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Negative Liberty & Hardness

William Gillis

22nd December 2018

I think it's insufficiently analyzed how the banner of "negative liberty" often replicates the "hardness" of masculinity and gets wrapped in it. Interdependence & contingency of feelings is often ridiculed alongside means of interdependence & contingency in social & economic relations.

I've long been skeptical of the ways "autonomy" – instead of "freedom" – gets thrown around in the left because of how often it is used as something like "sovereignty" and how quickly I've seen said negative approach to freedom collapse to nativism, isolationism, and self-reliance as the true goal. And it always tends to be coded masculine or appeal to masculine tropes.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a big believer in individualism – that the rational evaluative agency of individuals should be constantly focused on and enshrined, never ceded to "groups" or other institutional or collective entities. I deplore approaches to structuring society or even analyzing it that don't put individual agency first. But that's not remotely the same thing as never being interdependent. An individual can have strong agency in a web of interdependence. Indeed the further the impact of their choices stretch the

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more agency they have, whereas merely being “free” from outside influence or connection is the freedom of the prison cell.

In all the permutations of my life I relatively early on realized the ultraviolet limit of the fetishization of negative freedom – isolation and self-reliance in opposition to connection and interdependence – was a dark place filled with nazis (national isolationism) & primitivists (individual/tribal isolationism)

But these discourses of retreat and isolationism like most variants of ethnonationalism and primitivism tend to be overwhelmingly riven with ideological and aesthetic reinforcements of masculinity.

“I just want to protect my daughter” is a line I hear *constantly*. Especially from anticiv folks who often get to a point where they prognosticate the breakdown of civilization and the very specific horrors that they fear their daughter will have to survive. Retreat from the modern world, retreat from connectivity, is thus framed in terms of typical masculine “doing what must be done to protect one’s family.” This kind of extremely personal invocation is of course one I can’t really respond to, and so our exchanges inevitably end soon after their “but my daughter” proclamations. In some ways I wish them well, the world is a terrible place.

But the fetishization of “hardness in all things” as per Nietzsche, is one of the most prototypical components of modern masculinity in our society. And more than anything it’s a walling off from “being affected” – whether emotionally or culturally or what have you.

Some of the first writings I ever put online at the dawn of this millennia were diagnosing the roots of power and abuse as stemming from the hunger to disengage, to not rise in complexity to meet the external multitudinous world but beat it away or into regularities. I think that spectrum – between engagement and disengagement – is critical to understanding power as an ideology, strategy, or psychological orientation, but I also think it’s deeply gendered in a way we don’t emphasize enough and that clearly plays a huge role.

Of course this is not remotely to suggest that all instances of disengagement or putting up emotional walls or seeking independence or self-reliance are strictly bad things. Of course not. We live in a complex world, boundaries can protect against abuse. There are many instances where I disengage – refusing to get wrapped into the emotional abuse of family, refusing to waste my time on a pile of randos in my mentions – but there’s a difference between situational pragmatic strategies and core motivation or inclination.

The fall of many vulgar rank-and-file libertarians to variants of fascism and nationalism has been explained from many angles (including many terrible attempted explanations), but one significant pipeline is the way the broader ideological cluster of masculinity can so easily take over and redirect framings of liberty as purely a matter of separation-from rather than options-to.