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Freedom-amelioration, transformative change, and emancipatory orders

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Abstract

"Freedom" is a fundamental political concept: contestations or endorsements of freedom-conceptions concern the fundamental normative orientation of sociopolitical orders. Focusing on "freedom," this article argues that the project of bringing about emancipatory sociopolitical orders is both aided by efforts at engineering fundamental political concepts as well as required by such ameliorative ambitions. I first argue that since the absence of ideology is a constituent feature of emancipatory orders, any attempt at bringing about emancipation should leverage genealogical approaches in order to debunk existing ideological freedom-concepts, which can occur only by exposing the discursive functions these have come to serve for the (re-)production of dominant power relations. I then suggest that establishing and sustaining an alternative, ideology-free conception of "freedom" is a steeper task. Ensuring widespread uptake of any ameliorated concept is contingent on effective change in the relevant social environment. Where fundamental political concepts such as "freedom" are concerned, effective intervention in the relevant social environment requires radical sociopolitical change. But if such change can be brought about and enables the widespread uptake of an "improved" freedom-concept, the concept's content comes to reflect changed social facts, thereby stabilizing the particular emancipatory sociopolitical order which has newly arisen.

I

This article examines the relationship between conceptual and political dominance, focusing on how socially dominant conceptions of what it means to be "free" are related to the hegemonic normativities of sociopolitical orders. Freedom is a major political value and appeals to freedom (or "liberty") abound in political discourse.[1] Freedom's wide-ranging political power is well illustrated by the fact that diverse and often contradictory social and political movements are built on the motivation of achieving or maintaining "freedom," an almost mythical quality often seen as central to living any decent life. Even in a narrow context such as the recent and contemporary United States, one can find pertinent examples everywhere: from the black struggles of the civil rights movement to the (re-)erection of white supremacist orders[2]; from desires and organized efforts to curtail or displace the power of workplace bosses to antiunion entrepreneurism[3]; from antigun to progun activism[4]; provaccination campaigns and vax-sceptical efforts,[5] political ideals, and campaigns are shrouded in the language of freedom.

History at-large is littered with such conflicts about what it means to be free and who should get to be free (De Dijn, 2020). Throughout intellectual history, theorists have often argued that freedom, while conceptually open-ended, is *better* understood as one thing rather than another: say, as the absence of outside restraint or interference, the capacity to master one's desires in accordance with higher ends, the state of being part of a self-governing political community, of being enabled to live in conditions in which we can genuinely and mutually recognize our dependence on one another as persons, or of being subjected to no one's *arbitrary* power or *uncontrolled* interference (et cetera).[6] Importantly, such visions of freedom are not entirely separate from political efforts—explicitly or implicitly, those who espouse them make the case that such ideals can only be realized in specific political orders, or at least that they are irreconcilable with a certain kind or kinds of political order. Broadly speaking (and in a simplified manner), certain conceptions of freedom are then taken to animate or justify, inter alia, liberal, libertarian, (neo-) republican, socialist, or other political projects.[7]

It may not be too surprising, then, that radical changes in the political landscapes of Western societies have often been closely linked to conceptual ruptures in the dominant understandings of "freedom." That is, one understanding of freedom was widespread in the ancient Greek and Roman republics, another in the theocratic monarchies of the medieval ages; one in the period of the American and French revolutions; another in the restorative and reactionary circumstances that followed; and so on (De Dijn, 2020). This interlinking of conceptual and political change suggests that, where societies express sociopolitical claims in the language of freedom, there is a structural interconnection between which conceptions of freedom dominate and which kinds of political orders are hegemonic. But what is the precise nature of this connection? Which role does the character of one's sociopolitical order play in determining what "freedom" means for a society? And, inversely, which role do widespread conceptions of "freedom" play in determining the character of one's sociopolitical order?

Historians are not the only ones who should be interested in the answers to such questions. Most importantly, real-world agents of change, such as social movements and political parties, have a vested interest in the relations between concepts and politics. For them as well, the question of the directionality between political and conceptual change is an important one. Can they effect change by redefining established interpretations of concepts which express widely shared moral or political sentiments? Or can they only get to conceptual change via radical political change? And if so, is conceptual change still a valuable objective?

This article approaches these questions in the tradition of progressive conceptual analysis, and shall thus mainly be interested in the interplay between conceptions of "freedom" and the aim of bringing about *emancipatory* sociopolitical orders. However, I stop short of proposing or endorsing any comprehensive account of emancipation, insisting only that emancipatory orders cannot be *ideological* (in a pejorative sense) or sustained by or productive of such ideological discourse.[8] Since, on these grounds, emancipatory goals are irreconcilable with the operation of ideological freedom-discourse, I argue that any emancipatory critique aimed at understanding the interconnections between dominant conceptual practice and hegemonic political orders should begin by leveraging genealogical approaches in order to *debunk* current freedom-concepts that play ideological roles, which can occur only by

exposing the discursive functions they have come to serve for the (re-)production of dominant power relations.[9] Nonideologically establishing and sustaining an alternative conception of "freedom" considered more desirable from our own point of view, however, is a steeper task. Due to the externalist ways in which meaning (presumably) comes into being and proliferates, *abolishing* ideologically tainted freedom-discourse by redefining its content in non-ideological terms and ensuring widespread uptake of this newly *engineered* concept is contingent on large-scale, transformative change in the relevant social environment: transformative sociopolitical change. But once such change has enabled the widespread uptake of an "improved" freedom-concept, its content comes to reflect changed social facts and thereby, serves to stabilize any emancipatory sociopolitical order arising from this change. The relation between successfully established emancipatory freedom-concepts and emancipatory sociopolitical orders is, then, one of *mutual constitution*. Or so I shall argue.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the pejorative understanding of ideology, explains how "freedom"-discourse can be ideological in terms of discrepancies between manifest and operative concepts, and argues for *genealogical debunking* as the necessary first step in battling such ideology. Section 3 considers the possibilities for *establishing* nonideological freedom-discourse in society through the frame of semantic externalism, arguing that we can indeed change what "freedom" means, but that the success of any such endeavour is contingent on a radical transformation of society. Section 4 argues that this does not render freedom-amelioration pointless because pursuing and maintaining an ameliorated freedom-concept are essential for the long-term project of building a stable, emancipatory sociopolitical order and suggests that ideology-critical theory can aid emancipatory change by helping identify and support suitable agents of change. Section 5 addresses the problem of "ideology creep"—that purportedly emancipatory agents and orders might themselves fall back into the (re-)production of ideological discourse in the face of contestation—suggesting that a notion of emancipation which centres ideology-awareness ought to be coupled with prefiguring society-wide transformative change with smaller-scale experiments to counteract this danger. Section 6 briefly concludes.

