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Freedom, work and organizations in the 21st century: Freedom for whom and for whose purpose?

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Abstract

This article critically interrogates the meaning of freedom and its current and potential relationship with social relations in and around work as introduction to this special issue. This interrogation is vital given neoliberalism's evaluative promise for *more* individual and corporate freedom, while concurrently limiting the conditions for the experience/expression of freedom of workers. Consequently, there are concerns about working for "private governments", workers being subject to electronic surveillance, and workers increasingly caught up in structural disadvantages (i.e. precarious work) that contribute to growing unfreedom. Rather than reproducing abstract principles around freedom,

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this article and special issue advance a contextually sensitive emergence of freedom. We explicate this emergence as (i) alternative experiences of freedom, (ii) alternative conceptions of freedom, and (iii) alternative modes of organizing. To inspire future research, we extend these themes to suggest that treating freedom (i) as pluralist/relational and (ii) as having the capacity for world-making has meaningful implications for how work is organized and for whose benefit. We advocate an explicit turn to non-neoliberal values (e.g. collectivism, solidarity, human dignity, respect, and recognition) to enable more relational versions of freedom that can serve as a basis for freedom as world-making at work and in society.

Keywords

alternative organization, freedom, neoliberalism, theory, work

Introduction

Freedom is one of those concepts that many – if not most – people are intuitively happy to embrace. Freedom is good, and more freedom is better. Freedom is core to many historical events. We can think of examples in the present (e.g. the ongoing invasion of Russia into democratic Ukraine), in recent western history (e.g. Brexit), in somewhat less recent Chinese history (e.g. the protests on Tiananmen Square in 1989), or in even more distant past (e.g. the American and French Revolutions). Small wonder that, with this pedigree, freedom is perhaps *the* archetypal value, even though it may find its expression in socio-economically mediated ways. Furthermore, joined in a quest for freedom, the above events highlight different kinds of freedom: political freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom of belief, autonomy, and expression of the self, to name only a few. It is against these examples that we concur with Berlin (1969/2005: 159) that “the meaning of this term [freedom] is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist”.

Berlin’s observation summarizes neatly the broader motivation behind our special issue, namely “to invite critical interrogations of the meaning of freedom and its current and potential relationship with social relations in and around work” as the call for papers stated (Andersson et al., 2020: 1698). To this invitation we added three more specific questions: (i) What is freedom in the context of work in the 21st century? (ii) How does freedom relate to the way we organize ourselves in the present socio-economic conditions? And finally, (iii) How may a re-configuration of the meaning of freedom translate, on the one hand, into changes concerning for what and for whose purpose we organize ourselves and, on the other hand, into changes to the socio-economic conditions that influence our thinking, feeling, and conduct? These questions – in one way or another – inspired us to examine more closely the relationship between freedom and work (see also Griffin et al., 2015; King and Land, 2018).

From the outset, we resisted the temptation to take any specific predetermined notion of freedom as a starting point for this special issue. Instead, we presumed that the enjoyment and exercise of freedom is inextricably linked to dominant socio-economic conditions (Berlin, 1969/2005; Fromm, 1941/2011). That is, we assume that how we relate to

each other, and how we experience freedom in the context of work, is conditioned by the socio-economic system (industrial vs cognitive capitalism) and/or contexts (digital work vs manufacturing) in which specific, concrete work is done. At the same time, though less observable in practice, it is expedient to recognize that the desire for freedom can gain the prominence of a primary value from which subsequent actions, routines and institutions can follow (Hinings and Greenwood, 2015).¹ As such, the relationship between economic organization and individual freedom is, in the words of Dewey (1922: 307), an “experimental affair . . . not capable of being settled by abstract theory”. We thus conceive of freedom and work as in some way intimately connected, but always in concrete contexts. Relevant examples concern Anderson’s (2017) treatise on “private governments”, Chamberlain’s (2018) argument that the construction of “community” around the idea of paid work in the current capitalist system undermines freedom, or when technology – the servant of capitalism – helps managers to underline the freedom to work from home by realizing that “digital technology was just the ticket for keeping an eye on their newly remote subordinates” (Naughton, 2022). These are just a few examples to underline that, today, freedom at work means employers’ freedom, not employees’ freedom (Horgan, 2021).

Furthermore, in the sense of “economic freedom” (Berlin, 1969/2005: 160), socio-economic conditions can greatly curtail freedom, and the material implications thereof are reflected in troubling statistics. For instance, reports show that the richest eight individuals hold the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity (OXFAM, 2018), and that more than 40 million people across the globe work under conditions of slavery (Andersson et al., 2019). The story does not end here. Half of the jobs created between 2007 and 2013 in 26 European countries were precarious jobs (Wiengarten et al., 2021). The percentage of precarious workers in the USA rose from 10.7% in 2005 to 17.2% in 2015, and one in 10 workers in the UK was in precarious employment in 2019 (Wiengarten et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic only served to amplify these trends globally (Matilla-Santander et al., 2021). Accounts such as these add urgency to a re-examination of the relationship between freedom and work *now*, while underlining a lack of freedom at work and suggesting that the situation is worsening. Whatever slight freedom there may have been at work, it is seemingly being reduced further.

