

Hito Steyerl

Freedom from Everything: Freelancers and Mercenaries

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In 1990, George Michael released his song “Freedom ’90.” It was a time when everybody was deliriously singing along with Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” or the Scorpions’ “Winds of Change,” celebrating what people thought was the final victory of liberty and democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Most abysmal of all these sing-along songs was David Hasselhoff’s live rendition from on top of the Berlin Wall of “Looking for Freedom,” a song describing the trials and tribulations of a rich man’s son trying to make his own fortune.

But George Michael did something entirely different. For him, freedom was not some liberal paradise of opportunity. Instead,

It looks like the road to heaven
But it feels like the road to hell.¹

What sort of freedom does George Michael’s song describe? It is not the classic liberal freedom defined by an ability to do or say or believe something. It is rather a negative freedom. It is characterized by absence, the lack of property and equality in exchange, the absence even of the author and the destruction of all props suggesting his public persona. And this is why the song feels much more contemporary than all the odes to liberty from a bygone age of the end of history. It describes a very contemporary state of freedom: the freedom from everything.

We are accustomed to regarding freedom as primarily positive – the freedom to do or have something; thus there is the freedom of speech, the freedom to pursue happiness and opportunity, or the freedom of worship.² But now the situation is shifting. Especially in the current economic and political crisis, the flipside of liberal ideas of freedom – namely, the freedom of corporations from any form of regulation, as well as the freedom to relentlessly pursue one’s own interest at the expense of everyone else’s – has become the only form of universal freedom that exists: the freedom from social bonds, freedom from solidarity, freedom from certainty or predictability, freedom from employment or labor, freedom from culture, public transport, education, or anything public at all.

These are the only freedoms that we share around the globe nowadays. They do not apply equally to everybody, but depend on one’s economic and political situation. They are negative freedoms, and they apply across a carefully constructed and exaggerated cultural alterity that promotes: the freedom from social security, the freedom from the means of making a living, the freedom from accountability and sustainability, the freedom from free education, healthcare, pensions and public culture, the loss of standards of public responsibility, and in many

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places, the freedom from the rule of law.

As Janis Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." This is the freedom that people in many places share today. Contemporary freedom is not primarily the enjoyment of civil liberties, as the traditional liberal view has it, but rather like the freedom of free fall, experienced by many who are thrown into an uncertain and unpredictable future.

These negative freedoms are also those that propel the very diverse protest movements that have emerged around the world – movements that have no positive focal point or clearly articulated demands, because they express the conditions of negative freedom. They articulate the loss of the common as such.



The romantic free lance as portrayed in the book "A Festival of Song: A Series of Evenings with the Greatest Poets of the English Language," 1876.

Negative Freedom as Common Ground

Now it's time for the good news. There is nothing wrong with this condition. It is of course devastating for those who are subject to it, but at the same time, it also reshapes the character of opposition in a very welcome way. To insist on speaking about negative freedom opens the possibility of claiming more negative freedoms: the freedom from exploitation, oppression, and cynicism. This means exploring new forms of

relationships between people who have become free agents in a world of free trade and rampant deregulation.

One particularly pertinent aspect of the condition of negative freedom today: the condition of the freelancer.

What is a freelancer? Let's look at a very simple definition.

1. A person who sells services to employers without a long-term commitment to any of them.
2. An uncommitted independent, as in politics or social life.
3. A medieval mercenary.³

