Abstract

When facing the total destruction of the “world of the living” or the “web of life”, and therefore the “nature of nature” and the “nature of culture” itself, what space is there for normative resistance in postmodern cultural conditions? This question rooted in Freitag’s “oeuvre” is key in addressing the symbolic dimensions of the ecological crisis in the postmodern paradigm; both in the development of the crisis and the resistance to globalized neoliberal capitalism. The answer to this question can hardly be negative, since there can be nothing out of some form of “regulation” in the broad sense, may it take the shape of modern scientific “laws” which demonstrate “universal regularities” of observable phenomena, or of normativity and norms which are anchored in the autodetermination of synthetic subjects but which can be reproduced transformed by them (Freitag in Duclos, 2006: 98-99). Thus, this freitagien perspective will be in on two very important interrelated elements. The first being the ideological context, the said space in which the normative discourse and praxis of resistance can take place and the second being the substance and orientation of this normativity: both its overt and hidden telos for lack of a better word.

Introduction

When facing the total destruction of the “world of the living” or the “web of life”, and therefore the “nature of nature” and the “nature of culture” itself, what space is left for normative resistance in postmodern cultural conditions? This question is rooted in Michel Freitag’s “oeuvre” and is key to addressing the symbolic dimensions of the ecological crisis in the postmodern paradigm, both in the development of the crisis and in the resistance to globalized neoliberal capitalism. The answer to this question can hardly be negative, since nothing can exist outside some form of regulation in the broad
sense of the word, be it modern scientific “laws” which demonstrate “universal regularities” of observable phenomena, or normativity and norms which are anchored in the autodetermination of synthetic subjects but which can be reproduced after being transformed by them (Freitag in Duclos, 2006: 98-99). Thus, this brief and “bird’s eye view” freitagian exploration of the world-ecology perspective will hone in on two very important interrelated elements, the first being the ideological context, the said space in which the normative discourse and praxis of resistance as a socio-ecological project can exist and the second being the substance and orientation of this normativity – both its overt and hidden telos for lack of a better word.

In the first part of my presentation I will address Freitag’s concept of the symbolic dimension of human action, anchored in a concept of the individual subject as a synthetic and reflexive entity. In the second part, I will do a brief exposé of Freitag’s sociological and philosophical analysis of the modes of ideological-normative reproduction and regulation of the social order to help us understand the importance given by Freitag to the concept of Society (with a capital-s) in the production and reproduction of the ideological-normative landscape. In the third part, I will focus on the modern roots of the postmodern crisis which emanate from the ideological-normative core of Liberalism. In the fourth section of my presentation I will address the question of neoliberal capitalism and the reduction of the symbolic dimension of human action to a systemic auto-referential process “without subjects or ends”.

1. Michel Freitag’s concept of the symbolic dimension of human action

The second and augmented edition of Michel Freitag’s Introduction générale à une théorie du symbolique (Introduction to a General Theory of the Symbolic) (Freitag, 2011a) starts with a short definition of what the author considers as “le symbolique” or “the symbolic”. He states that what he call in this book the symbolic refers to the whole ontological domain of representation by ideas or concepts and specifically human life (Freitag, 2011a: 13). Not being only an aspect of, but the human condition itself, the symbolic dimension of human action therefore plays the central role in the reproduction of a socio-cultural and political order, as the dimension through which meaning is given and constructed. Thus, for Freitag the making of meaning is inscribed in the dialectics of the symbolic mediation between actions, norms and meaning in Society. In this sense, and this is an element raised by many of the author’s students and colleagues (Singer, 2002; Côté & Dagenais, 2002; Bonny, 2002; Filion, 2006, Dagenais & Gagné, 2014), the individual, society, culture and nature are bound in intricate dialectical relationships which are neither a priori determined nor undetermined, and which are bound to socio-historical development and are ultimately an ongoing normative “project”. Hence, we can state that because of this intricate and “holistic” aspect of the symbolic dimension, it consequently encompasses the reproduction of an “ecological” order, and thus vital to the world-ecological analysis.