Yet, there is merit in reminding ourselves about the aphorism that “eternal vigilance is the price of freedom”.² Concise in scope, it is nonetheless profound in its theoretical implications for at least two reasons. First, the reference to a need for “eternal vigilance” rejects the stability of the phenomenon at stake (here, freedom), implying that it is not feasible, nor desirable, to treat it as an isolated phenomenon with stable causes and effects (see Thacher, 2015). Given the dynamic relationship between freedom and dominant socio-economic conditions (Fromm, 1941/2011), when the context changes (i.e. when economic systems evolve or different sites of production are considered), so do the conditions for the experience of freedom change. Likewise, when “evaluative promises [of freedom] and their material fulfillment” in concrete organizational contexts (Honneth, 2007: 327) diverge (which they tend to do under neoliberalism), then the need for “eternal vigilance” is in relation to protecting or enhancing freedom at work, thus in turn continually affecting the socio-economic conditions to that end. Second, being vigilant comes at a cost. On the one

hand, the price is continual action designed to defend the conditions and structures of work (and beyond) in order to maximize scope for the experience and expression of freedom. For example, in the conceptualization of Berlin, workers' resistance against abusive managerial oversight can be seen as an effort to increase negative freedom, whereas their collective action for shorter hours and increases in payment may be seen as attempts to increase their positive freedom outside of the workplace. On the other hand, the price will show itself through inaction, when conditions and structures at work (and beyond) limit freedom without the encounter of resistance on the part of workers (or citizens). Too often, the loss of freedom is only noticed once it has already happened.

In the next section, we provide an account of the conceptual and political origins of neoliberalism to unpack the tensions alluded to above. Following that, we synthesize the five articles of this special issue. Finally, we discuss the broader theoretical and practical implications that flow from this special issue and outline vital areas for future research and policy debates.

Freedom and work: Mapping their relationship under neoliberalism

Despite the tendency of neoliberalism to evade capture in a universal definition (Jessop, 2019; Peck et al., 2019), it remains a "strong discourse" interwoven with key circuits of financial, cultural, and corporate power (Bourdieu, 1998). Given the centrality of the concept of freedom to neoliberalism (Friedman, 1962), an analysis of the trajectory of its "actually existing" form (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 349), and the theories that animate it, provides a clearer view of the macro-social context of contemporary work.

First, by turning to neoliberalism as the dominant socio-economic condition in the 21st century, we can better understand how it pertains to the welfare state and organized labor. Historically, the welfare state and organized labor have served as vehicles for advancing the freedom of workers – that is, their freedom from absolute reliance on wage labor in order to live, and the freedom to actively participate in shaping the terms of condition of employment. For this reason, the decline of the welfare state and organized labor under neoliberalism are of crucial significance for studies of work and freedom. Following this, we highlight the limitations of the theory of freedom that sits at the core of neoliberalism (developed by Friedrich Hayek) to understand its incursions on freedom at and around work. We also examine its influential celebration of the figure of the entrepreneur as a person who furthers prosperity through discovering and applying his or her talents and abilities in the economic realm. This neoliberal conception of freedom recognizes only a vanishingly narrow range of threats to freedom at work, while it positively promotes (entrepreneurial) work as a site of freedom.

Neoliberalism as the dominant socio-economic condition in the 21st century: Implications for freedom and work

When a group of 26 European and American "liberal sympathizers", including Hayek, met in Paris in 1938 at the Colloque Walter Lippmann, the term "neoliberal" was coined to name a refurbished liberalism that would aim to avoid what the group saw as the twin

perils of both laissez faire and collectivist theory and practice (Turner, 2007). To these neoliberals, the Great Depression had resulted from the failure of laissez-faire policies, and it paved the way for collectivism and planning in the shape of the British Keynesian state, the US New Deal reforms (which had given a problematically collectivist valence to the term “liberal”), and ultimately paved the ‘road to serfdom’ (Turner, 2007). To stem the tide of this collectivism, Hayek envisioned an international society – the Mont Pelerin Society – that would bring together intellectually isolated neoliberal thinkers with the tasks of breathing new life into liberalism and seeking influence in political decision making (Turner, 2007).

Given the dominance of neo-Keynesian policies in Britain and the United States, the first three decades of the Mont Pelerin Society was a “superficially lean time for neoliberals”, but it was also during these years when “neoliberalism generated intellectual coherence and matured politically” (Jones, 2012: 7). Although “the line of causation is often impossible to draw”, the fact that the Mont Pelerin Society brought together prominent intellectuals and politicians suggests that it had “some form of impact on the attitudes of politicians and the public at large” (Jones, 2012: 79). Indeed, Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister and one of the chief architects of neoliberalism, wrote in her autobiography that Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) was the “most powerful critique of socialist planning and the socialist state” that she had read in the 1940s (quoted in Griffiths, 2007: 190).

Neoliberalism as a set of policies entered the political stage in the United States and the United Kingdom in the context of the economic crisis in the 1970s, which was characterized by stagnation, inflation, and high unemployment. Echoing the earlier neoliberal criticism of collective institutions discussed above, in the 1980s neoliberals on both sides of the Atlantic blamed the economic crisis on what they saw as the inefficiencies and lack of dynamism engendered by the macroeconomic policies of Keynesianism, as well as by a relatively powerful organized labor movement that was now criticized as a distortion of market forces (Standing, 2002).

Of particular relevance to our concerns, the neoliberal revolution involved the dismantlement of the welfare state and the deliberate, and successful, effort to significantly curtail the power and size of labor unions (Peck and Tickell, 2002). A key feature of welfare reform under neoliberalism has been the adoption of “workfare” systems, which impose “a range of compulsory programs and mandatory requirements for welfare recipients with a view to enforcing work while residualizing welfare” (Peck, 2002: 10).

Meanwhile, governments on both sides of the Atlantic undertook to weaken the power of organized labor, albeit in different ways, owing to the differences between their labor markets. While Reagan took office in the context of a regulated labor market, Thatcher encountered a voluntarist system of industrial relations (Howell, 2015). Reagan and subsequent presidents may have left relatively unaltered the New Deal era federal labor law (Fiorito, 2007), but they deliberately shifted the balance of power on the National Labor Relations Board in favor of employers (Farber and Western, 2002). Under this new regime, employers enjoyed increased freedom to fire union supporters, obtained more latitude to spread misleading information about unions, and benefitted from a deregulation of reprisals against strikers (Farber and Western, 2002). In the United Kingdom, a key strategy to weaken organized labor involved the abolition of the closed shop (which requires union membership as a condition of employment).³

Over time, neoliberal ideas were able to become hegemonic, in part because they provided a more coherent explanation of the economic crisis of stagflation in the 1970s than Keynesian economics could (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). Yet, neoliberalism also tapped into, and arguably co-opted, various movements that called for greater individual freedom, whether under the guise of identity politics and multiculturalism, the anti-establishment sentiments of May 1968, or consumerist desires (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). How neoliberalism managed to impose its narrow conception of freedom on economic thinking is the subject of the next section.