II

Different conceptions of freedom motivate different political projects, and "freedom" thus has a significant role in structuring political narratives and potentials, and may serve to perpetuate some lifestyles, interests, and social visions while disadvantaging and marginalizing others. The ways in which "freedom" serves as a prism through which we experience and come to understand different aspects of the world can be helpfully interpreted as *ideological*, in at least two crucial ways. First, conceptualizations of what it means to be free are abstract models which "people use to represent and cope with the social world" (Anderson, 2017, p. xx). On this understanding, ideological models help us simplify the more complex realities of the social world, the ways in which values interact, clash and inform behaviors and practical outcomes, and so on. Akin to notions such as "liberalism," "conservatism," or "socialism," on this understanding, conceptions of freedom help us approximate the complex mechanics of social and political life and provide us with simplified, yet valuable ways to clarify to ourselves where we stand in relation to this life, and which of its aspects and forces we can identify with. This is a purely descriptive, nonevaluative understanding of ideology, and ideology thus understood is central to any notion of society and politics.

However, there is also a distinctly pejorative view of the concept—a view on which it describes something *bad*. Here, "ideology" picks out only such representations and models of the world, forms of social consciousness, or simply beliefs which represent it *falsely* or *undesirably*. Inter alia, such accounts hold ideology to "mask problematic features of our world, or cast those features in a misleadingly positive light, lack the normative concepts needed to identify what is problematic about them, or misrepresent the space of possibilities so as to obscure better options, the means to realizing them, or their merits" (Anderson, 2017, p. xxi); represent "epistemically flawed, rational revision-resistant belief" (Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 359; Stanley, 2015); represent pervasively false beliefs which "have the function of sustaining (and are in turn sustained by) systems of social oppression" (Srinivasan, 2020, p. 407); or

"fail to provide us with the tools to appreciate parts of the world, or what's valuable and how things are valuable" (Haslanger, 2020, p. 232). Second, then, understandings of freedom may operate in such ideologically bad ways. For the purposes of this article, I adopt a rather thin definition, which abstains from casting the function of ideology in moralized terms: ideological representations, beliefs, meanings, forms of social consciousness, and so on, are those which are epistemically faulty (or rely on epistemically faulty components) and, in virtue of these epistemic flaws, function to sustain operative power relations between agents. Such an understanding of ideology centers on its purpose of stabilizing power relations through pervasive distortion without the need for a prior moralized assessment of whether the stabilized power relations are, say, oppressive. It thus allows us to use the ideal of ideology-free justificatory processes as a benchmark not only for evaluating the prevailing power relations we want to also criticize on moralized grounds but also to keep a check on our own projects of consolidating supposedly morally more desirable—say, what we conceive of as "liberating"—forms of power relations.[10] Where the implementation or reproduction of *any* sociopolitical order is built on pervasive epistemic distortion, it fails to meet the basic conditions of any proper justificatory process.[11]

I am here mainly interested in how "freedom"-concepts can be significantly complicit in developing, upholding, and reproducing pejoratively ideological discourse. As we can glean from the preceding section, some conceptions of freedom may quite plausibly be understood to carry and perpetuate such discourse. Arguably, for instance, theological conceptions of freedom have elevated epistemically questionable beliefs in order to naturalize ordinary people's social and political subordination to unaccountable governance. Considering the prominent standing of the concept for social discourses and political visions, both historically and presently, and its omnipresent status as a sometimes-elusive object of almost universal desire, it seems quite plausible to think that freedom is a concept particularly susceptible to becoming corrupted by ideological takeover. Certainly, those striving for power would seem to have much to gain by co-opting "freedom" to bring widespread notions of what it means to live a free life in line with their partisan visions; be they based on epistemically accurate stories or not. "Freedom," then, is vulnerable to be filled with epistemically problematic content in order to play central roles in the facilitation of hegemonic power relations. Since laying bare the ideological constructs, which permeate public consciousness, is a primary aim of critical theory, we should ask which tools ideology critics might have to combat any dominant ideological understandings of a concept so central to collective life as "freedom."

One way to understand how concepts of social import carry and perpetuate ideology is to look at significant and ubiquitous differences between what people *take* themselves to refer to when using a concept and the *actual* meanings the concept has come to represent in people's linguistic and social communities. On an externalist framework of semantics, we are not directly in charge of meanings taken on by concepts and other representational devices. Instead, the meanings of our concepts are at least partly determined by the external environment in which we find ourselves, which includes, among other things, "experts in the community, the history of use going back to the introduction of a term, complex patterns of use over time" (Simion & Kelp, 2019, pp. 9-10).[12] In other words, when it comes to the generation and interpretation of shared meanings, "our social and natural environments serve as heavy anchors" (Burgess & Plunkett, 2013, p. 1096). This means that it is possible for us to disseminate meanings different from those we intended to refer to when engaging in speech acts, since we cannot unilaterally decide the content represented by terms and concepts. In an ideological environment, by using terms, we ourselves might take to be innocuous and straightforward in an unreflective manner, we can unwittingly conspire to reproduce what they *in fact* signify as the products of external meaning coinage. This is why, for example and notwithstanding our own intentions and personal beliefs about the meanings of the term, we cannot go around labeling the heavy use of make-up and adherence to a strict and narrow set of beauty standards "womanly" without thereby reproducing the pernicious stereotypes of patriarchal ideology.

