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Freedom and Economic Organization In a Democracy

In addition to the work of Yves R. Simon as Thomist philosopher in such areas of investigation as ontology, the philosophy of nature and moral psychology, and particularly his contribution to political philosophy, there is an aspect of his thought that has been less prominent. I refer to his study of French social thought. Throughout his writings, references to Saint-Simon, Comte, de Maistre and de Bonald, Durkheim and Georges Gurvitch can be found. He is the author of several essays on Proudhon.¹ Not only was he obviously well-acquainted with the leading ideas of Durkheim, but it is significant that his thesis director, Celestin Bouglé, was the successor of Durkheim at the Sorbonne.² Furthermore, he was not only knowledgeable about the French tradition in social thought, but he was well acquainted with the literature of German labor sociologists, notably the writings of Werner Sombart

¹Yves R. Simon, "Les idées artistiques et littéraires de Proudhon," *La Démocratie* I:12 (March 25, 1924): 553-62; "Le problème de la transcendance et le défi de Proudhon," *Nova et Vetera* IX:3 (July-September, 1934): 225-38; Vukan Kuic's translation of Simon's essay entitled "A Note on Proudhon's Federalism," in Daniel J. Elazar, ed., *Federalism as Grand Design* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 223-34.

²"A typical representative of the mentality of the lay university and a disciple of Durkheim, Bouglé contributed to broadening the initial domain of sociology. Instead of being content with sociological explanation, he integrated it in a more extensive explanation which in the final analysis rests on the psychological modifications which are determined in a given environment by the evolution of social facts" (Michel Mourre, ed., "Celestin Bouglé," in *Dictionnaire des idées contemporaines* [Paris, 1964], 257-58).

and Goetz Briefs.³

Now, it is not my intention to argue that there was a split in Simon's thought with the Thomist philosopher, on one hand, and the social theorist on the other. If his contributions to theoretical philosophy proceed on Thomist lines, his achievements in practical philosophy combine the employment of Thomistic principles and a deep study of social and political issues. In this regard, "Thomism and Democracy"⁴ marks a significant milestone in his intellectual development with its assertion that Thomism is relevant to modern democratic theory and its trenchant examination of the party system in democracy.

What I want to argue is that there are really two facets of Simon's democratic philosophy. In the earlier phase of its genesis, he was primarily concerned with the economic organization of a democracy, or its socioeconomic dimension, while, in the later phase, he was primarily concerned with the political dimension. In *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, both dimensions are examined,⁵ and, for that reason, it can be seen as a kind of culmination of his reflections over a considerable period of time on the socioeconomic and political dimensions of democratic life.

It should be noted that the purely political aspects of his philosophy of democratic government have been the subject of considerable commentary—I think, for instance, of two essays of W.J. Stankiewicz;⁶ little, if anything, has been said about his reflections on economic organization. Now, it is beyond doubt that the relationship between authority and freedom is central to Simon's philosophy of democratic government. Yet the concern with human freedom is not confined to the political sphere, anymore than

³In *Work, Society, and Culture*, there are references to both Sombart and Briefs. Simon was particularly influenced by Goetz Brief's treatise, *The Proletariat: A Challenge to Western Civilization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937). See also Yves R. Simon's translation of the original German edition into French: *Le proletariat industriel* (Paris, 1936).

⁴Yves R. Simon, "Thomism and Democracy," Louis Finkelstein and Lyman Bryson, eds., *Science, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 2 (New York: Distributed by Harper and Row, 1952), 258–72.

⁵While the political dimension is paramount in the first three chapters, the socioeconomic dimension is broached in the last two chapters.

⁶W.J. Stankiewicz, *In Defense of Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), and *Approaches to Democracy; Philosophy of Government at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (New York: St. Martin, 1981).

it is confined to the ethical life. It must be understood in the context of economic organization. Taking economic liberalism and state socialism as opposite and extreme alternatives, Simon examines the factors involved in modern economic life that impede freedom or are conducive to it. Of course, these factors may be viewed in terms of equality (and justice) as well as in terms of freedom, unless the two terms are defined as referring to the same thing. It is characteristic of Simon's approach to distinguish clearly between equality and freedom, while insisting on the close connection between them. Insofar as possible, this paper will focus on freedom alone.