Neoliberalism's narrow conceptions of freedom

Freedom is central to neoliberalism insofar as it buttresses neoliberal ideology and practice. The proponents of neoliberalism advocate that only by unleashing the constraints on markets can “freedom” be obtained. Neoliberal capitalism rests on a belief in freedom from the “tyranny” of governments/regulations,⁴ a freedom aggressively bestowed to corporations that is said to liberate the individuals within them (Monbiot, 2019; Thompson and Coghlan, 2015). To understand the narrowness of neoliberal freedom, we now turn to its preeminent proponent, Hayek. Contrasting his theory with Berlin’s discussion of negative liberty, the narrowness of Hayekian freedom becomes all the more evident.

In his 1960 *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek suggests that “the range of physical possibilities from which a person can choose at any given moment has no relevance to freedom” but that, instead, “the only infringement on it is coercion by men” (Hayek, 1960: 12). On the face of it, Hayek’s view of freedom aligns closely with Berlin’s (1969/2005: 160) concept of negative liberty, reflected in the assumption that individuals are “normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with [their] activity”. Despite this superficial similarity, however, just how narrowly Hayek construes negative liberty is revealed through a closer reading of some of the examples the two thinkers give to work through their respective accounts of freedom.

As Berlin (1969/2005: 160) notes, there may be no law against my purchasing a loaf of bread, but I may still think I am a victim of economic slavery or oppression if:

I believe that my inability to get a given thing is due to the fact that other human beings have made arrangements whereby I am, whereas others are not, prevented from having enough money with which to pay for it.

Within this seemingly straightforward discussion lie (at least) two ambiguities.

First, Berlin (1969/2005: 160) suggests that one may “very plausibly” make the claim of oppression in the bread example, but in doing so, he displays ambivalence about whether such a case does in fact constitute an infringement of freedom. Indeed, he sums up this discussion by noting that the “criterion of oppression is the part *that I believe* to be played by other human beings” (1969/2005: 160, emphasis added), with this belief resting on a “particular social and economic theory about the causes of my poverty or weakness” (1969/2005: 160). Berlin does not offer an evaluation of the merits of any such theory, but does not *rule out* the possibility of oppression in this example.

Second, there is some ambiguity concerning the role of intentions in whether an act counts as coercive or oppressive. For example, Berlin (1969/2005: 160) claims both that “coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act” and that the “criterion of oppression is the part . . . played by other human beings . . . with or without the intention of doing so, in frustrating my wishes” (1969/2005: 160). As Hirschmann (2003: 17), points out, Berlin claimed in a later formulation “that obstacles need not be deliberate”, although as she understands it, “they still had to be attributable to specific humans who could be held accountable for them”.

For Hayek, by contrast, freedom is violated when “somebody else has power so to manipulate the conditions as to make [a person] act according to that person’s will rather than his own” (Hayek, 1960: 13). Here, intentionality is strictly on the part of an agent – rather than residing in the social structure created by men – as we see in the following claim:⁵

Even if the threat of starvation to me and perhaps to my family impels me to accept a distasteful job at a very low wage, even if I am “at the mercy” of the only man willing to employ me, I am not coerced by him or anybody else. So long as the act that has placed me in my predicament is not aimed at making me do or not do specific things, so long as the intent of the act that harms me is not to make me serve another person’s ends, its effect on my freedom is not different from that of any natural calamity – a fire or a flood that destroys my house or an accident that harms my health. (Hayek, 1960: 137)

Even when the choice a worker faces is between starving or taking a poorly paid and unappealing job, Hayek definitively rejects the possibility of claiming that he or she is coerced into accepting employment, for the simple reason that no agent has intentionally acted in such a way that the worker must make this invidious choice in the first place.⁶ For Berlin, by contrast, the lack of an intentional act that causes this situation does not disqualify it as coercive or oppressive. A narrow view of negative liberty, like Hayek’s, thus fails to grasp the various ways in which work, and in particular its social organization, can violate freedom.

In addition, Hayek seems to embrace a form of positive freedom in his celebration of the entrepreneur. In *The Constitution of Liberty*, he claims that the “chief aim of freedom is to provide both the opportunity and the inducement to insure the maximum use of the knowledge that an individual can acquire” (Hayek, 1960: 81). Given this “opportunity and inducement”, individuals can discover “a better use of things or of one’s own capacities”, thus contributing to the prosperity of society as a whole. Hayek claims that while some of us work hard to discover “the best use of our abilities” and should be considered entrepreneurs, others do not. Moreover, he claims that free societies reward more highly the person who makes “successful use” of this capacity than the individual who “leaves to others the task of finding some useful means of employing his capacities” (Hayek, 1960: 81), although it is unclear whether by “reward” he means merely pay or also social esteem.

