Freedom Cut Me Loose: The Contradictory Nature of "Freedom" in Trump and Harris' Presidential Campaigns

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On August 21, 2024, the Donald Trump campaign posted a video that utilized Beyoncé's song "Freedom," which, at the time, was the anthem for Kamala Harris' campaign. The Trump campaign was forced to take the video down shortly after Beyoncé blocked him from using the song (Beaumont-Thomas 2024). Although this episode can be viewed as just another example in a long list of artists who have taken issue with the Trump campaign appropriating their music, I argue that this incident is actually indicative of a much greater rift between Trump and Harris' campaign messages and their views for the country. Specifically, Trump and Harris' notions of "freedom" are drastically different. In this essay, I apply the philosophical conceptions of freedom in the work of Karl Marx (1848) and Michel Foucault (1975) to Trump and Harris' campaign agendas on reproductive rights and immigration. I argue that, in accordance with these conceptions, both Trump and Harris have failed to provide the necessary circumstances to achieve freedom. In fact, their policy prescriptions and justifications regarding these issues are precisely what render us largely unfree.

Trump has heavily relied on the Republican Party's long-standing identification as the "Party of Freedom" to garner appeal from his constituents and advance his political career. His State of the Union Address in 2017 is reminiscent of this motive as he dedicated the opening portion of his speech to praising Americans for upholding what is actually a more liberal ideal of freedom. Celebrating our country's devotion to allowing citizens to exercise autonomy and create their own destinies, Trump reiterated "As long as we have faith in our citizens…we will never fail. Our families will thrive, our people will prosper, and our nation will forever be safe and strong and proud and mighty and free" (CNBC 2018). Fast forward seven years to his 2024 campaign, Trump's alignment with Christian-affiliated organizations has profoundly influenced his conception of freedom. Containing significant religious undertones, his new approach reflects the desire to make freedom exclusive for certain demographics at the expense of others.

Harris, on the other hand, has utilized a conception of freedom that seemingly prioritizes the interest of the ordinary individual. Advocating for the self-determination of everybody, with a particular nod to marginalized groups, Harris has framed her conception of freedom as the only viable solution to maintaining our civil liberties. Moreover, she has often put her conception in direct opposition to Trump's to demonstrate this point. By constructing a narrative that portrays the plunge of America into utter turmoil under a second Trump Administration, Harris has inflated the importance of her conception of freedom to convince the country that there is no suitable alternative. Unfortunately, Harris's presentation of herself as the more appealing option compared to Trump frames her campaign only in terms of comparison and thus has failed to distinguish herself as authentic in the eyes of many voters.

Karl Marx (1848) and Michel Foucault (1975) provide additional nuance into how each candidate restricts freedom. Marx (1848) is famous for his critique of capitalism and how material forces determine every aspect of our lives. An economic determinist, Marx (1848) believed that capitalism is not only the driving force of society but of inequality and class struggle as it divides individuals into two distinct groups; the bourgeoisie, or those who own the means of production, and the proletariat, or those who sell themselves for labor. The act of production is critical to understanding Marx's (1848) conception of freedom. Specifically, it is through the act of production that we acquire our humanity (species-being) and consciousness in which freedom is so deeply rooted. Consciousness, as described by Marx (1848), is an internal capacity that enables humans to reflect upon, deliberate, and direct change as needed (Foucault 1975). The ability to choose alternative courses of action is the essence of freedom and gives way to autonomy and individuality.

Foucault's (1975) conception of freedom focuses on the production of knowledge and power. Power, similar to capitalism, is not an entity possessed by any individual or group, but rather a capacity of domination exercised across multiple fields. It is the ability to reform the body and mind at the individual level as well as societal level in order to produce particular kinds of compliant beings, or docile bodies (Foucault 1975). In other words, it is the specific form that power takes or the way it is utilized that renders us either free or unfree. Moreover, asymmetrical relationships of power limit our freedom by influencing the choices we make through control of perception. Power is inextricably linked with knowledge in that knowledge is an avenue through

which power is exercised (Foucault 1975). Power produces knowledge and maintains asymmetrical relationships.

