of markets, Widerquist disregards facts such as the growth of private medical insurance costs with risk, booms and bubbles within the real-estate sector, increasing inequalities and inefficiency within societies without fully developed public educational systems, etc. Clearly, having to buy some of (or all) these services within markets

can turn basic income into an irrelevant measure for promoting personal independence and effective freedom, for its amount can become extremely low in relative terms.

In other words, an emancipatory basic income that is capable of promoting effective freedom must be seen as part of a package of measures unconditionally conferring full sets of (im)material resources upon individuals for them to interact on a footing of equal freedom. These packages of measures must include cash, at least at a level equal to the poverty line; a minimum wage to avoid a disproportionate decrease of salaries as a result of the introduction of basic income; and health, education, housing, transportation, and care policies, among others. In sum, it is true that cash transfers are preferable to raw resources and/or in-kind benefits only, because money is flexible and gives individuals higher degrees of freedom to decide what to do with their exit option; but it is no less true that such 'flexible money' must take part of a broader rights-based Polanyian project (Polanyi 1944) aimed at strengthening individuals' and group's social power by decommodifying crucial aspects of their lives—without this meaning any conflict with building a society harbouring certain forms of market exchange. Second, Widerquist perceptively observes that 'the power to say no is not a perfect protection against market vulnerability. There could be a system in which an advantaged group left others with just enough to give them economic independence but seized control of everything else' (109). In these cases, counting solely on a basic income seems insufficient to secure a real voluntary-participation economy.

However, Widerquist remains ambiguous with respect to this: 'the power to refuse can be an important tool even in these circumstances. If the disadvantaged find the dominant group's project to be too unfair or not enough in their interests, they can refuse it' (109). This is true, but refusing an unfair project does not amount to having real chances of deploying a project of one's own with one's own partners. When powerful economic actors have the power to control entire sectors and economies, they tend to introduce entry barriers in the productive space where we all are supposed to deploy our life plans. It does not matter how protected we are from alien control; when this happens, we are expelled from economic life and therefore lose our capacity to actively participate in projects with others. In these situations, protection of effective freedom requires also that public institutions seek to control such accumulations of economic power, be it by directly cutting down inequalities of resources or by introducing a regulatory ceiling restricting the opportunity set of the most powerful actors.

Third, an approach to independence as the guarantor of effective freedom cannot disregard the presence of immaterial causes of dependence and unfreedom. In other words, material independence constitutes a necessary yet not sufficient condition for freedom. There are important cultural and symbolic patterns - patriarchy, for instance—that force propertied people—well-off women, to use the same example—to accept and even promote practices that undermine their freedom. Widerquist's emphasis on material resources should not blind us to this issue.

But let's put it the other way around. Of course, often, it is very good news that certain immaterial ties bind us together. Many of them have to do with the sphere of care, which we all need—in different ways—all through our lives. In this sense, the objective of 'staying out of others' way' cannot imply atomisation or destruction of important care-related social ties; the reality is that, fortunately, we humans actually are in others' way. One could argue that Widerquist's book presents an 'isolationist' emphasis on independence that may blur the care dimensions of our lives—for instance, when he asserts that 'the main thing people need [...] is not aid from other people; they need resources, or more accurately, they need other people to stay out of their way while they use resources that were here before any of us' (47). Nonetheless, Widerquist's book helps us to understand that even those precious care relations should be non-coercive; they cannot constitute 'forced work', which primarily requires that those taking part in them are not propertyless. This is why basic income can play a crucial role as part of an unconditional package of measures making all of us less vulnerable to coercion and enabling all of us to explore, with others, other ties that are really 'of our own'. On Unconditionality In sum, there are many good reasons to support Widerquist's proposed unconditional assignment of resources to maintain individuals' effective power to refuse unwanted service and to build unforced interaction. The principle of unconditionality in public policy entails ex-ante empowering individuals, rather than ex-post assisting those who fail. Herein lies its emancipatory potential. Conditionality is based on propertylessness and therefore forces us to accept the status quo—to start with, current labour markets—and if we come off badly from our ineluctable interaction with such status quo—because we fall into unemployment, for instance—it forces us again to perform certain activities to somehow stay included.

Conversely, unconditionality tries to avoid propertylessness from the start and thus gives us the chance of avoiding the status quo by erecting social relations that we find desirable and believe can lead to a truly collective making of the social world.

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