Notice that Hayek claims that, “in discovering the best use of our abilities, we are all entrepreneurs” (Hayek, 1960: 81), whereas the term “independent” simply refers to anyone who is not employed as a wage laborer (Hayek, 1960: 120). However, an employed

person could, therefore, count as an “entrepreneur” so long as they worked hard to discover their talents, they could not be an “independent” without giving up their employment. This celebration of the entrepreneur as the ideal human subject – someone who does not necessarily participate actively in the world of “business”, but who does see his or her own capabilities of whatever kind as a form of capital to be developed and invested – has, of course, become central to neoliberal political rationality, as has extensively been theorized by Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown, and Nikolas Rose, to name just three authors. For example, Miller and Rose (1995: 453) suggest that, in the context of concerns about international competitiveness, quality, and the importance of the customer, this identity took root in management doctrines as a way to “overcome organizational problems, and to ensure dynamism, excellence, and innovation by activating and engaging the self-fulfilling aspirations of the individuals who make up the workforce”. In these doctrines, the worker was thus “depicted as an enterprising individual in search of meaning, responsibility, and a sense of personal achievement in life, and hence in work” (1995: 454).

As we have seen, neoliberalism has transformed institutions that secured a degree of freedom for workers, while propagating a view of freedom that discourages seeing social structures as a condition for freedom and encourages individuals to identify with work as a site of freedom. Against this material and ideational background, we can better appreciate the analytical contributions and challenges that the articles in this special issue make.

Taking stock of conditions for freedom in the 21st century: Overview of special issue articles

Like others in the field of management and organization studies (Fleming, 2017; Jones et al., 2020; Moisander et al., 2018), we contest neoliberal conceptions of freedom and their consequences. If it is the case that freedom is inextricably linked to dominant socio-economic conditions (Berlin, 1969/2005; Fromm, 1941/2011), and if neoliberalism constitutes the currently dominant socio-economic condition, then the *raison d’être* of the special issue was, first, to understand better this condition and, second, to inquire into the possibility of conceiving differently of the concept of freedom itself as a necessary step to change the prevailing socio-economic conditions. In other words, and playing on the title of Fromm’s famous book, can research showcase ways to “escape from neoliberal freedom”? Can we identify and theorize examples of economic organization that allow for a greater latitude for the experience of freedom at work?

The special issue offers some suggestions to questions such as these. Four of its five articles report on qualitative studies into specific contexts for the expression or experience of freedom.⁷ They include community agroecological work sites in the Philippines (Jack et al., 2022), women’s business network blogs (Villesèche et al., 2022), hostels in a garment production cluster in India (Crane et al., 2022), and a set of three alternative forms of organizing in the UK (Dahlman et al., 2022). The fifth article is a conceptual exploration of the mechanisms of the regulation of academic labor in the neoliberal university (Fleming, 2022). Below, we explore how these analyses intersect in terms of (i) examining experiences of freedom, (ii) offering alternative conceptions of freedom, and

(iii) advancing alternative conceptions of work and organization that may be more conducive to worker freedom.

Alternative experiences of freedom

It should come as no surprise that the articles in the special issue reflect a considerable variation in the experience of freedom. In them, we find instances in which freedom is undermined, compromised, or under threat; examples of how freedom is experienced in unexpected ways; and as well as situations in which freedom is enhanced.

Regarding how freedom may be *undermined*, Fleming (2022) explains how academic laborers, often heralded as being relatively untethered from traditional forms of disciplinary power in the workplace, are prey instead to various mechanisms captured by Foucault's (2008) concept of biopower. These mechanisms – such as journal rankings, performance appraisals, response time expectations, and the lure of academic stardom – invoke self-adherence to implicit occupational and institutional expectations, thus undermining the various types of occupational freedoms seemingly experienced by academics (see Lindebaum (2022) as one example on how occupational freedom is eroded in relation to genres of writing we use). Dahlman and colleagues (2022) find a similar pattern in how freedom is undermined in three different forms of alternative organizing. Their analysis illustrates how, even when the status quo is rejected and more liberating forms of organization are being developed, practices can be appropriated from within or outside of the organization in ways that prevent worker freedom from emerging. In addition, the undermining of freedom happens at worker hostels, as uncovered by Crane et al. (2022). Their research on migrant women workers living in hostels in a garment hub in South India illustrates how hostels restrict movement outside the hostel, as well as autonomy and self-determination inside the hostel. It is questionable whether these incursions on freedom would even register as such according to the Haykian neoliberal conception discussed above, while it is also important to note that these constraints on freedom do not constitute a singular, homogenous experience.

Several articles in this special issue also elucidate ways that freedom at work can be experienced in perhaps *unexpected ways*. The research of Crane and colleagues (2022), for example, reveals that garment worker hostels can offer certain freedoms for the women that they might not otherwise obtain if they had stayed in their villages with their families, where unfreedom ensues from arranged marriages, conflicts within the family, and patriarchal oppression. By contrast, at the hostel, in spite of the restrictions imposed upon the women but freed from their previous socio-economic conditions, the women experience freedom in their enjoyment of communal recreation and creation of opportunities for self-improvement. In addition, the findings of Dahlman et al. (2022) suggest that the general trajectory of alternative organizations from rejection of dominant norms to possible appropriation by status quo interests follows specific paths that allow different tactics to emerge for keeping the potential for freedom residing in the alternative open. Tactics, such as endurance, germination and reiteration are used by alternative organizations in ways to balance the rejection–appropriation tension and allow the freedoms inherent in novel organizing to flourish.

Finally, some articles also present circumstances in which freedom for workers can actually be *enhanced*. Villesèche and colleagues (2022) utilize Zerilli's (2005) theory on freedom-centered feminism to provide a lens as to how women's business networks might encourage new feminist worlds rather than simply replicate the power relationships in the neoliberal order. Their research reveals that women's business networks can be construed as political arenas, or places for world-building, in which women's freedoms can be advanced through sharing inspiration and imagination. Jack and co-authors (2022) also offer insight into how freedom at work can be enhanced. Using the lens of Amartya Sen's concept of "development as freedom", they performed a fieldwork study within a Filipino non-governmental organization (NGO) that supports sustainable agriculture based on agroecology. Through a collaborative, co-designed research project, the authors highlight the farmer-initiated prefigurative practices that give rise to alternative, grassroots modes of organizing work for sustainable development, eliciting substantive freedoms that are inherently relational in nature. Both articles present issues – women's business networks and sustainable agriculture – for which work can be reimagined and reorganized to offer freedoms collectively conceived.