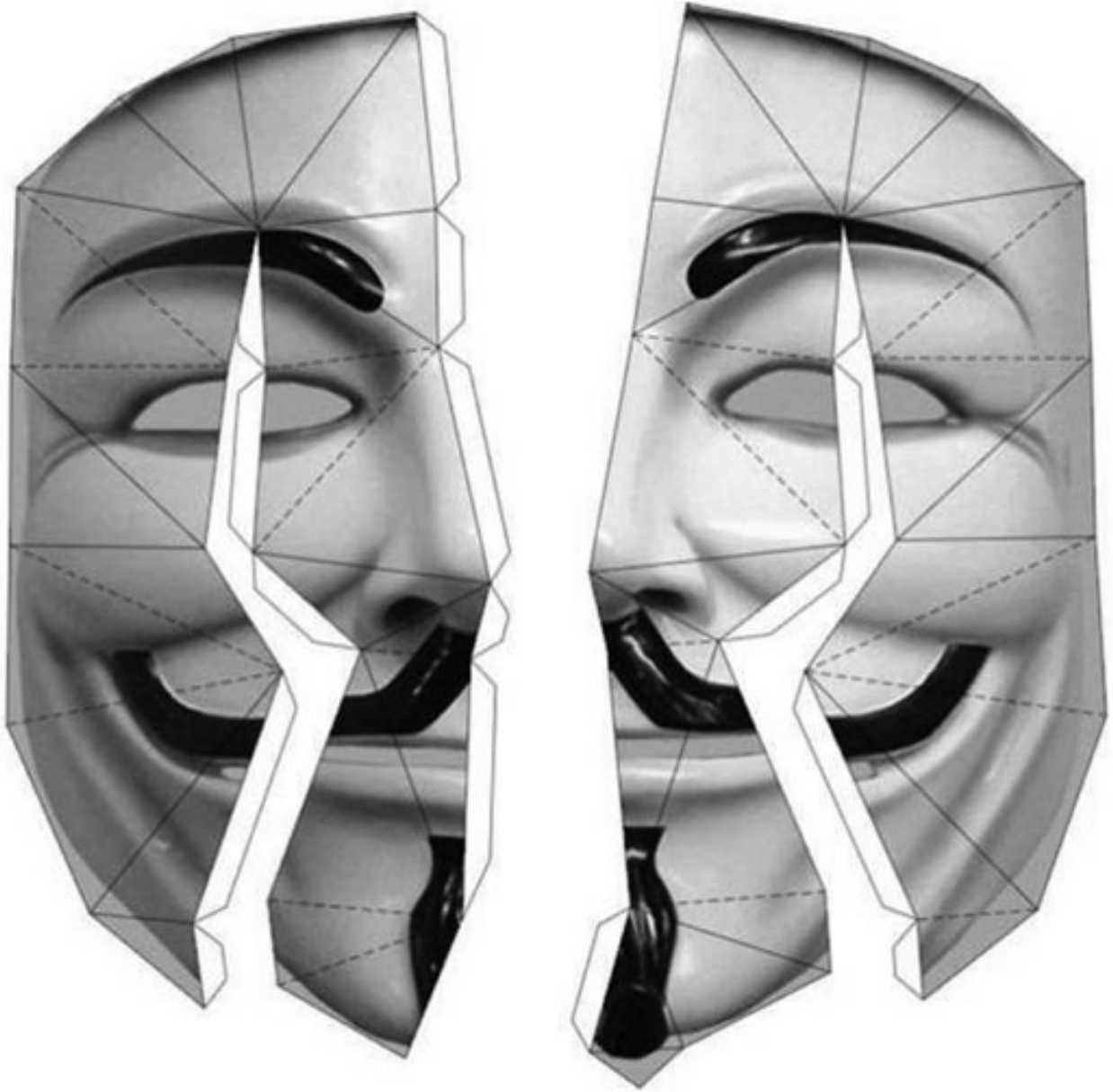
The word "freelance" derives from the medieval term for a mercenary soldier, a "free lance," that is, a soldier who is not attached to any particular master or government and can be hired for a specific task. The term was first used by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) in *Ivanhoe* to describe a "medieval mercenary warrior" or "free-lance," indicating that the lance is not sworn to any lord's services. It changed to a figurative noun around the 1860s and was recognized as a verb in 1903 by authorities in etymology such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Only in modern times has the term morphed from a noun (a freelance) into an adjective (a freelance journalist), a verb (a journalist who freelances) and an adverb (she worked freelance), as well as the noun "freelancer."⁴

While today's lance-for-hire takes on many different forms – from stone crushers, shovels, baby bottles, and machine guns to any form of digital hardware – the conditions of employment do not appear to have changed as dramatically as the lance itself. Today, that lance – at least in the case of writers – has most likely been designed by Steve Jobs. But perhaps labor conditions have changed as well – the factory now seems to be dissolving into autonomous and subcontracted microunits that produce under conditions that are not far from indentured and day labor. And this widespread, though by no means universal, reversal to historical forms of feudal labor could mean that, indeed, we are living in neo-feudal times.⁵

In Japanese cinema, there is a long tradition of portraying the figure of the itinerant freelance. This character is called the "ronin," a wandering samurai who knows no permanent master. He has lost the privileges of serving a single master and now faces a world characterized by the Hobbesian warfare of all against all. The only thing he has left are his fighting skills, which he rents out. He is a lumpen samurai, downsized, degraded, but with key skills nevertheless.