A good starting point for analysis of Simonian thinking on the economic organization of democracy is the *Charles Dunoyer, mémoire*, a thesis completed in 1923.⁷ Granted that this is an early work, subject to all the restrictions of a university requirement, still the subject matter and the themes developed provide a kind of overture to his later preoccupation with the world of work. Dunoyer was a representative of economic liberalism at the time of its introduction in France.

As the political revolution in France was followed by the industrial revolution, so economic liberalism followed political liberalism. Charles Dunoyer's thought, says Simon, is located at the "confluence of industrialism and liberalism" (CDM 4). Simon asserts that "his ideas constitute the most complete systematic treatment of liberal industrialism" in his day (CDM 8). If there was a form of political liberalism in France that was purely critical and negative, Dunoyer's approach seems constructive and positive. Jean Baptiste Say in his *Political Economy*⁸ was the leading interpreter of the ideas of Adam Smith in France. Dunoyer, in contrast to his fellow countryman Say, is not noted for his contributions to formal political economy, while Say's law about supply and demand has entered into the classical formulation of modern economics. Incidentally, Dunoyer preferred the term "social economy," though he was closer to Adam Smith than Say was on the issue of the measure of values (CDM).⁹

Not concerned with the problem of free choice as such, Dunoyer defined freedom as "the power, the facility of action" (CDM 19). This power can be more easily employed when obstacles to its exercise are

⁷I am indebted to Anthony O. Simon for his generous gift of a copy of this thesis.

⁸Jean Baptiste Say, *Traité d'économie politique*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1826).

⁹References to social economy are found on 13 and 16, to Say and Smith on 46-47.

removed. On one hand, nineteenth century criticism considered Dunoyer's definition as one-sided, having simply a positive character and, on the other hand, as Proudhon argued, as having only a negative character, "as if it were only a synonym for the removal of obstacles" (CDM 21). It is Simon's contention that there are indeed the two aspects insofar as freedom progresses through the removal of obstacles to its exercise, and that freedom is something positive; it is power.

Simon then notes that "freedom understood in the sense of power is something other than freedom understood in the sense of independence or autonomy" (CDM 21), although Dunoyer tended to confuse these two quite different conceptions. Furthermore, Simon notes that the definition of freedom as power does not entail liberalism, for there were socialists as well who accepted a similar definition. Moreover, one significant twentieth century version of liberalism rejects the idea of freedom as power and maintains that freedom means freedom from coercion.¹⁰

Dunoyer defended "an individualistic conception of life" (CDM 17, n.1). Simon observes that "nowhere in his text is there a social aim distinct from individual improvement" (CDM 55). In fact, "the unique aim of social activity is individual improvement" (CDM 55-56). The government, accordingly, leaves or should leave individuals free to act as they please. However, in this regard, Dunoyer moves from an initial stance against the idea of repressive government to the later view that "such a regime is an essential condition of freedom" (CDM 58). So there is both liberalism and authoritarianism in Dunoyer's theory and, indeed, he attempts to reconcile his love of freedom and the sense of order. Simon gives no indication that he thinks Dunoyer succeeded in this intention.

Dunoyer, while a liberal, was no democrat, and he tended to confuse

¹⁰F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 16-17. In his commentary on Hayek's conception of freedom from coercion, Raymond Aron makes the following observation: "What is the concrete freedom which serves as the model for this definition of freedom? Obviously, the freedom of the entrepreneur or the consumer: the first is free to take initiative and to combine the means of production, the second free in the use he will make of the buying power provided by his monetary income. But neither the worker in a production line, nor the employee inside a vast organization, nor the soldier who is subject to strict discipline, nor the Jesuit who has taken a vow of obedience is free, according to this definition. Indeed the very nature of industrial society seems inexorably to reduce the number of persons for whom this kind of freedom is accessible, at least in work" (*An Essay on Freedom*, trans. Helen Weaver [New York: World Publishing Company, 1970], 88-89).

democratic and socialistic ideas. His belief in the benefits of free trade for the distribution of wealth led him to the optimistic conclusion that such a system would render socialist systems useless. Summing up Dunoyer's approach, Simon says that he "completed political liberalism by economic and ethical considerations" (CDM 92).

Now, out of the commentary, a number of salient themes emerge: the distinction between two notions of freedom (and Simon's early concern with the freedom of autonomy); liberal individualism and its social and economic consequences; and, finally, the relation between freedom and authority, the central theme of Simon's political philosophy.