Alternative conceptions of freedom

Collectively, the articles in this special issue acknowledge that freedom at work has been considered most commonly through the lens of the individual worker's experience of workplace or societal "freedom from" (negative freedom) and "freedom to" (positive freedom). Each article departs from this binary, and thus also from the neoliberal framework articulated earlier in this article, to explore different types of freedom at work and/or ways that freedom is nuanced, collective, relational, or politically negotiated. Several authors offer context-specific means of expanding our notions of freedom, while others ground their evolved conceptions of freedom in the work of contemporary social theorists.

Regarding the context-specific nature of freedom, Crane and colleagues (2022) problematize the binary understanding of freedom versus unfreedom that prevails in the literature on unfree labor and modern slavery. From the perspective of female garment workers, their families, employers, and other stakeholders, the authors argue, freedom is not experienced in terms of either/or, as either present or absent, but as a hybrid of (un)freedom: the experience of simultaneously being free and unfree. Hybrid (un)freedom is thus a more nuanced portrayal of how freedom plays out under specific socio-economic conditions. Also portraying a contextual understanding of freedom, Dahlman and colleagues (2022) put forth the idea of *alternativity as freedom*, a freedom that emerges through tactics of doing things differently, while remaining recognizable within the given context. Freedom, they demonstrate through three empirical cases, resides in the possibility to be alternative and do otherwise; it will never be achieved and, hence, will never disappear. Introducing types of freedom at work that derive from occupations – contractual, spatial-temporal, professional, and vocational – is the contribution of Fleming (2022). He underscores that occupational freedoms can indeed be liberating, but can also be exploited by those in power and by the internalization of ideologies that align with powerful interests.

The remaining articles offer relational and political conceptualizations of freedom derived from the contributions of noted social and economic theorists. Villesèche and colleagues (2022) build on Zerilli's (2005) work to contradict the assumptions of post-feminism in online women's communications networks and raise the possibility of such venues offering world-building and thus freedoms that are collective, contested, and plural. Jack and co-authors (2022) use Sen's writings on development to propose a relational "freedom with" in their study of innovative work and organizing rooted in alternative sustainable agricultural practices. These authors each expand what we call freedom at work to an aspiration that is mutually shared and perpetuated, arguably of greater collective significance and impact than individual experiences of freedom at work.

Alternative modes of organizing work

Beyond providing unique contributions to defining and understanding freedom at work, the articles in this special issue present inventive work and organizational arrangements that facilitate or prohibit (and sometimes both) freedom at work. The most conspicuous example of the former can be found in the article by Dahlman et al. (2022). Its authors examine organizing at various levels of analysis – individual (mindfulness meditation teachers), organizational (a sustainable fin-tech start-up), and institutional (a grassroots minority political party in the UK) – with a view to showing that all these alternative forms of organizing offer, at their essence, modes of expression for freedom. Thus, alter-nativity itself comprises the challenge to the existing order; it is within the small spaces that elude co-optation where real freedom is exhibited. A more concrete example, offered by Jack et al. (2022), of work and organizing that is facilitative of freedom is in the "pre-figurative work" and organizational practices of the small-scale farmers in their study. These Philippine farmers are cooperatively engaged with an NGO in pursuing a grassroots, alternative ecological system for eco-agricultural development. Through their participative methodology, Jack et al. (2022) uncovered practices by farmers in organizing their work, such as farmer-led design activities, democratic decision-making processes, and collective articulation of future sustainable development visions that engender a relational freedom, even between species.

On the other hand, neoliberal universities, women's online business networks, and worker hostels are contemporary organizational structures that are simultaneously facilitative and prohibitive of freedom at work. Fleming (2022) explains that, while academic laborers in the university experience certain occupational freedoms seldom enjoyed by workers outside the academic sphere, these freedoms can also be illusory as neoliberal academic work is held increasingly captive to a coercive managerialism that employs biopolitical mechanisms to control outputs in the interest of institutions.⁸ Depending on how strongly these biopolitical mechanisms are felt, work–life boundaries of academics can be sharply eroded (even deceased colleagues are not immune from this, see Fleming, 2021). Villesèche and colleagues (2022) illustrate how women's online business networks, seen primarily as venues for women to share strategies for seeking equality in the neoliberal status quo, can also be political arenas for broaching the realization of emancipatory ideas and strategies. Finally, the research of Crane et al. (2022) conveys how female garment workers in hostels experience a hybrid (un)freedom that simultaneously

comprises elements of both unfreedom and freedom, each of which needs to be seen in the context of the gendered nature of prevailing social and economic relations.

Twenty-first-century futures of freedom and work

The articles in the special issue embrace and substantiate critiques of neoliberal conceptualizations of freedom at work, not only illuminating them, but examining particular types of organizations and alternative ways of organizing and structuring work to expand possibilities of freedom. They explore possibilities for multidimensional, relational, and collective forms of freedom at work, inside and outside of traditional organizations, and through the lenses of various contemporary philosophers and social theorists of freedom. The domain of work, long seen unilaterally as either a space of freedom or of unfreedom, is given scrutiny in ways that elucidate work as a space with greater nuance in terms of freedoms and with the potential to offer freedoms yet uncovered or rarely experienced.

In this section, we move beyond the articles themselves to propose how, as a collection, they may contribute to our understanding of freedom at work. In doing so, we make a threefold conceptual move: (i) from seeing freedom as an individualist concept to seeing it as a pluralist and relational concept; (ii) from it being seen as a condition to seeing it as world-making; to then (iii) consider how points (i) and (ii) can be synthesized to inform and mobilize current and future research on the relationship between freedom and work.