On this view, thus, it is not entirely in our control, which values and meanings we proliferate when we speak of things such as "freedom." We can further develop this line of thought by following Sally Haslanger and making a critical distinction between *manifest* and *operative* concepts (Haslanger, 2020, pp. 92-94). Often, when ordinary language users use terms uncritically, they contribute to a *naturalization* process: they either take themselves to be referring to natural kinds or use terms in a way which supports the naturalizing interpretations of others (or both)—the *manifest* concept—even when what they really refer to is better understood as a contingent result constructed

by particular constellations of social relations—the *operative* concept. Some operative concepts may be relatively innocuous (Haslanger provides the example of "cool"), whereas others carry ideology (consider "race"). To combat ideology, we require a sustained effort at exposing the discrepancies between manifest and operative concepts, that is, we must *debunk* the idea that the manifest and operative concepts are one and the same, trace the operative concept's social origins, and explain what social functions it fulfils (Haslanger 2012, 2020). This is meant to be an analytical epistemic effort at understanding what concepts convey in their social contexts, and what roles their histories have made them play in social practice (Prinz and Rossi, 2017, pp. 358-360). To clarify this, it is worth quoting in full Prinz and Rossi's (2017, p. 358) explication of one of Haslanger's examples:

> [...] Haslanger shows that generic statements such as "blacks are criminals" are used in a way that reflects a specific form of knowledge, embedded in a web of schemata and resources in which they are true. However, such generic statements are misleading at the same time. They seem to be making a claim about the *nature* of an object/set of persons [the manifest concept, note] when the claim in fact is about its/their *socially and historically developed position* in the requisite social order [the operative concept, note].

"Blacks are criminals" does not convey an empirical truth but *really* reproduces an ideologically loaded history of social relations. *Ameliorative* conceptual analysis, then, must begin by making use of historical investigations in order to provide genealogical insights about how the purported naturalizations of manifest concepts have come to be constructed, and what this process of construction itself tells us about historical power relations between the relevant agents. We need to know not only if or that a statement is an empirically false locution, but what function its construction plays in historically situated and developed social relations. Indeed, to know if some locution is not merely false, but perhaps instead a socially constructed naturalization with ideological function, we need to investigate its relation to power relations, which are inevitably situated in sociohistorical context. In this sense, ideology critique counteracts the power of ideological discourse to leave operative concepts obscured and reproduce the fantasy that there is only the truth of the manifest concept, by attempting to dismantle "hegemonic naturalizations" (Prinz and Rossi, 2017, p. 357; Haslanger, 2012, pp. 448-449).

We can counter the potential of hidden ideology in ubiquitous referrals to "freedom," then, by paying close attention and genealogically reconstructing which picture of power relations such referrals convey, and by making ourselves aware of their entanglements with particular interests and valuational hegemonies.[13] While "freedom" might seem to some of us as obvious a social construct as it gets, it is arguable that its ubiquitous deployment in social discourse and political debate aims at entrenching particular notions as "common sense," thereby attempting to naturalize them, while simultaneously obscuring contentious political presuppositions and agendas, and that this process relies significantly on epistemically dubious legitimation stories. An ideology-critical approach to "freedom" must investigate these hunches more thoroughly, debunk the construction of false equivalences between manifest and operative concepts, and provide critical evaluations of the operative concept's history and functions.

III

So much for critical diagnosis of prevailing, ideological freedom-conceptions. But, presuming that the prevailing meanings of freedom are somehow importantly linked to the normative character of the dominant sociopolitical order, can we appropriate the political power of freedom-discourse for our own desired political ends without rendering it ideological once again, thereby undercutting the basic conditions of emancipation? That is, can we *replace* the manifest meanings of people's freedom-talk with content suited for aiding and sustaining our own ends without producing obscured operative concepts or relying on epistemically faulty legitimation stories ourselves? Can we *bring*

about what we might consider a truly liberating change in what it means to be free while sustaining the justificatory conditions of emancipation?

This question connects the diagnostic side of ameliorative conceptual analysis with its more proactive engineering aspect, on which we not only assess concepts, but endeavour to fix those which are evidently broken (as in, for instance, confused, unsatisfiable, too inclusive, too narrow, or nonsensical; Simion, 2018, p. 916),[14] and try to improve those we think could do better work in aiding "our legitimate purposes," by adjusting their intensions and extensions (Haslanger, 2020, p. 230).[15] One reason we might have to improve concepts is that we take them to have morally, politically, or socially detrimental effects, which could be inversed and made fit to serve more desirable ends. This is, *ex hypothesi*, what we discovered to be the case in our previous hypothetical ameliorative analysis.

But let us consider first if there might be reason to be cautious about a project quite as brazen as engineering "freedom" in the sense of replacing its current representational contents with whatever we see fit, even besides the danger of falling back into the creation and perpetuation of ideological beliefs and narratives. A first concern asks: are we not wilfully eliminating crucial knowledge about the world by engaging in conceptual engineering, and would this not give us *epistemic* reason to abandon this effort? Mona Simion thinks engineering projects can be justified on the condition that they do not lead to epistemic loss: "A representational device should be ameliorated iff (1) There is all-things-considered reason to do so and (2) the amelioration does not translate into epistemic loss" (Simion, 2018, p. 923). This condition aims to preclude wrong-kind-of-reasons amelioration. After all, concepts seem to be essentially epistemic devices whose basic function is to enable us to grasp true features of the world. So, abandoning "a semantically impeccable, joint-carving, practically nondeficient concept" just because doing so would yield all-things-considered, nonepistemic advantages for us would never improve a concept *qua* concept (Simion, 2018, p. 921). For instance, Simion argues a concept like "deer," which we stipulate to carve nature at its biological joints, would not become a better concept if we revised it to exclude a subset of its appropriate extensions on the motivation that doing so "would improve the life expectancy of bumblebees, which, given that bumblebees pollinate crops, would, in turn, result in economic advantages" (Simion, 2018, p. 921). Despite the socioeconomic advantages, abandoning the joint-carving concept would entail epistemic loss, while the most basic function of concepts is to enable epistemic gains. But ideology critique is, in a sense, precisely *about* epistemic loss. After all, we want to *abandon* a certain ideological conceptual practice and *change* what people take a concept to refer to. Is this effort not, then, in direct violation of Simion's desiderata? (Podosky, 2018).