For Freitag, nature and culture, or society are not inscribed in “cartesian duality”\(^2\). Although he addresses both categories neither in the same manner nor as the same reality, the author still characterises the two as being dialectically linked dimensions of the “monde du vivant” or “world of the living” (Freitag, 2008). Thus, the concept of Culture and cultures cannot come into being out of the necessary category of the “living”; in other words, the physiological constitution of human beings as

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1 Translation mine.

2 See Jason Moore (2011a, 2011b) for an in-depth account of the theoretical effect of the Cartesian binary on the studies of capitalism and ecology.
sentient beings is the most necessary condition for society. It is in this particular context that, through sensory-motor, symbolic and formal-operational mediations, humans can construct cultural and symbolic orders. Reality as a totality is then conferred meaning through multiple symbolic prisms or lenses.

One could easily interpret Freitag’s thought as an anthropocentric one, which would not be a completely false interpretation. However, this position, with all its ethical implications, comes from specific epistemological and normative choices. First, the current ecological crisis is caused by humans and capitalism, therefore by the Anthropos itself and its creation. Freitag would reject attempts to take capitalism as a-historical, or out-of-society; he thus integrates it into the realm of human action. Second, Freitag is very critical of biocentric and anthropocentric approaches (Freitag, 2002a, 2002b, 2006, 2008; Lafontaine, 2004) to the ecological crisis because they are generally submitted to the “cybernetic paradigm” (Weiner, 1954 in Lafontaine, 2004) or system-centered (Luhman, 2012) analyses. These analyses become normative dead-ends by reducing “human action” to “the agency of the actor”, and by separating the “actors” from the systems. Furthermore, they separate the said systems from the socio-political and normative dimension of responsibility. Finally these analyses separate the human reality from extra-human nature, and thus by expulsing the human from the biosphere, they tend either to normatively put the latter over the former, or relativize the place of human activity in the world of the living which creates new modes of “belief” which could justify authoritative modes of societal regulation by legitimizing eco-technocratic as seen in The Imperative of Responsibility of Hans Jonas (1985), and other radical conservationist measures, found in authors such as Holmes Rolston III (Siurua, 2006) and proponents of deep ecology (Pepper, 1993; Lafontaine, 2004).

Consequently, the “world of the living” does not appear to itself by itself, but through a specific symbolic order (Freitag, 2008: 392) through which it is given meaning. Since this symbolic order is fundamentally linked to the ideological and normative social conditions, it therefore skews, and orients the individual’s and society’s said relation to the world. This pushes the need to look at the specific social and societal contexts in which these conditions take shape and are reproduced.

2 The socio-historical mutation of the ideological-normative landscape

In his work, Freitag’s analysis of sociohistorical transformation was not one of capitalism per se. His main focus was the relationship between the cultural, symbolic and political orders in which the ideological-normative fabric of society was produced and reproduced. Following the sociological tradition of “ideal-types”, Michel Freitag developed a general theory of society in which he identifies three general types of western societies: the pre-modern or cultural-symbolic society, the modern or political-institutional society, and the postmodern or operational-decisional society. In a perspective of the “longue durée”, society changes through, and is marked by, mutations and transitions which relate to the legitimization of its ideological-normative order. For example, the transition from pre-modern to modern society was one of gradual and radical scissions in the mode of reproduction 3

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3 On this subject, Freitag has also developed a position on the rupture and continuity between humans and animals which was influenced by zoologist Adolf Portmann. For further discussions on the subject see Freitag (2002c; Freitag in Duclos, 2006) and the article « La société informatique et le respect des formes » in Freitag (1998a).
through a cultural-symbolic one characterised\(^4\) by the inherent legitimacy of tradition (Freitag, 1989, 1998, 1999, 2002). In traditional societies, authority imposes norms on social relations as part of a “jurisdictional deduction based on the privileges and power, or capacity to act, conducive to different social groups, and which manifest themselves together in the necessary order of society” (Gagné, 1991: 28). Authority therefore acquires its legitimacy in respecting this order. Therefore, the process of institutionalization the authority goes through is always linked to the preservation of tradition and to the processes of reconstructing harmony through social change (Freitag, 1989; Gagné 1992).