The classic freelancer film is *Akira*

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This layout for a do-it-yourself paper mask of V for Vendetta's graphic novel character Guy Fawkes has been used by protesters since 2008 in reference to the Anonymous hacker movement. A cutout mask allows users to avoid paying copyrights for the mask, now property of Warner Brothers since the film studio's adaptation of the novel.

Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), which also became popular in the West because it was adapted as a so-called spaghetti western by Italian director Sergio Leone.



The Hollywood adaptation of Akira Kurosawa's 1961 film *Yojimbo* starred Clint Eastwood. Clint Eastwood's character, originally a freelance samurai, was adapted by Sergio Leone to be a cowboy in his spaghetti western Dollar Trilogy.

A Fistful of Dollars (1964) launched both Clint Eastwood and the superwide super-close-up, usually of sweaty males staring each other down before decisive shoot-outs. But the original Japanese version is much more interesting. In its opening sequence, we are faced with a surprisingly contemporary situation. While the freelancer walks through a windswept and barren landscape, he approaches a village and meets people in different degrees of anguish and destitution. The closing shot of the introduction is of a dog who strolls past with a human hand in his mouth.

In Kurosawa's film, the country is transitioning from a production-based economy to a consumption-and speculation-based one. The village is ruled by two rival warlord-capitalists. People are giving up their manufacturing businesses to become brokers and agents. At the same time, textile production – a profession deeply associated with the creation and development of capitalism – is being outsourced to housewives. Hookers abound, as do the security personnel to whom they cater. Sex and security are valuable commodities, as are coffins, which, apart from textile production, seem to be the main industry in town. In this situation, the freelancer appears

on the scene. He manages to pit the warlords against each other and liberates the villagers.

The Mercenary

While the story of the ronin is a fitting allegory for the conditions of contemporary freelancers, the mercenary is not just an allegorical or historical figure – it is a very contemporary one. Indeed, we are living in an age in which the use of mercenary forces has made a surprising comeback, especially during the second Iraq War, which – as we may have already forgotten – started out as “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

The question of whether private security contractors can be called mercenaries under international law was hotly debated during the Iraq War. While US military contractors perhaps did not satisfy all the criteria for being called mercenaries according to the Geneva Convention, the use of about 20,000 such personnel during the occupation highlights the increasing privatization of warfare and the lack of state control over the actions of these private soldiers.

As many political scientists have noted, the privatization of warfare is a symptom of an overall weakening of the structure of the nation-state – a sign of a loss of control over military power, which undermines accountability and the rule of law. It calls into question the state's so-called monopoly on violence and undermines state sovereignty, replacing it with what has been called “subcontracted sovereignty.” We thus have two figures, which complement each other and figure prominently in the scenario of negative freedom: the freelancer in an occupational sense and the mercenary or private security contractor in the military occupational sense.

Both freelancers and mercenaries lack allegiance to traditional forms of political organization, like nation-states. They engage in free-floating loyalties that are subject to economic and military negotiation. Thus, democratic political representation becomes an empty promise, since traditional political institutions only give negative freedoms to freelancers and mercenaries: the freedom from everything, the freedom to be outlaws or, as the beautiful expression goes: free game. Free game for the market; free game for the forces of deregulation of states, and, in the last instance, also the deregulation of liberal democracy itself.

Arguably, both freelancers and mercenaries are related to the rise of what Saskia Sassen calls the “Global City.” This concept was beautifully summarized in a recent lecture by Thomas Elsaesser. He says that Global Cities are places that,

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due to a number of distinct factors, have become important nodes in the global economic system. The idea of the Global City therefore implies thinking of the world in terms of networks that come together at certain points, in cities whose reach and reference go beyond a single nation, thus suggesting transnationality or post-nationality.⁶

Global Cities thus express a new geography of power that is intrinsically linked to economic globalization and its many consequences, which have substantially transformed the role of the nation-state and its political institutions, such as representative democracy. This means that traditional modes of democratic representation are deeply in crisis. This crisis was not brought about by the interference of some culturally alien Other. It was brought about by the system of political representation itself, which has, on the one hand, undermined the power of the nation-state by rolling back economic regulations, and, on the other hand, inflated the power of the nation-state through emergency legislation and digitized surveillance. The liberal idea of representative democracy has been deeply corrupted by the unrestrained forces of both economic liberalism and nationalism.

At this point a new negative freedom emerges: the freedom not to be represented by traditional institutions, which refuse any responsibility for you but still try to control and micromanage your life, perhaps by using private military contractors or other private security services. So what is the freedom to be represented differently? How can we express a condition of complete freedom from anything, from attachment, subjectivity, property, loyalty, social bonds, and even oneself as a subject? And how could we even express it politically?