The way out of this problem is to take seriously the distinction between *natural kind* concepts such as "deer" and *social kind* concepts such as "freedom." Natural kind concepts target the world's nonsocial ontological makeup, that is, they aim to capture *what is there* independent of social realities. This is why, when we engineer away from an already joint-carving natural kind concept, we face epistemic loss: something that enabled us to grasp as much of reality as possible is gone, and it will not come back unless we reverse our engineering efforts (Podosky, 2018, pp. 8-10). However, and to the contrary, social kind concepts such as "woman" or "freedom" themselves play an important role in determining social reality. Since social kind concepts by definition pick out and specify phenomena that arise from within contexts of human relations, they are properly revised when such contexts change. And since the operative meanings of concepts themselves play a significant role in *shaping* the state of our social relations and contexts, engineering them does not need to involve permanent epistemic loss (Podosky, 2018, pp. 9-11). Consider:

> If *woman* is engineered so as to exclude features about women being better caretakers than men, then, while there is an initial loss of knowledge; eventually, after the concept has received significant uptake, women will not be treated as better caretakers than men. Facts about social reality will change. And hence, the concept *woman* will accurately represent this. (Podosky, 2018, p. 9)

We can thus engineer social kind concepts without suffering (permanent) epistemic loss precisely because successful engineering will itself render the concept's representational content accurate over time. It may be alleged, however, that such engineering may yet entail a different kind of epistemic loss. While a successfully implanted "freedom" concept will come to reflect lived social normativity and thus appropriately track social reality, ensuring

that there is no epistemic mismatch between language and social reality, it may be the case that a newly engineered freedom concept is simply *bad*, in that it is unreasonable, fails to accord entirely with our normative intuitions about related concepts, is contradictory so that it cannot provide coherent-action guidance, or exhibits other clear defects.[16] In such cases, we might suffer permanent epistemic loss in the sense that we lose knowledge of the reasonable purposes freedom concepts have played in structuring social relations: our conceptual repertoire is being corrupted by meanings which have no similarity with or purpose for people's reasonable interests or experiences. We are thus in danger of losing knowledge about the proper baseline function of a concept itself. To avert this danger, critics may say, engineering efforts should proceed only where it can be shown that the newly proposed conceptual content satisfies some criteria of conceptual reasonableness or justifiability.

This is an important worry that I cannot entirely displace, not least because there is no way for me here to discuss or postulate such criteria of reasonableness or justifiability in a way that is not fatally ad-hoc and arbitrary. However, it seems to me that to generate the popular appeal necessary to successfully establish a proposed change in the conceptual content of "freedom," such a concept would have to relevantly relate to the experiences and interests of a great many people, and seems therefore unable to avoid meeting some suitable criterion of conceptual reasonableness or justifiability. Malicious efforts at circumventing such a process of justification—forcing or manufacturing nongenuine consent to conceptual uptake—appear themselves to necessarily involve either or both unbridled authoritarianism, the legitimacy of which we can deny on independent normative grounds, and/or recurse to ideological methods that distort the justificatory process with misleading narratives, which would disqualify the engineering effort on the epistemic grounds of my own view.[17] The upshot is that the epistemic worry formulated above becomes salient only in independently objectionable sociopolitical circumstances. Insofar as we are committed to standards of social justification stressing authority- and ideology-free processes—which a conceptual engineer animated by an ideology-critical mindset should anyways be—we therefore are yet to discover a good *epistemic* reason to refrain from ameliorating an ideologically tainted "freedom" concept.

Another strong reason to refrain from engaging in the active engineering of "freedom" might be provided by the charge that such efforts are *infeasible*, that is, that our engineering efforts cannot ensure the representational accuracy of our newly minted concept (Podosky, 2018, p. 13). In such cases, engineering efforts might only produce confusion, and in general, there is every reason to think that our efforts are ill-spent on infeasible projects. But why should it be infeasible to engineer "freedom"? If other examples of social kind concepts are any guide, there does not seem prima facie reason to believe such a project to be infeasible. "Marriage" (or its equivalent in different languages), for example, is a social kind concept that has been successfully engineered in many linguistic communities, now including in its extensions previously barred same-sex relationships of the right kind.

The reasons why we may seriously doubt the feasibility of "freedom"-engineering becomes clearer once we realize that "freedom" is not merely a social kind concept. Where the language of freedom has purchase on the sociopolitical claims society members make on each other, it is also, and perhaps primarily, a *fundamental political concept*.[18] Under such circumstances, politics *always* negotiates the concerns of freedom, directly or indirectly. That is, such politics involves all, combinations of, or either of the following: (a) disputes over the proper meaning of the concept itself, (b) disputes about which concrete individual pursuits can or should be deemed valuable by particular meanings, (c) disputes over specific policies which are at least in part proxies for debates about the underlying understandings of freedom, or (d) concerted (and often contentious) efforts to enable widely shared conceptions of freedom to flourish. These processes of *contestation* and/or *enablement* do not simply involve the changing political matters of the day but ultimately negotiate the basics not only of the proper relationship between the governed and the governors, but also between the governed themselves. Thereby, they shape the *fundamental normative orientation* of a system of social relations. It is important to add that I do not claim here that freedom is the *only* fundamental political concept, or even a particularly distinctive one; such a claim would be unnecessarily contentious. As implied by my introductory remarks, it seems to me that there is indeed some tacit historical evidence that the concept of freedom has been particularly persistent as a transtemporal organizer-concept for politically organized societies, to extents that surpass the persistence of rival "core" political concepts such as "justice" or "equality."[19] But this need not be true

for my argument to work. Those who believe that other concepts (like justice or equality) are fundamental political concepts as well, or allege that freedom is not a fundamentally political concept while other concepts are, are in principle free to plug their favored concepts into my analysis. The general lesson is simply that the negotiation of "freedom" (perhaps along with such concepts as "justice" or "equality") concerns the most general level of political normativity, from which our evaluative approaches to more narrow and particular issues of political conflict often follow (e.g., whether or not we should mandate vaccination passports, or whether or not a rise in capital gains tax is a good idea). Understanding "freedom" in this way creates serious worries about the feasibility of freedom-amelioration. Ameliorating fundamental political concepts seems to differ in important ways from ameliorating other social kind concepts.