Although slightly outdated, I contend that the philosophical conceptions of freedom provided by Marx (1848) and Foucault (1975) are not only relevant but essential to analyzing Trump and Harris' presidential campaigns. Two issues in particular are important to examine from the perspective of freedom: reproductive rights and immigration. Each of these concerns receives drastically different treatment from Trump and Harris but the justifications for their policy prescriptions are framed around freedom, which Marx (1848) and Foucault (1975) approach from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective of freedom aligns more closely with the liberal view that freedom is the absence of interference with what people wish to do; it is freedom from oppression and exploitation. This can be described as negative freedom. Marx and Foucault also have a more positive conception of freedom, where freedom is about the fulfillment of human potential and reconciliation with our humanity (species-being) within the parameters of a particular set of constraints. In analyzing each candidate's response to reproductive rights and immigration, it is evident that Trump generally approaches these issues in a negative sense (e.g. freedom from) whereas Harris approaches these issues in a positive sense (e.g. freedom to). I argue that both Trump and Harris' approaches, while purporting to offer freedom, actually fail to deliver meaningful freedom. Instead, both candidates utilize policy prescriptions and justifications that actually foster the malicious exercise of power and domination and render us unfree.

Trump has championed himself as the "protector" of women in America all the while facilitating the decimation of women's rights over their bodies, lives, and futures. Having devoted much of his campaign to commemorating the actions of the Supreme Court in the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, Trump has proudly celebrated his role in the return of women to second-class citizens. In fact, he has insisted that it is better this way. By presenting the post-Roe era as one more suitable for "women [to] be happy, healthy, confident, and free," Trump is naturalizing the notion that feminism and bodily autonomy have been counterproductive, and that the stripping of reproductive rights is actually a sign of progress (Barron-Lopez 2024). Thus the regulation and restriction of reproductive health care is a solution to relieving women of the burdens modern-day society has brought by offering an "appealing" predetermined social, biological, and sexual order (Dworkin 1983).

This predetermined order is reflective of Foucault's (1975) notion of how internalized power structures maliciously operate against the interest of the beholder. Power operates through the regulation of individual bodies to create conformity to appropriate social roles. It is not only exercised over us by institutions but comes to be something we exercise over ourselves and are conditioned to want. What we are witnessing with the increase in abortion bans and pro-life ideology is the work of a much broader cultural campaign headed by anti-abortion and conservative Christian extremists to fully eliminate abortion and the civil liberties it entails. They are accomplishing this by separating abortion from its medical and cultural understandings. Changing the language around abortion by emphasizing nonmedical terms like “maternal-fetal separation procedure” instead of “abortion,” or redefining what constitutes a “late abortion” to make it appear more cruel and horrific than it is, represents their effort to divorce abortion from healthcare and justify abortions as never being medically necessary (Valenti 2024). On a cultural level, anti-abortion and conservative Christian extremists have over-relied on grouping abortion with feminism and women’s liberation in order to demonize them all in the process of getting abortion criminalized. The omnipresence of these negative rhetorics around abortion is intended to condition women to accept that they can only achieve true fulfillment through adherence to traditional gender norms and binaries. However, embedded within these norms and binaries are idealized expectations that dehumanize women, furthering them from their species-being according to Marx (1848) and reinforcing asymmetrical relations of power along the lines of gender, as Foucault (1975) warned. Through enforcing expectations of women as perfect, compliant wives and mothers, the diminishment of women through self-sacrifice is valorized, portraying a true American woman as one who would sacrifice her time, money, and even her own life to a fetus. In this sense, no woman can be sure that their humanity is counted and considered free when they are made to view their lives as inherently dispensable.

By promoting abortion as strictly a matter of the state, Trump has ensured that a woman's worth will be determined by where they geographically reside in the U.S. Whether they are perceived as competent enough to make decisions regarding their own health and well-being, as having more constitutional rights than an unborn fetus, and as deserving of the recognition of being a fully fledged citizen rather than a vessel to facilitate the development of *real* humans, entirely depends on what zip code they live in. And this is all by careful design.

By the end of his first administration, Trump had appointed 28% of all active federal judges and one-third of the Supreme Court, effectively stocking the court system with right-wing, conservative judges who would deny most women's right to choose if and when to be pregnant (Vox 2024). In 2017, he backed a bill that would have banned abortion after 20 weeks of pregnancy, with exceptions for rape, incest, and the mother's life. However, the exceptions were crafted to be virtually impossible to use but on paper allow him and conservative legislators to feign reasonableness and compassion for women's lives (Lee 2024). Finally, he launched a somewhat quiet crusade against birth control as well as other forms of contraception by imposing heavy restrictions on the Title X Program and Planned Parenthood, setting the standard for the erosion of women's long-standing reproductive rights (ACLU 2024). The return to so-called "family values" through the decimation of women's humanity not only violates freedom according to Marx (1848) and Foucault (1975), but the fundamental principles of freedom on which this country was supposedly founded. And yet, we voted for it again.