Now, if the opposition between freedom as power and freedom as autonomy is accepted as central to understanding the issues of freedom in the work world, some of Simon's remarks about a form of economic freedom distinct from the freedom of autonomy fall into place. In a passage in which Simon would seem to invoke Saint Thomas' name (TLT 42), he argues for the proposition that property functions as a support for freedom. The person without property is by the same token deprived of power and, in extreme cases, deprived of the means of life itself. Elsewhere, he will argue that property should not be viewed as an instrument of exploitation but "in its essential function as a guarantee of freedom against governmental arbitrariness" or the exploitation of others.¹¹ Now, a close examination of Saint Thomas' teaching on property does not reveal that he was particularly concerned with property as a support for freedom, though that might not be an unreasonable inference from remarks he makes about wage workers. It is more likely that this idea is one that Simon took over from Proudhon.¹² In any case, while maintaining that one may indeed speak of economic freedom in this regard, Simon is principally concerned with the freedom of autonomy. But it is not the isolated individual who preoccupies him when he speaks of autonomy. Unlike some who would want to discuss autonomy in purely individualistic terms—for

¹¹Yves R. Simon, *La marche à la délivrance* (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1942), 118.

¹²"The last thought of Proudhon on the subject would be nicely expressed by the consideration that much should be forgiven to property on account of what it does for liberty" (*Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 248).

insistence, the freedom of the entrepreneur or the customer—Simon reflects a widely held view in treating autonomy as a social concept. As one commentator on contemporary democratic theory put it, “autonomy in most democratic theory is now assumed to arise only in a social context.”¹³ To sum up, Simon, while not denying the relevance of a notion of freedom depending upon property as a guarantee, directs all of his attention to the freedom of autonomy that is non-individualistic. In short, the “freedom from abusive power” is distinct from “the freedom of a group to govern itself” (PDG 76).

To define autonomy simply as self-government is insufficient. In an account that owes much to Maritain, Simon notes that freedom of autonomy is a terminal freedom. Properly speaking, it “is constituted by the presence of law within liberty. It is won by an interiorization of the law” (CF 18).¹⁴ This is a formulation opposed to the Kantian notion of autonomy but congruent with that of Durkheim, except that Durkheim has a more limited notion of law than Simon. Autonomy can be absolute, as in God, or relative, as in human beings. This occurs when “the spontaneous inclinations of the agent coincide with the exigencies of the law” (CF 20). Simon sets out a program when he states that “the sure means of starving despotism out of existence is to realize, at all levels of personal and social life, the fusion of law and freedom” (CF 21). We are now prepared to deal with “the quest for autonomy as it should be pursued in the humble and fruitful tasks of daily life” (CF 30).

In a series of inquiries stretching over more than twenty years, Simon, starting from an examination of the meaning of the term “work,” elaborated conceptions of autonomy in the workplace that precede and parallel what he had to say about autonomy in the political realm. The *Three Lectures on Work* (1938), in which the first account of workplace autonomy was sketched, was followed by “The Concept of Work,” *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, and the posthumous *Work, Society and Culture*.¹⁵ The first socioeconomic treatment preceded the first application of the theory of autonomy in the political domain in *Nature and Functions of*

¹³Dennis Thompson, *The Democratic Citizen: Social Science and Democratic Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 14. Simon says, “it follows that it is not in solitude but in the community that the quest for autonomy should be pursued” (*Community of the Free*, 30.)

¹⁴The original statement dates from 1945.

¹⁵Yves R. Simon, “The Concept of Work,” in Robert B. Heywood, ed., *The Works of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

Authority (1940). It is a fair conclusion that Simon was initially concerned with social autonomy and subsequently became concerned with political autonomy. For a Thomist, there seem to be good methodological reasons for proceeding in this way.

The focus in the *Three Lectures* is on the industrial world. In a metaphysical perspective, work is contrasted with contemplation. It is useful activity, geared to the state of the thing being worked on, and involves generosity and motion (thus is subject to the law of change and time) (*TLT* 2; cf. *WSC* 5–8). On each of these points, with the exception of generosity, contemplation differs from work. Of course, there are intermediary forms of activity, particularly mental activity, that involve work. Clearly, there are some paradoxical features to the notion of intellectual work.¹⁶ While it is an error to conceive of mind, as some philosophers do, as a “productive faculty,” it would equally be an error to see in manual work “the highest form of activity” (*TLT* 10–11). If autonomy is, as we have seen, “the presence of law within liberty,” it first arises in the world of manual labor when one compares “legal fulfillment” and “the order of free expansion” (*TLT* 16). To work as a gardener in order to fulfill a need differs from the same work done as an amusement or pastime. The first concept comprises “activities which fulfill a definite prescription of a biological or national nature”; the second “aims at some human perfection placed outside the sphere of definite prescription” (*TLT* 16). Now, the way in which this affects the worker is that he “finds the fulfillment of his personal being in the very exercise of his generosity,” even though it is true that he labors for the work and not himself. Or take the case where there is legal fulfillment without this free expansion, an all too frequent case. What Simon is getting at is “the expansion and felicity of the creative life” (*TLT* 44). In such favorable instances, the law of the object is united with the expansion of the working subject.