A helpful way to understand why and how they differ and why this seems to pose serious feasibility problems for our ameliorative efforts is to consider a recent rebuttal of "contemporary" ideology critique and to show that this argument only sticks to concepts and practices which are much "narrower" than what attempts at freedom-amelioration try to accomplish. To understand how this critique gets off the ground, consider that, insofar as we want to engineer a given "freedom"-concept, the externalist picture on which we operate forces us to acknowledge that we first need to effect a change in the *environment* in which "freedom" takes on meaning. Turning back to our earlier example, if we want the concept "woman" to stop containing the hegemonic naturalization that women are better caretakers, we must shape the linguistic and behavioral environment of the "woman" concept in such a way that it is no longer functional for the concept's intension to contain gendered hierarchies of caretaking capabilities. The contents of our manifest concepts are functional in the sense that they can be explained by considering the roles they might play for satisfying the specific needs generated within particular social environments. So, as Simion and Kelp (2019, p. 12) point out, to engineer concepts we must pursue "strategic interventions in the relevant habitat" to effect changes in the social environment in and through which the meanings of concepts take shape.

But according to the critique referred to above, ideology critique has nothing valuable to tell us about how we can overcome "ideological" concepts and constructs because it cannot tell us anything distinctly helpful about how we effect the strategic interventions in relevant habitats which make social (and conceptual) change possible. This argument, leveled by Kirun Sankaran (2020), proceeds in three steps.

First, Sankaran sets aside the pejorative connotations of "ideology" to reconceptualize the phenomenon on a purely descriptive level, arguing that ideologies are *conventions*: equilibria solutions for social coordination problems. As such, they serve the function of stably enabling coordinated action to the mutual benefit of some actors. But because they serve their function successfully, to change conventions, some sort of strategic intervention in the environment, which necessitates them is needed. Sankaran's second step is to argue that the kind of ideology critique which refuses to engage with empirical evidence and strategies (which, he conjectures, is indeed characteristic of "contemporary" ideology critique) has no tools to bring about conventional change. Such ideology critique essentially rests on the assertion that "[i]f people are exposed to the ways in which their engagement with the world is distorted, and the ways in which those distortions have pernicious downstream casual effects, [...] they will stop acting in ways that maintain pernicious social arrangements" (Sankaran, 2020, p. 1449). But this is to "systematically ignore the role strategic considerations play in driving and preventing social change [which] leads to an impoverished account of how social change works" (Sankaran, 2020, p. 1449). The empirical social sciences, instead, have brought forward convincing explanations for the causes of social stasis and elaborated strategies to bring about social change, as Sankaran shows at the example of Mackie's seminal, empirically driven explanations for variations in the trajectories of (arguably ideological) practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and "footbinding" (Sankaran, 2020, pp. 1450-1453; also Mackie, 1996, 2000). Sankaran's third step is to argue that even if ideology critics could overcome this ineptness by beginning to pay due attention to empirical insights on conventional change, they would simply reinvent "the wheel, poorly" (Sankaran, 2020, p. 1453). Social scientific accounts of changes in the content of social conventions are sufficiently rich to do all the diagnostic work ideology-critique aspires to supply—providing a sophisticated theory of the entrenchment of functional social conventions—and can top this off with sophisticated accounts of the mechanics of social change. In sum, ideology critique is either ill-equipped to do its job or, alternatively, pitifully superfluous.

Even if we grant Sankaran's point that ideologies are conventions (equilibria solutions for social coordination problems), the case of "freedom" shows that his complete deference to social scientific solutions to bring about social change can be inadequate. The "positive" side of freedom-amelioration—the bringing about of a widespread, sustained change in what people take themselves to mean when they refer to "freedom"—is not capturable by the terms of Sankaran's critique, which are limited to assessing the sort of conventional change occurring through clear-cut interventions into micro- (or meso-) level practices and discourses with a somewhat determined set of characteristics. "Freedom", as a fundamental political concept, must be understood as a fundamental value according to whose dominant conceptions social relations become organized and whose fault-lines underpin the very practice of political contest. If shared understandings of freedom are conventions that coordinate behavior, then they are better understood as conventions that form part of the discursive ground rules of organized society; ground rules that structure and condition, yet do not by themselves determine, what is worth striving for. When it comes to constructing substantive specifications of "freedom," then, there is no (specific) coordination problem to solve: rather, what is at stake are the basic contours of a societal normativity. But this also means that the external "habitat" in which we must eventually strategically intervene if we are to facilitate lasting and wide-spread take-up of our proposed ameliorative change of "freedom" is societal discourse at large. Transcending issue-arenas and the particular domains of problem-oriented social coordination, the social change needed for freedom-amelioration is a matter of transforming society's underlying normative frame. In other words, it is a matter of deep and radical social change. But there are no state-of-the-art social scientific accounts, which help us uncover how to go about the mechanics of radical social transformation. To ameliorate "freedom," we must radically alter the sociopolitical status quo, and we must ourselves find out how to do so in the process.