It is again through a long-term process that, this “first” mode lost its legitimacy considering its inherent conflict with the process of individualism and the abstraction of the source of the ideological-normative fabric of society, or what Freitag calls the process of “radical transcendentalization of the subject”. Indeed, the “embedded” sense-making dimension of everyday practices went through a process of abstraction and became dissociated from the embedded and lived community and thus was reoriented towards an overarching “source” of normativity (1989, 1999). Through this process, the ideological-normative dimension came less from the ecological relation between the community and the living world, from its traditions or cultures, than from an otherworldly authority.

Metaphorically, this could be the transformation from the pre-modern anthropological conceptualization of the “being-of-this-world”, in which humans and thus society emanates from the world of the living, to the monotheistic “being-in-the-world”, wherein humans are “put” in the empirical world of the living or the “down here” but do not belong to it, belonging instead to “the beyond” (Freitag in Duclos, 2006: 102). The process of abstraction will take its most notable turn in the political-institutional mode which is characterized by the replacement of tradition with transcendental Reason, as the means of legitimizing the normative fabric of a society, in which a deliberative institutional space shaped by relations of domination, in Weberian terms, “democratizes” the reproduction of the said society. This movement of abstraction is dialectically linked to the production of the concept of the individual and its emancipation from the socio-ecological conditions of the world and the production of transcendental Reason (Freitag, 1998).

However, this abstraction also took place in a specific context: the development of primitive forms of accumulation of capital (Harvey, 2003, 2005) growingly in opposition with the cultural-symbolic regulation, thus fueling the emancipation away from traditional and cultural normativity. In this sense, one could see capitalism as a mode of production born out of which was initially a process autonomy, and tends to further this autonomy, by breaking away from cultural or political regulation (Freitag, 1998, 2002, 2008). In Freitagian terms, throughout the political-institutional mode of social reproduction of modernity, capitalism was in constant opposition with socio-ecologically embedded regulation and thus its own embedding into a normative framework. Consequently, it seems important to state that Michel Freitag often refers to the distinction between \textit{oikonomia} (economics) and \textit{chrematistics} (Freitag, 2002, 2006, 2008) and therefore adheres largely to Aristotle’s depiction of the pre-modern socio-culturally regulated \textit{oikonomia} and to his critique of chrematistics which was associated to the “\textit{metaikos}”, the meta-\textit{aikos}, or the one who is out of the culturally-embedded regulation of the City, therefore not regulated by the norms of the city, i.e. the outsider.

\(^4\)It should be noted that this ideal type is exposed here in its most generalized concept. This mode spans a long period of time and is consequently comprised of many different empirical and sociopolitical iterations. A more in-depth assessment of the process of “longue durée” can be found in Freitag (1989).

\(^5\)Translation mine.
Throughout the development of his theory of society, Freitag focus largely on capitalism, without finding fault with it. One could argue then that his critique of capitalism is a critique of the reproduction of the capitalistic order of society which takes place in the modes of social and societal reproduction. In fact, the author sees mainly Liberalism as the fundamental normative milestone of the reproduction of the capitalistic society. It is through the concept of “natural individual rights”, based in Reason and taken as a new ideological-normative foundation external to a collective or culturally-related concept of tradition, that the double normative core of modernity and Liberal modernity will be crucial to understand the symbolic dimension of postmodern neoliberal capitalism.

3 The modern roots of the postmodern crisis and the ideological-normative core of Liberalism

Consequently, the current postmodern cultural conditions and the “crisis of the symbolic” to which they are associated in Freitag’s work are the result of socio-ecological mutations which have affected the political-institutional mode of societal reproduction associated to modernity. These mutations were already in “potentiality” in the two socio-cultural conditions forming the basis upon which practical, or ethical and normative, reason could flourish in Liberal modernity. I am referring to the production of the double ideological-normative core of modernity crystallized through Liberalism: the negative ontological principle of individual liberty and the positive principle of the natural inclination towards passions⁶.