Maybe like this?

Lose the Face Now, I've Got to Live...

In 2008, the Guy Fawkes mask was appropriated by the hacker group Anonymous as its public face for a protest against Scientology. Since then it has spread as a viral visual symbol of contemporary dissent. But it is virtually unknown that this is an appropriation of the face of a mercenary.

Guy Fawkes was not only the person who got executed because he wanted to blow up the British Parliament. He was also a religious mercenary, fighting for the cause of Catholicism all over the European continent. While his historical persona is more than dubious and frankly unappealing, the reappropriation of his abstracted likeness by Anonymous shows an interesting if certainly unconscious

reinterpretation of the role of the mercenary.

But the new mercenary – who is supposedly free from everything – is no longer a subject, but an object: a mask. It is a commercial object, licensed by a big corporation and pirated accordingly. The mask first appeared in *V for Vendetta*, a film about a masked rebel named V who fights a fascist British government of the future. This explains why the mask is licensed by Time Warner, which released *V for Vendetta*. So anticorporate demonstrators who buy the official version of the mask help enrich the kind of corporation they protest against. But this also triggers counteractions:

[One] London protester said his brethren are trying to counter Warner Bros.' control of the imagery. He claims that Anonymous UK has imported 1,000 copies from China, and the distribution goes "straight into the pockets of the Anonymous beer fund rather than to Warner Brothers. Much better."⁷

This overdetermined object represents the freedom not to be represented. A disputed object of copyright provides a generic identity for people who feel they need not only anonymity to be represented, but can only be represented by objects and commodities, because, whether free lances or even mercenaries, they themselves are free-floating commodities.

But look at other uses of masks or artificial personas to see how the trope of the mercenary can be taken even further. The Russian punk band Pussy Riot used neon-colored balaclavas to conceal their faces during highly publicized appearances on Red Square in Moscow, where they told president Putin in no uncertain terms to go packing. Apart from its use value in (at least temporarily) concealing faces, the balaclava also references one of the most famous icons of good-humored militancy of recent decades: the pipe-puffing subcomandante Marcos, unofficial spokesperson for the EZLN, also known as the Zapatista movement.

And this also shows us how to flip the figure of the mercenary into the figure of the guerrilla. Indeed, historically both are intimately linked. During the second half of the twentieth century, mercenaries were unleashed on insurgent groups throughout the world, particularly in postcolonial conflicts in Africa. But paramilitary "advisors" were also deployed against guerrilla movements in Latin America during the dirty proxy wars to maintain US hegemony in the region. In some sense guerrillas and mercenaries share similar spaces, except for the fact that guerrillas usually do not get paid for their efforts. Of course it is not possible to characterize all guerrilla movements along these lines – they are much

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too diverse. While in many cases their structure is similar to that of mercenaries and paramilitary groups deployed against them, in other cases they reorganize this paradigm and reverse it by taking up negative freedom and trying to break free from dependency; from occupation in all its ambiguous meanings.

As figures of contemporary economic reality, mercenaries and free lancers are free to break free from their employers and reorganize as guerrillas – or to put it more modestly, as the gang of ronin portrayed in Kurosawa’s masterpiece *Seven Samurai* (1954). Seven free lancers team up to protect a village from bandits. In situations of complete negative freedom, even this is possible.

The Mask

And now we can come back to George Michael. In the video for “Freedom ’90,” all the elements mentioned above are vividly expressed. With its unabashed and over-the-top veneration of heteronormative celebrities, the video looks as silly now as it did when it was first released.

George Michael never appears in the video. Instead, he is represented by supercommodities and supermodels, who lip-synch his song as if they were human mics. All the insignia of his stage persona – the leather jacket, the jukebox, and the guitar – are destroyed in explosions, as if they were the British Parliament blown apart. The set looks like a foreclosed house in which even the furniture has been pawned and nothing remains but a sound system. There is nothing left. No subject, no possession, no identity, no brand, with voice and face separated from each other. Only masks, anonymity, alienation, commodification, and freedom from almost everything remain. Freedom looks like the road to heaven – but it feels like the road to hell, and it creates the necessity to change, to refuse to be this subject who is always already framed, named, and surveilled.

So here is the final good news. Only when you accept that there is no way back into the David Hasselhoff paradigm of freedom, with its glorification of self-entrepreneurship and delusions of opportunity, will the new freedom open up to you. It may be terrifying like a new dawn over a terrain of hardship and catastrophe – but it doesn’t exclude solidarity. It says clearly:

Freedom: I won’t let you down. Freedom: I will not give you up. You got to give what you take.

