

How are freedom, equality and private property rights related?

My proposed research is a philosophical examination of the relationship between freedom and equality, with reference to the institution of private property. My central claim is that freedom, equality and private property rights relate to one another such that they are all potentially consistent in some degree, but to the extent that any of them is realized the others will be restricted. This model hypothesizes that society is analogous to an economy possessing a limited stock of 'capital' available for the realization of social values, meaning that various ratios of freedom to equality to property rights can be 'purchased'. The relationship between freedom, equality and private property can be understood to entail the type of cost/ benefit calculation found in economic reasoning because the realization of different combinations of these values require different levels of social properties such as coercion, wealth and authority etc. Those properties required by one value frequently impinge on others, meaning that its extension will progressively exclude them.

Having elaborated this model I then intend to apply it to selected existing political theories in the socialist and liberal traditions. Considering these theories' attitudes to property rights will help clarify the reasoning behind competing definitions of freedom and equality. Pre-existing, often implicit, commitments regarding private property constrain the particular interpretation of freedom, equality or the combination of these values advocated by an ideology, because the implications of any political values adopted must be compatible with its conception of property rights. By examining how attitudes to private property rights condition advocacy for freedom and equality, I hope to show that there is no conceptual reason why equality of outcome cannot coexist with substantial negative freedom if private property rights are restricted.

Positioning of the Research

My research would contribute to the literature in three ways: firstly it would outline a new conceptual model of the relationship between freedom, equality and property rights; secondly it would help clarify existing debates between liberalism and socialism; and thirdly it would pave the way for an argument that individual freedom and equality of outcome are compatible.

There is extensive existing literature concerning the respective relationships between freedom and equality, freedom and private property and equality and private property (e.g. Berlin (1958, 123-125, 167, 170; 1969, xlix-li, liv); Christman (1994, 67-80); Cohen (1994, 223; 1995, 28-31, 34-37, 53-59); Dworkin (2000, 65-70, 120-134, 171, 182); Hayek (1960, 17-19, 85-101, 136-141; 1982, 81-83); Norman (1982, 85-99, 105; 1987, 2-5, 15-16, 132-135); Steiner (1994, 1, 35-39, 52-54, 91, 229-236); Tawney (1931, 60, 84-86, 121-126, 149-155, 228-247)). However the idea of a tripartite quasi-economic relationship between these values would contribute a new analytical perspective which could help to clarify these debates. The existing literature does not address the idea that private property rights condition the relationship between freedom and equality itself, as opposed to interacting with each of these values independently; my research would aim to fill this gap.

The second contribution of my research would be to clarify the debates between socialism and liberalism. It is a staple of liberal and right wing political theories that “material equality and liberty are irreconcilable” (Hayek 1982, 181, n. 30; cf. Berlin 1958, 123-125, 167, 170; Berlin 1969, liv; Hayek 1960, 85-86; Hayek 1982, 83; Hume

1975, 193-194; Nozick 1974, 160-164). Conversely, socialists generally consider freedom and equality to be compatible, but often have recourse to the idea of positive freedom (e.g. Norman 1982, 85-92; 1987, 28-55), a conception which liberals regard as an abuse of the term (Berlin 1958, 122- 125). My research would clarify why socialists and liberals talk at cross purposes, since it would show that their conceptions of freedom and equality differ as a result of the attempt to reconcile or balance these values in the context of private property rights which make their true reconciliation impossible.

Finally, my research would provide an argument that negative freedom and equality of outcome can be made conducive. While there is some literature claiming that private property is not integral to negative freedom (e.g. Cohen 2001; Cohen 2011; Waldron 2006, 154-155), the role of private property in governing the relationship between freedom and equality – and thus the terms of political debate – has not been analysed. My research would offer an original perspective on the relationship between freedom and equality by focussing attention on the background assumption of private property rights which forms the conceptual basis of the debate.

Research Design and Methodology

My methodology is analytical political theory. The research will have two stages. The first will comprise a defence of my primary claim: that freedom, equality and property rights are all consistent to some extent, but with a limited scope for tripartite realization. This will involve conceptual analysis of freedom, equality and property rights to determine the implications of the pursuit of each of these values for the

realization of combinations of the others. I will focus on existing philosophical explications of freedom, equality and private property rights such as Baker (1986), Berlin (1958), Christman (1994), Cohen (2001; 2011), Dworkin (2000), Hohfeld (2001), Honoré (1968), Steiner (1994), Tawney (1931), Waldron (1988) and Williams (1962).

The second stage will utilize the model developed in the first section to critique selected existing theories broadly classified as liberal and socialist. I expect the theories considered to include those of Cohen (2009), Dworkin (2000), Hayek (1960; 1982), Norman (1982; 1987), Nozick (1974) and Rawls (1971) (the number of theories addressed will be limited by the available space, so this analysis will only provide examples of how the model developed in the first stage applies to existing theories). This stage of the research will involve exegesis of arguments for freedom and/ or equality deriving from liberalism and socialism to show that their conceptions of freedom and equality differ primarily because of background assumptions about private property rights.

Finally, building on the two main stages, I intend to argue that, contrary to liberalism and right wing libertarianism (e.g. Hayek 1960, 140; Nozick 1974, 151-164), freedom and equality are not necessarily incompatible. The perception that they conflict derives from the presupposition of private property rights, but by reducing the extent of private property more social capacity can be made available for the pursuit of freedom and equality. Hence extensive negative freedom can coexist with equality of outcome in the absence of private property rights.

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