IV

We are now in a better position to understand why freedom-amelioration might fall prey to feasibility concerns. If the amelioration of "freedom" *qua* fundamental political concept requires us to radically change our society's normative frame and thereby necessitates us to transform the reigning sociopolitical landscape, infeasibility seems to loom large. Indeed, if freedom-amelioration is ultimately tied to a sea change in the political landscape of a sociolinguistic community, the idea of pursuing it may seem preposterous. But I suggest that this is not due to feasibility problems. High hurdles and the unlikelihood of success do not equate infeasibility. Such a stance is clearly contradicted by the many deliberately effected large-scale political transformations which have occurred throughout human history. Conceding infeasibility would not only be premature; it would also be insulting to those who spend their lives in pursuit of radical change (and sometimes achieve it).

The problem, instead, is that the whole endeavour now seems *pointless*. Insofar as we not only want to debunk ideological narratives but also want to change the meaning of concepts in virtue of conceptual change's importance for the facilitation of emancipatory social change, our engineering efforts seem a fool's errand. If, as the preceding discussion has suggested, our engineering efforts cannot be successful before emancipatory change has been achieved on its own, and emancipatory change is the ultimate purpose anyways, we should refocus our efforts on formulating appropriate strategies to effect social change and on putting these strategies into action; freedom-amelioration is a distraction.

If this is right, ideology critique's transformational purchase on a fundamental political concept like "freedom" is limited to its diagnostic task of exposing ideological discourse via genealogical inquiry, debunking prevalent naturalizations, the distortions on which they rest, and their power-stabilizing functions for all to see. This could in itself have a disenchanting effect on people and thus prove valuable for political mobilisation[20] but is ultimately an unsatisfying response to Sankaran's charge that ideology critique itself is unhelpful for identifying the relevant mechanics of change in social environments. Countering this charge, the remainder of this article strives to show that both ideology-critical conceptual engineering and other resources of ideology critique are not pointless or unhelpful

for effecting and maintaining radical sociopolitical change but of great value for such efforts. Let me begin this argument by unravelling in more detail what the arguments proposed so far already indicate: that transformative sociopolitical change and the successful engineering of fundamental political concepts like "freedom" are *mutually constitutive*.

De Dijn's aforementioned book shows that, throughout the ages, what people understood freedom to mean was always heavily intertwined with shifting paradigms of political rule. Where the republics and democracies of antiquity retreated, moralistic conceptions of freedom as an inner virtue of wise men, whose strength remained unperturbed by outer turmoil or oppression, manifested widely, as did the antiworldly ideologies of organized religion (De Dijn, 2020, pp. 60-68, 111-125). Conversely, where people rose up against tyrants or autocrats, freedom often came to describe a democratic way of life without arbitrary superiors or insubordination (De Dijn, 2020, chs. 3-4). Once again, actors sometimes (re-)discovered such conceptual possibilities and built radical change in public culture on its back; other times, conceptual improvement seems to have followed democratic achievements. The directionality of these processes is not very clear, but I think that we are in a good position to suggest a clearer structure to such directionalities using the insights already unearthed. On a closer look, a picture of the mutual constitution of conceptual change and transformative sociopolitical change, conceptual entrenchment, and the stabilizing of sociopolitical orders emerges.

It is a central task of ideology-critical theory to lay the groundwork for sweeping change by providing genealogical efforts to debunk ideological freedom-concepts and discourse in order to raise consciousness about naturalizations and the distortions which underpin them. But we have seen that it is only transformational social change itself which enables widespread uptake of a nonideological freedom concept containing the *newly engineered content* motivating progressive action because concepts play functional roles in their environments, and new concepts are thus only functional in adjusted environments. If and once they have achieved significant uptake, however, social kind concepts make themselves accurate over time, reflecting and *stabilizing* changed social facts through increasing conceptual entrenchment. Our newly minted emancipatory order, thus, ought to remain committed to conceptual upkeep as well as to precluding ideology creep, where our own previously ideology-free concept becomes inundated with manifest naturalizations and obscures social power relations.[21] This necessitates a fostering of our ameliorated conceptual landscape. In this way, anti-ideological freedom-amelioration and emancipatory sociopolitical change are mutually constitutive, as one ultimately depends on the other.

This web of relations raises a host of questions about the character of political change and political strategy. After all—as Sankaran would have expected—I have had little to say about the ways in which we can get from undesirable sociopolitical orders to desirable—and emancipatory—sociopolitical orders via transformative change (or what could be strong candidate reasons to refrain from trying). A comprehensive answer to such questions is indeed beyond the scope of this article, and beyond the scope of the armchair in general. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that ideology critique has intrinsic resources to contribute to guiding the real-world efforts of agents of change. Its task is not merely to develop a theory of conceptual amelioration and its interactions with real-world environment change, and then let the appropriate agents of change take it from there. Instead, ideology-critique can provide distinctive aid to practical endeavours of effecting change and erecting emancipatory orders.

Ben Laurence (2020, p. 374) has recently argued that nonideal theory's endeavours of diagnosing unjust structures and outcomes—such as the role ideological freedom-discourse can play in upholding what we deem to be oppressive social relations—as well as prescribing appropriate remedies are intimately entangled with the question of the agents of change, agents "for whom intentionally bringing about change is feasible, and for whom it is realistic to think that they might come to do so willingly."[22] When it comes to building nonideological (emancipatory) and desirable sociopolitical orders on the back of improved freedom concepts, ideology critique is in a good position to identify suitable agents of change and engage with them in a dialectical process of mutual improvement. First, the debunking process of conceptual analysis unearths the roles ideological concepts play in advantaging some groups (and their interests) over others, and its heavily empirically informed genealogical efforts identify *whose concerns are being elevated over whose*. Thus, those marginalized groups who will likely be motivated to spur change can be

identified. To illustrate this, think about a hypothetical analysis of the specific ways freedom-concepts have historically facilitated the continuing economic and political dominance of wealthy owners of the means of production in a particular society of advanced capitalism. Were one to conclude, for instance, that social discourses there identify freedom with absence of state interference and use of private monetary resources to establish social and political influence and thereby make "freedom" play a facilitating function for class-based dominance, one could further identify both the social groups most disadvantaged by this hegemonic discursive practice—workers of some specified sort—and the organized subset of this group best positioned to attempt the transformation of social circumstances.