Freedom as pluralist and relational

The first conceptual move that the articles urge is a questioning of the individualistic orientation in liberal conceptualizations of freedom, such as found in Berlin and Hayek alike.⁹ Here, “individualist” refers not only in a literal sense to autonomous individuals, but also to groups, organizations, and collectives when seen and understood as single, unitary agents (such as when a business firm as a legal entity enters a contract with another agent, or in the sense that political scientists conceive of nation states in international relations). With Berlin (1969/2005: 160, emphases added), the individualist orientation speaks from his definition of negative freedom: “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with *my* activity.” As to Berlin’s (1969/2005: 165, emphasis added) view on positive freedom, he notes that “the ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish *on the part of the individual* to be his own master”. Likewise, Pettit’s (1997: 5) republican theory of unfreedom, understood as being subject to arbitrary domination, or “the potentially capricious will or the potentially idiosyncratic judgment of another”, has an individualist starting point because the condition of freedom implies the absence of a relationship in which the focal agent is subject to the arbitrary domination by another agent. Even Sen’s (1999) positive conceptualization of development as freedom, as the expansion of the substantive freedoms of people (“freedom to”, in terms of Fromm; “positive freedom” in terms of Berlin), centers on the individual agent (Jack et al., 2022). In each of these traditions, the problem is how to secure the rights of each and every one (freedom as sovereignty, Villesèche et al., 2022) and how to govern people’s relations with one another while preserving the pluralism in their individual needs and preferences.

Individualist orientations to understanding freedom have been challenged by numerous authors (Honneth, 2007, 2012; Horgan, 2021; Shymko and Frémeaux, 2022). One alternative is to replace the individual by a collective (the labor movement, collective action, stakeholders, group identity), although that alternative is at risk of suppressing internal differentiation within the collective in order to be able to advance the collective. Of note, this alternative is exactly the historical ground on which the liberal, individualist notion of freedom was cultivated, as it grew out of suspicion of the pursuit of collective interests (De Dijn, 2020). Villesèche et al.'s (2022) discussion of the relationship between feminism and post-feminism is a contemporary example of precisely this tension between individual and collective, and associated risks for those more diverse or marginal. Put in these terms, as a dualism, this tension is irresolvable.

Another alternative is, therefore, more promising. It sees freedom as contingent on the relationships among heterogeneous agents. Freedom then becomes a relational and pluralist concept; your freedom is different from my freedom, but both of us depend on the other for its possibility. This alternative is articulated in Villesèche et al.'s (2022) reliance on Zerilli (and through Zerilli on Hannah Arendt), and also in Jack et al.'s (2022) extension of Sen's freedom as development. And yet, whereas Villesèche et al. locate the relational pluralism among human agents, Jack et al. extend this domain to include non-human agents.

It can be argued that these pluralist notions of freedom are an amendment to MacCallum's triadic notion of freedom. MacCallum (2006) rejects the distinction, or opposition, that Berlin makes between positive and negative freedoms. Instead, MacCallum (2006: 100) argues that freedom is "always one and the same triadic relation" of (i) an agent, (ii) preventing conditions, and (iii) the doings or becomings of the agent. Working with the articles by Jack et al. and Villesèche et al., we extend the second aspect of MacCallum's triadic understanding of freedom in two ways. The first extension is the acknowledgment that "conditions" can be both "preventing" and "enabling" (Giddens, 1979). The second extension regards substance of what is meant by these "preventing conditions". For Hayek they were other individuals, for Pettit somebody else's capricious will or idiosyncratic judgment, for Berlin both other individuals and various sorts of conditions like poverty, natural disaster, or disability, for MacCallum (2006: 102) "constraints, restrictions, interferences, and barriers". That "conditions" can also be enabling suggests that other human agents (as well as – why not? – non-human agents) may be constitutive of freedom. They may be so in direct ways, such as when individuals support each other (e.g. business networks in Villesèche et al. (2022), or hostels in Crane et al. (2022)), or in indirect ways, such as when people work to change regulations, collaboratively take preventive or mitigating action in the face of disasters, for instance. After all, "we . . . become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others" (Arendt, 1968: 148). Through this dual extension of MacCallum's (2006) "conditions", freedom becomes fully relational and pluralist.

Freedom as world-making

Closely related to the previous is a second conceptual move: a conceptualization of freedom, no longer as a private, individualistic state-of-being (absence or presence of

conditions), but as a public world-building practice, a world-making. With Arendt (1968), we can conceive of freedom as an attribute of action (1968: 155), as “call[ing] something into being which did not exist before, which was not given” (1968: 151), as the capacity to make a new beginning and carry that through. In other words, freedom becomes a verb. Nevertheless, to the extent that “Men [sic] *are* free . . . as long as they act” (1968: 153, emphasis in original), the accomplishments of their acting remain fragile, uncertain, temporary, and therefore in need of being re-accomplished on an ongoing basis.

We can see this world-making, not only theoretically underscored in women’s business networks (Villesèche et al., 2022), but also implied in the hostels (Crane et al., 2022), the various alternative organizations (Dahlman et al., 2022), and the agroecological communities (Jack et al., 2022) that populate the articles in the special issue – and its absence in the neoliberal university (Fleming, 2022), where the pivoting mechanisms of biopower constrain the possibility of making a new beginning, unless academics collectively understand and tackle “the managerial monopoly over how organizational outputs are defined and enforced, which has relegated academics to mere bystanders in their own profession” (Fleming, 2022; but see Lindebaum, 2022 and Van Houtum and Van Uden, 2022 for challenges to this monopoly). Such world-making is by necessity “political” in the sense that it depends on and is accomplished through action and speech in a public realm (Arendt, 1958/1985).