Legal fulfillment includes scientific discipline and arts and crafts. The argument turns to the development of what Simon calls “technical culture” (*TLT* 58).¹⁷ As long as the worker is involved solely in execution, and not in the direction of work, he is deprived of free expansion. He is told what to do; he does it, and gets paid for it. But it is obviously a matter of degree. The question of free expansion is a question of access to technical

¹⁶Denis de Rougemont examines these paradoxical features in *Journal d'un intellectuel en chômage* (1933–1935) in a compilation, *Journal d'un époque* (1926–1946) (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 149–53.

¹⁷See also Simon, “The Concept of Work,” 16.

culture. What is envisaged is the free worker's participation in the direction of work. And, if we are to believe the labor sociologists, the demand of workers is not simply one for higher wages, but has as "its principal origin the heteronomy (*Fremdbestimmung*) of work" (TLT 69–70). Simon sums up the problem:

It is clear that this absence of initiative eliminates any chance for the worker to acquire the wisdom of the social laborer. Prudence having for its content the very use of freedom, the possibilities of a worker culture of a prudential type corresponds strictly to the amount of autonomy possessed by the worker (TLT 70).

The perspective here is that of large industry and the possibilities within that sphere of "a broad liberation of worker initiatives" (TLT 70). Stated in the language of autonomy, the answer is not in replacing subordinative relations by contractual relations, but by the constant association of two principles:

The principle of authority: whenever the welfare of a community requires unity of conduct in matters where the meeting of minds is uncertain, either in principle or simply in fact, this unity of conduct must be assured by the decision of the higher organs of the community. . . .

The principle of autonomy: in a hierarchical whole, whenever a function can be assumed by the lower without detriment to the object of this function, it should be effectively assumed by it, for there is more perfection in a whole whose parts are full of life than in one where the parts are but instruments crossed by the initiative of the higher organs of the community (TLT 70–71; cf. NF 44–45).

It seems to me that Simon first sees the issue of autonomy in the industrial workplace arise in the relationship between technical imperatives and the development of a technical culture in those who remain mere operatives and do not share in the direction of work itself. To distinguish this from another dimension of how autonomy is realized, or might be realized in the workplace, let us say that he began by looking at the working group distributively and then looks at it collectively, for autonomy essentially concerns the group.

Well, what is the collective aspect of the search for autonomy in the workplace? The same division of labor that produced "an unprecedented

separation between planning and execution," has led to the development of the proletariat as a class of "permanent and hereditary wage-earners" (WSC 100). Following Goetz Briefs, Simon wants to distinguish between the proletariat and the working-class and to argue that the former term is not appropriate to the American case.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the problem of autonomy remains, even when one denies the existence of a class of permanent and hereditary wage-earners: "Every community normally tends to achieve autonomy. This is a sort of law: whenever there is a normal community, there is also a tendency toward autonomy" (WSC 104). Since the working-class, because of the conditions of modern production, is a community, it has this tendency as well. However, it is a class that once had no autonomy, no power of self-government. The principal institution that contributes to the autonomy of the worker is, of course, the labor union. While Simon has no illusions about the shortcomings of labor unions, he says that

labor organizations have accomplished the double feat of helping to establish discipline among masses of men and of giving such discipline the higher meaning of autonomy. What this great product of the technological society—the labor union—has done for autonomy is of such exceptional value that any reform which would jeopardize the operation of labor unions or alter their essential constitution is bound to arouse the suspicion of the democratic mind (PDG 306).

He goes on to refer to "two essential organs of democratic life—the party and the labor union" (PDG 317).