In the wake of Trump and his malicious endorsement of "family values," Harris has cast herself as women's "liberator" and made championing reproductive healthcare a centerpiece of her 2024 campaign. Utilizing her understanding of the salience of the *Dobbs* decision, Harris has devoted much of her campaign to reiterating that an attack on women's reproductive freedom is an attack on democracy itself. While this may be true, her strategy in framing the discussion on reproductive rights around the reclamation of freedom from the dominating presence of Trump's government is deeply problematic. Marx's (1848) notion of bodily autonomy is particularly useful for understanding why. According to Marx (1848), bodily autonomy is a necessary condition of freedom but is perpetually constrained as various forms of domination are exercised over us (Marx 1848). Under a specific set of circumstances, we are oblivious to the operation of inherently unequal social relations that ultimately obscure how we have lost autonomy, and are, therefore, unfree. This notion directly applies to Harris. Throughout her campaign, she fiercely criticized the degree to which federal and state power has seized control of women's bodies through undue legal constraints. But in doing so, she actively concealed how her own proposed policy prescriptions would fall short in securing the essential freedoms and protections she so passionately guaranteed to restore.

Harris has been incredibly outspoken about her belief that the government should have no involvement in regulating women's bodies. However, she has neglected to mention how her biggest initiative would do just that: maintain government interference in women's most intimate healthcare decisions. If elected, she promised to reinstate *Roe v. Wade* by eliminating the filibuster so that the bill could be passed with a simple majority (Beard et al. 2024). There are two main problems with this plan: The first is that she drastically overestimates her ability to achieve meaningful legislative action during those four years as president. The likeliness of passing legislation codifying abortion rights is slim given the Republican majority in both chambers of Congress. The second, more pressing concern is that Harris' overreliance on restoring the status quo is ill-conceived as abortion services under *Roe* were inaccessible for far too many. Women of color and marginalized communities suffered especially under *Roe* (Valenti 2024). Not to mention, the original 1973 decision only protected abortion up until the time of fetal viability or about 22-23 weeks, barring another demographic of women from accessing abortion services for personal or medical reasons (Barron-Lopez 2024). In this sense, it would be impossible for Harris to provide the external conditions necessary for *all* women to exercise autonomy throughout their pregnancy and achieve true freedom.

Trump and Harris' approaches to reproductive rights are not only flawed but indicative of how interest-based power maliciously operates closer to the ground. The persuasive yet dominating influence of, in this case, political power invades our lives, inhabits our daily practices through a constant process of negotiation, and operates as its own autonomous power that cultivates the illusion of freedom, all the while rendering us a product and perpetrator of domination (Marx 1848; Foucault 1975). Trump and Harris' arguments around immigration are another place where this notion is prominent.

By intensifying the inflammatory rhetoric that defined his first term, Trump has proudly whitewashed what it means to be a citizen and legitimized the endurance of racism in America. The xenophobic policies that served as the foundation of his campaign represent the desire to preserve the white homogeneity of America and demonize the diversification of our country. They are also symbolic of a much sinister end goal: the preservation of a strict racial hierarchy. Foucault (1975) and his notion of the production of knowledge are key to understanding how Trump plans to accomplish this racial hierarchy. Power, as previously noted, dictates the

terms of knowledge. What is known and how it is known is constructed by power through knowledge and utilized to construct specific perceptions of reality. These distortions of reality then permeate our lives, and we become subjects of it (Foucault 1975). Through his continuous pleas to end birthright citizenship, remilitarize our southern borders, and conduct mass deportations, Trump has been able to scale the issue of immigration into a full-blown moral panic. The heinous knowledge he began that portrays immigrants as criminals, mental patients, and animals, along with other degrading labels, is intended to sustain this panic and bolster public fear. By framing immigrants as an imminent threat to the welfare and stability of America, Trump has fueled anxieties surrounding race and converted the perception of immigrants as sub-human into a much more digestible narrative. This then broadens the appeal of maintaining strict racial and ethnic boundaries as well as justifies the legitimate use of physical force over the "other."