Anderson (2017: 65f) considers “four general strategies for advancing and protecting the liberties and interests of the governed under any type of government: (1) exit, (2) the rule of law, (3) substantive constitutional rights, and (4) voice”. In considering these general strategies, Anderson sees limited recourse to the first three, and therefore finds the fourth, voice, a necessary condition. Voice is not only reminiscent of Hirschman (1970), but also of Foucault (2011), when he discusses *parrhesia*. Hirschman (1970) famously argued that voice, whether through appeal or action, was a political alternative to escape (i.e. exit), and the only viable option when exit is unavailable. Foucault (2011) is concerned with the freedom to speak truth with openness and frankness, not just as a certain relation to moral law and duty, but also in relation to the self and others. Hence, political action is not only essential as an individual or collective act constitutive of freedom, but also as an act that is constitutive of who we are as moral selves (Lindebaum and Gabriel, 2016).

This twofold reconceptualization may be much needed, on the one hand, to find ways forward beyond recognizing and criticizing the neoliberal notion of one’s individual negative freedom for its perverse consequences (e.g. increased socio-economic inequalities, precarious working conditions in the gig economy and universities, ongoing oppression and exploitation of workforce). On the other hand, it may also be needed to show, as well as to counter, adverse consequences of unbridled increases of positive freedom. The pursuit of individual rights (in terms of expression of identity and preferences, realization of self, etc.) is increasingly compromising collective interests (the common good, whether seen as interests, preferences, or traditions). That is, the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968) is back on the table, but now morphed from being a consequence of calculative, rational self-interested individual action to being the consequence of relentless insistence on, and exercise of, their rights by “tyrannical individuals” (Sadin, 2020).

Pluralist, relational world-making in the world of work?

The articles in this special issue touch upon a heterogeneous set of empirical situations: the university (Fleming, 2022); a political party, social/sustainability motivated fintech startup, professional mindfulness teachers (Dahlman et al., 2022); social spaces outside of work (i.e. women's business network, Villesèche et al., 2022) and workers' hostels (Crane et al., 2022); and an agroecological collective (Jack et al., 2022). This diversity of a-typical locations for work and workers opens the question of whether Arendt's (1968) idea of public political action as freedom is or has become an impossibility in the world of work of the 21st century under conditions of private governance (Anderson, 2017).

Many work settings that appear in the articles are not private or public bureaucracies, nor the kind of for-profit commercial business entities that are the prime focus of business school teaching (such as stock market listed corporations, family businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), etc.), and in that light they are "alternative". Yet, their sources of "alternativity" vary: some are idealistically motivated organizations (alternative in the sense of prefiguration, see Parker et al., 2014), others are not-for-profit organizations (alternative in the sense of purpose), yet others are examples of partial organization (alternative in the sense of lacking one or more elements in the set of decisions that constitutes organization, see Ahrne and Brunsson, 2019), and a few can arguably not be captured with the language of organization (e.g. professionals and networks).

The a-typical selection of empirical situations in this special issue is not something that we intended, but an outcome of the submission and review process. Yet, it does give food for thought. Apparently, or arguably, reconceptualizations of freedom at work happen to be in the range of alternative empirical settings. What does this say for the possibility of enhancing freedom at work, or worker freedom? If we return to Arendt's (1968) political conception of human freedom as the ability to act in organization, then we are invited to "rethink the value and meaning of work by rehabilitating political action" (Shymko and Frémeaux, 2022: 224). We can see in each setting different forms of rehabilitation that resist (or perhaps fail to resist) the neoliberal "ideological production of the freedom fantasy" (Shymko and Frémeaux, 2022: 219): the generation of solidarity that fosters action (freedom through declarations of support in women's network blogs; Villesèche et al., 2022); the experience of spontaneity that allows for new possibilities (freedom through moments of fun and happiness in the worker hostel; Crane et al., 2022); and the appeal to the respect and singularity of individuals (failure of freedom through responsabilization of professionals as means of managerial control, see Fleming, 2022).

Such forms of political action call into question assumptions that freedom at work in private and public bureaucracies is essentially an oxymoron and that the subjecting of workers to their employers' private government is inescapable (Naughton, 2022). Lack of freedom at work might be alleviated through acts of resistance (Courpasson et al., 2011) and collectively through organizational forms such as a resurgent and revitalized trade union movement (Horgan, 2021) and other traditional methods of collective action, solidarity, and regulation by the state. However, as noted by the authors in the special issue (e.g. Crane et al., 2022; Fleming, 2022), freedom (and its absence) at work and in organizations is not necessarily experienced as "freedom from" or "freedom to", as an individual right to be fought for on the streets or in the ballot box. Rather, it is experienced and accomplished as relational and dynamic, as "freedom with" others, human and

non-human alike (Jack et al., 2022). It is through this understanding, through a twofold conceptual move from (neo)liberal conceptions of freedom, that freedom at work becomes a project of world-making. Whether such a project is feasible under conditions of private governance remains to be seen; the articles in the special issue do not cover this question. However, as the saying goes, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and therefore the possibility remains open.