In our dystopia of negative freedom – in our atomized nightmares – nobody belongs to anybody (except banks). We don’t even belong to ourselves. Not even in this situation will I give

you up. Will I let you down. Have some faith in the sound. It’s the only good thing we got. Just like Kurosawa’s free lancers and mercenaries, who form bonds of mutual support in situations of Hobbesian warfare, feudalism, and warlordism, there is something we are free to do, when we are free of everything.

The new freedom: you’ve got to give for what you take.

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1
George Michael, "Freedom '90":

I won't let you down/
I will not give you up/
Gotta have some faith in the
sound/
It's the one good thing that I've
got/
I won't let you down/
So please don't give me up/
Because I would really, really
love to/
stick around, oh yeah/

Heaven knows I was just a
young boy/
Didn't know what I wanted to be/
I was every little hungry
schoolgirl's/
pride and joy/
And I guess it was enough for
me/
To win the race? A prettier face!/
Brand new clothes and a big fat
place/
On your rock and roll TV/
But today the way I play the
game is not the same/
No way/
Think I'm gonna get myself some
happy/

I think there's something you
should know/
I think it's time I told you so/
There's something deep inside of
me/
There's someone else I've got to
be/
Take back your picture in a
frame/
Take back your singing in the
rain/
I just hope you understand/
Sometimes the clothes do not
make the man/

All we have to do now/
Is take these lies and make them
true somehow/
All we have to see/
Is that I don't belong to you/
And you don't belong to me, yeah
yeah/
Freedom, freedom, freedom/
You've gotta give for what you
take/
Freedom, freedom, freedom/
You've gotta give for what you
take/

Heaven knows we sure had
some fun boy/
What a kick just a buddy and
me/
We had every big-shot good time
band/
on the run boy/
We were living in a fantasy/

We won the race, got out of
the place/
I went back home got a brand
new face/
For the boys on MTV/
But today the way I play the
game has/
got to change, oh yeah/
Now I'm gonna get myself
happy/

I think there's something you
should know/
I think it's time I stopped the
show/
There's something deep inside of
me/
There's someone I forgot to be/
Take back your picture in a
frame/

Take back your singing in the
rain/
I just hope you understand/
Sometimes the clothes do not
make the man/

Freedom, freedom, freedom/
You've gotta give for what you
take/
Freedom, freedom, freedom/
You've gotta give for what you
take

Well it looks like the road to
heaven/
But it feels like the road to hell/
When I knew which side my
bread was/
battered/
I took the knife as well/
Posing for another picture/
Everybody's got to sell/
But when you shake your ass,
they notice fast/
And some mistakes were built to
last/

That's what you get, that's
what you get/
That's what you get, I say that's
what/
you get/
I say that's what you get for
changing/
your mind/
That's what you get, that's what
you get/
And after all this time/
I just hope you understand/
Sometimes the clothes do not
make the man/

All we have to do now, is take
these lies/
And make them true somehow/
All we have to see is that I don't
belong to you/
And you don't belong to me,
yeah, yeah/

Freedom, freedom, freedom/
You've gotta give for what you
take/
Freedom, freedom, freedom/
You've gotta give for what you
take,
yeah/

May not be what you want
from me/
Just the way it's got to be/
Lose the face now/
I've got to live./

2
On the distinction
between positive and negative
freedom, see Isaiah Berlin's "Two
Concepts of Liberty" (1958).
There is also a tradition of
debate around negative
freedom as defined by Charles
Taylor, whose concept is
different than the one in this
essay.

3
See
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>, s.v. "freelance."

4
See Wikipedia, s.v. "freelancer."

5
"In as abstract sense, the
multifaceted political geography
of the feudal order resembles
today's emerging
overlapping jurisdictions of
national states, supranational

institutions, and novel private
global regimes. This is,
indeed, one of the prevalent
interpretations in globalization
scholarship." Saskia Sassen,
Territory, Authority, Rights: From
Medieval to Global
Assemblages (Princeton, NJ:
Princeton University Press,
2006), 27

6
Thomas Elsaesser,
"Walter Benjamin, Global Cities,
and 'Living with Asymmetries'"
(lecture, 3rd Athens Biennale,
December 2011).

7
Tamara Lush and Verena
Dobnik, "'Vendetta' mask
becomes symbol of Occupy
protests," November 4,
2011, Associated Press.

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