The first principle legitimized the emancipation and liberation from tradition. In this sense, the concept of the freedom of individuals is, in its own logic, incompatible with any kind of absolutism coming from an illegitimate source (Freitag, 1998 in Samson, 2015: 7). The second principle made it possible to establish a positive social order based on the acceptance of certain realities which could be deemed “common” and to raise a transcendental political “Reason” to be raised above particular “reasons” through institutionalization. Therefore it allowed a socio-political entity, which would be “Society” (with a capital-s) as a conceptual category, or a civilization, to strive for a particular social or common good. The latter principle can therefore be seen as a safeguard from the excesses of the former, by being the very foundation of the political, reflexive and deliberative space in which to debate the question of the common good.

However, Freitag insists on the fact that these two distinctively “modern” philosophical principles have been woven into capitalism rather quickly if not from the start, highlighting the difficulty to determine exactly where the difference between “liberalism” and “liberal capitalism” (Freitag, 2008). However, it is clear that this particular socio-historical development cannot be considered apart from the hegemonic position of the Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment, characterised by empiricism as epistemology, utilitarianism as ethics and pragmatism as political action, in the construction of the ideological and normative fabric of the western world’s capitalistic social imaginary (Freitag, 1998: 214).

Therefore capitalism emanates both ideologically and normatively from the symbolic interrelation between individuals, society and the world of through a “movement” of liberation from political-cultural constraints to both individuals and the general realm of human action. In this sense, Freitag asserts how “capitalism was consequentially born from the radical liberation of modern

individualism with regards to freedom and reason; and its development therefore coincides with the
reduction of the Enlightenment’s transcendental Reason to utility, and from utility to profit.” (Freitag,
2008: 12)\(^7\). The author again refers to this aspect as the distinction between the normative dimensions
of the socio-culturally, if not ecologically-embedded \textit{oikonomia} and the systemic pragmatic
chrematistics. Although one can easily see the normative and very “Polanyi-like” distinction between
embedded and disembedded modes of regulation, it should be noted that the disembedded or
autonomous mode of regulation is also inscribed in a particular normative framework, and is therefore
not a-normative. In other words there is nothing out of the normative, in the realm of human action.

4 Neoliberal capitalism and the reduction of the symbolic dimension of human action to a systemic
auto-referential process “without subjects or ends”

At the core of Michel Freitag’s critique of postmodernity we find the dialectical relationship
between the capitalist mode of production, the principle of negative liberty and the natural inclination
towards passions which has produced and reproduce the legitimacy of the societal order through a
process of fragmentation and dissolution of society as a concrete and synthetic totality (Freitag, 1998a,
2002a). In \textit{l’Abîme de la liberté} (Freitag, 2011c), which could be translated as the “the abyss of freedom”,
a posthumous book, Freitag hones in on the contemporary socio-ecological condition of individual
freedom through its complex evolution in both liberal and neoliberal empirical, utilitarian and
pragmatic paradigm.

The birth of modern empirical social sciences became the theoretical, conceptual and
pedagogical space which could contribute to the political legitimization of social order. However, these
social sciences took root in the ideological-normative domination of the Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment
in which empirical, utilitarian and pragmatism shaped the very conditions in which the symbolic, or
meaning-making dimension, was confined to individual spirituality and religions on the one hand, and
which reduced questions of meaning and the common good to cost-benefit calculations. In fact, this
is the starting point for both the principle of negative liberty and the natural inclination towards
passions becoming the contemporary norm. In this sense, modern economic liberalism was aimed at
liberating individuals from the weight of irrational norms and despotic configuration of power and
authority, which was the basis of the idea of Progress (Freitag, 2006; Freitag, 2008: 23). But at the
same time, this very concept of “Progress” was being laid against the nominalist position of positive
sciences which put in questionned the idea of a “transcendental” or “universal” progress and restricted
the idea of “truth” and knowledge to pure empiricism, and also the ideological-normative structure of
capitalism in which the idea of progress had been transformed into that of development (Freitag, 1998,