Conclusion

This special issue injects fresh momentum into our substantive understanding of freedom, work, and organization in the 21st century. When responding to the guiding question of our special issue – What is freedom in the context of work in the 21st century? – there is convergence in the articles of this special issue that global and abstract theorizing around freedom has its limits (Honneth, 2012) when social innovation of economic organization occurs in the cracks of prevailing socio-economic conditions of neoliberalism. We invoked Arendt's (1968) notion of political action geared toward new beginnings to this end. The world-making capacity of freedom, so it strikes us, rejects abstract theoretical categories (e.g. à la Berlin), and instead can be seen as a reaction to the sustained suppression of non-neoliberal values (e.g. collectivism, solidarity, human dignity, respect, and recognition). Suppressed for too long, these values – both as preferred modes of conduct and end-states (Rokeach, 1968) – will find expression in creating and nurturing cracks in the neoliberal order. After all, “rules, practices, material subsistence are subordinate to values” (Hinings and Greenwood, 2015: 132). If that is so, we can then also hypothesize that nurturing these values and how they translate into practice and institutions can increasingly challenge the neoliberal order. In a way, the empirical articles of this special issue underline in compelling ways that “there is nothing so theoretical as good practice” (Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019: 493). This “inverted” Lewin doctrine serves as the inspiration for management and organization studies to examine cases of “good practice” as far as attempts at reclaiming freedom in thought and action are concerned in social relationships in and around work. This would enable researchers to “re-engineer” the theoretical ingredients and processes that constitute cases of good practice, rather than starting from abstract principles around freedom that may no longer be as applicable as they might have been in the past (Honneth, 2012). Inspired by the articles of this special issue, we thus underscore that there is scope for alternative versions of economic organization once we permit ourselves to challenge, more frequently and at a larger scale than is observed in the examples of this special issue, the existing values that inform action and practices at work and in society that hitherto contribute to impaired economic freedom, political freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom of belief, autonomy, and expression of the self, to name only a few. Once this challenge grows in momentum, it is possible that it will not only enable changes to economic organization, but also foster greater clarity as for whom and whose purpose that organization is designed (see, for example, the example of a worker cooperative installed onto a digital platform – Anzilotti, 2017; Haas, 2020). As researchers, we can take inspiration from examples of good practice to benefit from an explicit turn to the performativity of theories, when theories become self-fulfilling because they no longer describe social reality but actually shape it (Marti and Gond, 2018).

We cannot say with certainty why we did not receive more explicit submissions on other crucial themes currently overwhelming research in work and organization – technology (Den Hond and Moser, 2022; Moser et al., 2022; Weiskopf and Hansen, 2022), climate change (Banerjee and Arjaliès, 2021; Wright and Nyberg, 2012), or gender (Mandalaki and Pérezts, 2021). This is not to say that these issues do not matter, or that they were absent. Far from it. For instance, climate threat creates the necessity for adaptive practices in the study of agroecological work in the Global South (Jack et al., 2022). In other examples, gender relations are fundamental to the study of female garment workers in worker hostels (Crane et al., 2022), and feminist theory provides the foundation for the analysis of women’s professional networks (Villesèche et al., 2022). While we would have welcomed more submissions speaking to the call for papers in relation to technology as negating human agency, climate, or health crises denying choice, gender as a battleground – it is not what has shone through in the overall pool of submissions and those articles eventually accepted for inclusion in this special issue. It is our hope that the insights collectively generated by the articles of this special issue can inform future research on the conditions or possibility for the experience and expression of freedom in and around work, including those themes that did not feature too prominently in this special issue, but that undoubtably deserve closer attention.

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Notes

- 1 As highlighted later, the articles that constitute this special issue oftentimes point in this direction. Rather than starting from abstract principles around freedom, the desire for enlarged scope for the experience of freedom, coupled with the belief in the self-efficacy of one’s action, marks an attempt to reverse the belief that socio-economic conditions shape individual and group values and action, and not vice versa.
- 2 There are versions of this saying with “liberty” or “safety” instead of “freedom”. The source of the quote is contested. It is often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, but others claim that it

- was first used in 1852 by abolitionist Wendell Phillips (<https://empowermissouri.org/eternal-vigilance-is-the-price-of-liberty-our-duty-to-agitate/>) (accessed 24 April 2022).
- 3 In both the USA and the UK, neoliberal leaders also engaged in high profile showdowns with striking workers. In the United States, only one year into his presidency (1981), Reagan fired the striking air traffic controllers' union (PATCO) and replaced them with non-union workers (Farber and Western, 2002). While already legal according to a 1938 Supreme Court decision (Fiorito, 2007), the practice of replacing striking workers with nonunion employees increased after Reagan's intervention (Farber and Western, 2002). Similarly, Thatcher defeated the National Union of Mineworkers in 1985 (Beckett, 2006), and then introduced a set of rules governing industrial action that made it possible for courts to issue injunctions against striking workers on the grounds that they have not correctly followed balloting rules and other procedures (Countouris and Freedland, 2010).
 - 4 De Dijn (2020) argues that we owe our modern conception of freedom as constraints to legitimate state activity largely from the counter-revolutionary backlash against the excesses of Jacobin politics during and after the French Revolution.
 - 5 Hayek considers oppression "perhaps as much a true opposite of liberty as coercion", but thinks that it "should refer only to a state of continuous acts of coercion" (Hayek, 1960: 135).
 - 6 While we cannot know for sure Hayek's thoughts and intentions at the time of writing the above lines, we note that they can have the effect of a sophisticated rhetorical construction to dilute and disperse the attribution of intentionality and agency, making it difficult to lay aim at the "enablers" of un-freedom. If the "target" of social critique is fuzzy, then the possibility of meaningful resistance is diminished in the first place.
 - 7 The pro-qualitative tendency does not suggest a bias on our part in the selection of articles. In fact, we underline that we did not receive an empirical study using quantitative methods. What this does suggest, however, is the challenge to capture the conceptual parameters of freedom, and the socio-economic condition in which it can (or cannot) be experienced – through assuming the stability of freedom across time and space.
 - 8 In the wider context of the neoliberal university, however, the control of outputs renders universities adrift in meeting the "key ambitions of [their] own mission statement[s]", such that the process of exchanging "quality, freedom, and societal benefit . . . for quantity, managerial control, and status benefit" appreciably resembles a "self-harming protection strategy" (Van Houtum and Van Uden, 2022: 197).
 - 9 See, for example, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/liberty-positive-negative/> (accessed 28 February 2022).

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