The ideology-critical ambition of positive freedom-amelioration, as we have learned, must categorically be part of a large-scale project of societal transformation. In this sense, secondly and highly related to the first point just made, our ideology critique formulates a clear appeal to all those marginalized actors who propagate for change (and their allies) to work in concert but sends the clearest mandate to get to work to those collective agents with the greatest organizational capacities to push for radical change. This suggests that the agents of change in question are akin to what Lea Ypi has termed "avantgarde political actors": agents and organizations at the vanguard of political activism, especially those "whose position in society renders them particularly vulnerable to the effects of specific political and institutional conflicts and therefore particularly relevant in informing the theorist's diagnostic inquiry" (Ypi, 2012, p. 5). Once identified, such actors, as the collective representation of those whose interests' are primarily at stake, should thus also be mobilized to help sharpen ideology critics' debunking efforts with the particular insights generated from their situated knowledge. In turn, as we shall see below, the theoretical resources of ideology critics contribute to guiding such agents of change toward emancipation; they can provide counsel to ensure that the agents' own narratives keep from slipping into ideological territory, especially as such agents amass more power. These two facets of cooperation may generate an emancipatory dialectic. In sum, ideology critique as described here incorporates intrinsic tools for identifying proper agents of change; its theorizing process ought to be aided by such agents, and its analyses can go on to carry significant import for guiding agents toward achieving and maintaining emancipatory orders. *Pace* Sankaran, ideology critique has an important role to play in identifying and aiding the mechanics of environmental change, where such change necessitates large-scale social transformation.

V

One crucial question is yet to be answered. Earlier, I have asked not only how and if we can establish new meanings of "freedom" but also if and how we can do so without eventually falling back into ideology, sustaining our preferred sociopolitical orders only by ourselves obscuring the discursive roles "freedom" *really* plays in buttressing our maintenance of power. This problem is enormously important since, *ex hypothesi*, truly emancipatory social relations are incompatible with ideological discourse. It becomes even more vexing once we consider that we do not have obvious historical models of nonideological discursive spheres: We would be hard-pressed to point to a particular epoch or circumstance in history in which ideology-free social and power relations were successfully erected and sustained (at least on a scale as grand as we target here). It seems, indeed, that we simply do not know how to construct an order "so devoid of the need to conceal its real power dynamics so as to afford an unclouded view of human relations" (Rossi, 2019, pp. 646-47). Sooner rather than later, progressively transformed orders will face a reality check: reactionary forces will want to turn back the clock, or others might share "emancipatory" ends but fundamentally disagree with us about what emancipation entails, and our order will thus become contested. Is it really possible for our hypothetical order to politically resist such challenges without making use of the powerful weapon of ideological distortion?

I will not be able to displace this worry about "ideology creep" confidently: it warrants a longer examination which I do not here have space for. Nonetheless, it is important to at least give a preliminary indication as to where we could find the resources for successfully countering it. Doing so further illustrates the distinct contributions of ideology critique to making transformational sociopolitical change both possible and desirable, and justifies my earlier claim that ideology critique incorporates theoretical resources which help agents of change avoid engaging in ideological distortion.

There are, I think, two main considerations to stress: first, the importance of forming a clear notion of what it means to live in an emancipatory sociopolitical order, and second, the importance of identifying the appropriate ways of getting there. First, reason for hope arises from the possibility that ideology critics may influence emancipatory movements so that they understand their task primarily (or at least significantly) as one of changing discursive environments (and the concepts they include) to the effect that widespread *awareness* of the ubiquity of ideological distortion and an imperative to avoid producing it becomes society's discursive foundation. Understanding the emancipatory task in this way may position the relevant actors to be more sensitive to the production of ideological distortion (and more hesitant to embrace it) and should help create an informed and vigilant citizenry which both takes normative issue with ideology and is not easily fooled by it. On this view, then, ideology critics may function to influence agents of change to understand the effort of emancipation itself at least in (necessary) part as the creation of "a fragile social experiment" in which epistemic transparency is assigned special value (Thaler, 2018, p. 688).

Second, ideology critique's emphasis on the necessity to build sociopolitical structures resistant to pervasive epistemic distortion advises agents of change to prepare for endeavours of society-wide transformation by engaging in experimental learning processes in smaller-scale environments. More precisely, it counsels that abilities to counteract and abstain from the production of ideological "freedom"-discourse—and to create the right conditions for a project of widespread ideology-awareness to take hold—will be greatly enhanced if emancipatory agents engage first in the smaller-scale, experimental alternative-building of *prefigurative politics*. Such politics are prefigurative because they strive for the construction of alternative, emancipatory ways of living on a smaller scale, hoping that the lessons learned there can then inform society-wide sociopolitical transformation (Marxian leftists point to a wide array of collectives as examples, such as the Occupy movement or the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria aka Rojava).[23] The hope is that the engagement of transformative actors in building prefigurative political structures with a particular eye towards debunking ideological "freedom" discourse and practising emancipation as ideology-awareness equips them, where the challenges are fewer and the stakes lower, with tools, strategies, and lasting motivation to pursue large-scale change on the basis of epistemic accuracy and transparency. Through prefigurative politics, that is, we can couple the insurgent critique of dominant orders' ideological ways with a newfound awareness of how to deal with the ideological potentials posed by our own dominant narratives and learn how to respond to these potentials in emancipatory ways. While emancipatory actors cannot change what "freedom" means for society-at-large as long as they stay within the confines of prefigurative structures, the political preparation afforded by collective organization within those structures may be integral to their success in eventually keeping improved "freedom"-discourse ideology-free. Once again, ideology critique has salient resources to guide the production of transformative sociopolitical change.