The preservation of the so-called "purity" of our country is nothing more than a lame excuse to justify racism and sanitize the abhorrent nature of Trump's policy prescriptions. Executive Order 13769 and the Zero Tolerance Immigration Enforcement Policy from his first term are two prime examples. These policies required the temporary suspension of entry into the U.S. from seven Muslim-majority countries and the immediate prosecution of undocumented immigrants crossing into the U.S. respectively (Liptak and Shear 2018). The Zero Tolerance Policy also oversaw the forced separation of thousands of undocumented immigrants from their children (Burnett 2019). Most recently, Trump has been testing the limits of his regained executive power by expanding ICE's authority to arrest and detain suspected undocumented immigrants in "sensitive" locations such as schools, hospitals, and churches. He has also severely restricted the right to seek asylum (Yousif 2025). The xenophobic and racist logics embedded within these policies are upsetting in of themselves but become even more disturbing when considering our own complicity in the deprivation of human recognition.

Overall, Trump has made an art form out of stripping away the humanity of immigrants. By convincing Americans that immigrants entering from the southern border are a threat to white America, to white sovereignty, he has been able to reaffirm a sense of racial superiority along with guarantee that those with greater access to power and resources (white skin and a native English tongue) are granted the privilege of being seen as automatically "belonging" in this country and having their humanity recognized. Meanwhile,

people of color regardless of their citizenship status are left with having to convince their peers, as well as the government, that they too are worthy of being recognized not just as American citizens, but human.

Unlike Trump and his emotionally charged approach to immigration, Harris, in many ways, has been an enigma. Criticized by voters and political opponents alike for her inability to communicate a clear stance, Harris' evolution into a more moderate position is representative of the gradual breakdown of resistance against dominating power structures. Her shift towards emphasizing both law enforcement and pathways to citizenship, blending a firm stance on border security with humanitarian reforms, demonstrates the diminished capacity we possess in actually pushing back against unequal power relations as they exert increasingly more control over our lives (Foucault 1975). One of the best examples of this occurred just last year. If you look at the 2024 Democratic Party Platform, the phrase "secure our borders" appears at least ten times. This is a major change from 2020 when the phrase did not appear even once (Wall Street Journal 2024). The shift in Harris as well as the Democratic Party's overall position is indicative of the way we are *all* ultimately forced to participate and comply in the process of domination when faced with the correct set of constraints. In this case: the immense polarization between political parties and Americans more broadly on what to do about the border.

Bound by these constraints and Trump's ridicule, Harris was somewhat successful in handling the immigration "crisis" during her vice presidency. Through several initiatives, she was able to address the root causes and reduce illegal immigration to a degree. One such initiative was the Los Angeles Declaration of Migration and Protection. This action consisted of countries such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Costa Rica building metaphorical walls for the U.S. by extending legal status to millions of migrants, significantly reducing the overall amount that came into the U.S. (The New York Times 2024). Closer to home, Harris utilized small-scale executive action to transform the asylum system and impose tighter restrictions on how, when, and which migrants qualify for asylum. This proved to effectively reduce illegal immigration beginning in June of 2024 (The New York Times 2024). Finally, Harris created and secured legal pathways into the U.S. through the Immigration Parole Program. This initiative granted temporary access into the U.S. from several countries with particularly high influxes of migration, serving as a deterrent to migrants looking to cross the border illegally (The New York Times 2024).

Nevertheless, Harris' approach to immigration during the 2024 election cycle left much to be desired. Her failure to establish an authentic and confident position on border security weakened her overall stance on the issue. Not to mention, it only reaffirmed the perception of her as part of the status quo. As much as Harris preached freedom and meaningful reform, she was still bound to operate within the constraints of the Democratic party, thus rendering her immigration policy nothing more than a continuation of previous administrations, and ultimately, uninspiring.

In contemplating Trump and Harris' campaigns from the perspective of freedom one last time, the only words that come to mind are from none other than Queen Bey herself: "Freedom, freedom, I can't move…Freedom, freedom, where are you?" (Knowles-Carter 2016). Although a bit corny, I believe Beyonce has perfectly captured the true essence of freedom in present-day America. Freedom is the illusion of being empowered to experience life as one sees fit while simultaneously being constrained by various forces of power that render the very notion obsolete (Marx 1848; Foucault 1975). Trump and Harris in their policy prescriptions and justifications regarding reproductive rights and immigration are no exception to this process. Each candidate promotes a presidential agenda that seemingly promises freedom all the while denying the very right to the majority of current and prospective Americans. By relying on existing, exploitative power structures to enact flawed policies that would only continue to reproduce, if not intensify, asymmetrical relations of power, neither Trump or Harris can be expected to meaningfully offer freedom in the way that every human being in this country deserves. For this reason, I cannot stand in good faith behind either candidate and their promise of freedom, if we can even call it that.

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