In the neoliberal age, development as the generally accepted form of progress and freedom
appear related very differently than during modernity. Through the radical process of “freedom from”
socio-ecological normativity resulting from negative liberty and the natural inclination towards
passions, neoliberal capitalism produces a concept of freedom very different from the one of its modern
iteration. It transforms the subject of freedom itself and anchors it in a different sphere of normativity.
Hence, the ideological-normative and expressive substance of the individual’s inherent freedom, as a
“fundamental human right” or an emancipatory political end, is semantically transformed, into a dual
concept of freedom. As suggested by Alain Bihr (2007: 133), neoliberal capitalism, on the one hand,

\(^7\) Translation mine.
promotes the conceptualization of individual freedom that completely negates the very concept of a “collective freedom”, thus creating what one could call radical individualism, and on the other, reorients the very subject of freedom, from the “human-as-individual” to the “organisation-as-individual”.

Freitag also argues that the neoliberal metaphysical doctrine of the “freedom of the individual” takes shape in a context in which the totality of life is dominated by corporations and organisations, reducing the ideal of the individual to a trivial marketing ploy in order to shape and justify the systemic auto-referential logic of capital (Freitag, 2008: 23). Hence, the need to outline the fact that both “ideas of freedom” demand different sphere of normativity. The first could be framed normatively in the fundamental moral and political concept of emancipation, and the second in the “apolitical” and auto-regulated processes of the market laws. According to neoliberalism, the normative dimension of the market is naturalized as market rules and as being an empirical fact, as scientific and, as mentioned at the beginning, as demonstrating “universal regularities” of observable phenomena. The concept of freedom becomes a “rule” devoid of any basis in the individual’s subjective dimension. Thus the concept of neoliberal freedom is a freedom for “freedom’s sake” (Freitag, 199a, 2006, 2008: 22-23; Freitag in Duclos, 2006: 116) and is conceptualized as being a cardinal principle of a systemic environment separated from the very socio-ecological conditions in which human activity emerges and takes shape.8

Conclusion

Neoliberal ideology has shaped the normative landscape in a way that both the political “right” and “left” have become two sides of the same coin. It is completely integrated into the operational-decisional and systemic mode of societal reproduction, meaning that the political-institutional mode present in modernity, while still present has gone through a substantial transformation on the basis of its normative grounds. Though being ever-present and dominant, the “action” of the State has been fully integrated in hegemonic neoliberal ideologico-normative structures. With the dissolution of the welfare or social State, we can see the definite political consecration of the already hegemonic position of neoliberalism in the field of economics, of scientific research, social rights, all levels of education from, kindergarten to university which strengthen the systemic end of “adaptation” to the development and expansion of capitalism. Furthermore, this ideological, normative, political and social “dialectic” strengthens the reproduction of the idea that the symbolic dimension of human activity is reduced to information and communication, and that the fundamental socio-ecological anchoring of human action is therefore reduced to producing and reproducing the neoliberal status quo and adapting to its ever-changing and growing need to push back the socio-ecological normative limits of the auto-referential regulation of systemic global capitalism (Freitag, 2002, 2008).

When facing the total destruction of the “world of the living” or the “web of life”, and therefore the “nature of nature” and the “nature of culture” itself, what space is left for normative resistance in postmodern cultural conditions? The space is one of radical change, where “conserving” the conditions in which the dialectical “nature of nature” and the “nature of culture” are intertwined, and which shapes itself though the repossessions of the means of producing the symbolic order in which the “mondialisation” opposes the “globalisation”, or where “worldalization” or the creation of an intercivisational oikoumené (Freitag, 2008, 2011c) must be the way to foster the reproduction of human

8 For an interesting contrast to this concept of freedom, but with similar conclusions, see Bihr (2007).
symbolic orders against the general conformism of postmodern neoliberal capitalism (Castoriadis, 1992, 1996).
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