VI

Let us take stock. I argued in this article that there is a relation of mutual constitution between transformative sociopolitical change and change in the dominant meanings of fundamental political concepts such as "freedom." Presuming that emancipatory futures are futures in which prevailing power relations are legitimated by ideology-free processes of social justification, I argued further that progressive actors striving for such futures have strong reason to deploy ideology critique in order to, first, examine currently dominant meanings of "freedom" and, second, engineer and implement alternative meanings suitable to aid the stabilization of more desirable sociopolitical orders in ideology-free ways. The first task becomes necessary for the analysis of current circumstances, where dominant "freedom" concepts may be ideological in the sense that they are constructed and reproduced as hegemonic naturalisations that function to sustain prevailing power relations. I showed the importance of debunking such naturalizations and highlighting how they are different from the discursively operative meanings of the concept: the task is to unveil the reigning functions of "freedom" for sustaining prevalent power relations through careful genealogical reconstruction. The second task results from the mutually constitutive relation between radical sociopolitical change

and change in fundamental political concepts. Where we strive to overcome current conditions and erect radically alternative orders marked by emancipatory justificatory processes, we must effect large-scale political transformation which will in turn be stabilised by an improved "freedom" concept of widespread uptake. Ideology critique helps make such endeavours both feasible and desirable. It helps identify the appropriate agents of change, insists that their principles and projects of emancipation be built around the central tenets of ideology-awareness and epistemic transparency, and counsels that radical transformation be put to the test in structures of prefigurative politics before society-wide transformative change is attempted, so that avoiding the ever-present danger that agents of change fall back into the very ideology they fought against is at the front and centre of emancipatory politics.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In this paper, I shall be exclusively concerned with the social dimensions of "freedom," that is, freedom as a value arising in the context of our relations to others (as opposed to, say, metaphysical questions about the existence of a "free" will). This kind of freedom is often termed "liberty"; this essay takes the two terms to be synonymous.

[2] Compare, for example, King (1963), and Wallace (1963). Also consider the story told in Stovall (2021, pp. 313-319).

[3] For example, compare Eidlin and Uetricht (2018) and Galles (2020).

[4] Compare Stanley (2018) and LaPierre (2020).

[5] Compare Casas (2021) and Langford (2020).

[6] See for instance Ambrose (1954, pp. 287-299), Constant (1988), Herodotus (1998), Hägglund (2019), and Pettit (1997).

[7] See for instance Mill (1963–1991), Pettit (1997), Hägglund (2019), Nozick (1974), and Roberts (2016).

[8] I provide a more extensive discussion of "pejorative ideology" in the next section. For now, it is enough to point out that such ideology supports or stabilies power relations by reproducing epistemic faults—lies, misconceptions, and so on. Such ideology is irreconcilable with emancipation because it precludes persons to consent to relations of power on reasonable grounds—instead deploying power to actively manufacture the very consent sought in the first place, while emancipation is fundamentally in the business of displacing (in some significant sense) illegitimate power relations. For background on the irreconcilability of such ideology and emancipation, see Bernard Williams's "Critical Theory Principle," according to which "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance has been produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified": Williams (2005, p. 6). For more extensive discussion, see Williams (2002, pp. 219-232).

[9] Matthieu Queloz calls this "pragmatic genealogy," a method consisting "in telling partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to explore what these ideas do for us." Thus, we investigate the emergence and persistence of terms through an examination of their historical functions, "by reconstructing the practical problems that these ideas offer solutions to." Queloz (2021, pp. 2–3).

[10] This shall interest us further in Section 5.

[11] See again Williams's "Critical Theory Principle" in Williams (2002, pp. 219–232); see also Forst (2001, p. 168).

[12] Semantic externalism remains contested by semantic *internalism*, which denies that meaning is necessarily shaped by the external world. However, as conceptual engineering or amelioration becomes but a nonissue on a semantic internalist framework, the crucial challenge for my argument about freedom-amelioration is to retain plausibility even in the event that the more challenging framework of semantic externalism is true.

[13] For a recent account of the values of genealogy for political philosophy, including its value for the political critique of ideology, see Prinz and Raekstad (2020). See also Queloz (2021).

[14] She is quoting Greenough (2017). For a general and pioneering account of conceptual engineering, see Cappelen (2018).

[15] In semantics, ""intension" indicates the internal content of a term or concept that constitutes its formal definition; and "extension" indicates its range of applicability by naming the particular objects that it denotes" (Britannica, n.d.).

[16] Think of the Orwellian conceptual engineering by which *freedom is slavery*. The general worry here is brought out well in Queloz and Bieber (2021, pp. 6-9).

[17] As Queloz and Bieber (2021) make clear, the notion that it would be desirable to implement well-engineered concepts with ease should make us wary of the political mechanisms required to change people's conceptual repertoires with

relatively little difficulty or pushback. The idea that wide uptake of an engineered concept with a general social function (such as "freedom") is legitimately induced only by an authority- and ideology-free social process of justification is positively complementary to their negative account of the normative factors counselling against establishing a machinery which could ensure easy conceptual implementation.

[18] My conception of "fundamental political concepts" is evocative of the pioneering exploration of *essentially contested concepts* given by W.B. Gallie (1956). Though this would need further argument, I do not take "freedom" to be an essentially contested concept in his sense, at the very least because it seems to me that it does not meet Gallie's sixth condition (and therefore also his seventh), which prescribes that a candidate concept must derive "from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept" (Gallie, 1956, p. 180).

[19] De Dijn (2020); also Kelly and Reid (1998), and Neocosmos (2016).

[20] Cf. Haslanger (2020, p. 236).

[21] I say more about precluding ideology creep in Section 5.

[22] Note that on this account, emphasizing as it does feasibility and motivation, the appropriate agents of change are not necessarily those who have the most stringent *moral obligations* to spur change. For a pertinent account on particular agents' moral obligations to transform conceptual practice, see Podosky (2021).

[23] Compare Raekstad (2018) and Rossi (2019, p. 648). The seminal academic attempt at proposing, exploring, and analyzing structures of prefigurative politics is found in Erik Olin Wright's *Real Utopias Project*. See, importantly, Wright (2010). For a general overview, see Wright (2021).

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