If Simon were maintaining that the present adversarial relationship that characterizes labor-management interactions was sufficient to guarantee the collective autonomy of various groupings of workers, his position would be open to serious objection. The legal relationship between management and labor insures the perpetuation of a basically authoritarian system and the term is used by Simon to contrast that kind of system with a democratic one (PDG 142).¹⁹ Simon was clearly interested in going beyond the *status quo* in industrial relations when he treated the issue of autonomy in reference to the labor group considered collectively. The degree of autonomy that has been achieved through the efforts of

¹⁸Goetz Briefs distinguishes between the wage-earner group and the proletariat in *The Proletariat*, 22–23. He did believe that "the creation of a genuine proletariat is now in progress" in the United States (167–68).

¹⁹"Any method which subtracts the governing personnel from the control of the people can be termed 'authoritarian'."

labor unions would have to be extended, and he suggests the kinds of institutions that might affect this transition. Among the new forms of community life he has in mind are "mutual-assistance societies, consumers' cooperatives, institutes for popular education, factory committees, autonomous workshops" (CF 29). It seems to me that the last of these is the most promising and most in line with the development of workers' movements in Europe since Simon wrote on these subjects. The thrust of his thought seems to be in the direction of self-management within the existing capitalist system, rather than self-management socialism as understood in France.²⁰ Whether such a transition would be achieved mainly through concern for productivity or occur through greater worker representation on management committees—by broadening collective bargaining in order to allow for greater participation, by recourse to public legislation, or some other presumably democratic means—is open to question. Simon indicates the need for greater autonomy within a system that continues to require authoritative structures, but he apparently did not think that the task of the philosopher is to elaborate the specific steps by which this might be achieved. This is in line with his general reluctance to enter into the level of decision-making, which should, in his opinion, be left for prudential judgment.

Now, while I have spoken of two dimensions as Simon did, it is obvious that there is a close relationship between the prospect of the workers acquiring a greater technical culture and that of greater worker self-management. Analytically distinct, the two dimensions are joined in actuality. If Simon has made so much of the need for worker autonomy, the principle of autonomy, it should not be assumed that it would operate to the detriment of the principle of authority. The issue concerns the manner in which these two principles will be joined within technological society.

Simon suggests that there is a connection between the absence of self-government in the workplace and the difficulties of the worker in learning to govern himself in his moral and social life. Even though this connection is not a necessary consequence, "it is psychological and likely to be a matter of fact in a majority of cases" (PDG 299).

Up to now, attention has been focused on the industrial workplace. In *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, Simon turns to agriculture, a field hitherto neglected in his analysis of the modern workplace. Since agriculture does not allow for the kind of division of labor characteristic of in-

²⁰Ralph Nelson, "Emmanuel Mounier, Between Proudhon and Marx," *Science et Société* XXXI:2 (University of Montreal, 1979): 225.

dustry, the opportunities for workers to govern their own work is much greater in it: "All other things being equal, the farm worker finds in the condition of his work an opportunity in training for self-government, both in the technical order and in the human order, which industrial conditions do not furnish" (PDG 301). The economic unit he has in mind, however, is not what is now called agribusiness, but the family farm. While there is an old tradition in France glorifying this institution, it is an object of veneration in North America as well.²¹ Here, as elsewhere, the lone entrepreneur or worker is not the focus of attention, but the group, that is, the family. However, where the call for greater autonomy in the industrial workplace would be considered a radical idea, at least in North America, the defense of the family farm might be viewed as reactionary, nostalgic,²² economically unrealistic. The family farm is viewed as a way of life, not simply as a business. Simon is well aware that a certain kind of paternalism may threaten this institution as a center of autonomous work. Yet, that aside, he presents a strong argument for the values of this form of rural life. Of course, this coincides with an old strand of Catholic social thought based on the family unit.

In any case, it is surely a sign of our times that the family farm is greatly threatened today and may not endure much longer as an important aspect of agricultural production. Regardless of the values it embodies, is it likely that an institution that is apparently economically unviable—because of the cost of machinery and other capital investment, not to speak of the risks of farming itself—will be maintained for traditional reasons? It is commonplace to consider the loss of a farm by a family, particularly one that has labored for generations on the land, as a catastrophe, while the demise of an urban family business goes unmourned. While one can agree

²¹"At that time, as since, agriculture in France was more than an occupation; it was what with proper solemnity would now be called a way of life," John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics in Perspective: A Critical History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 46.

²²In a chapter entitled "The Nature of Social Nostalgia," Galbraith says: "This manifestation of social nostalgia explains the unique reverence with which, in the United States, we regard the family farm. It is our most important surviving example of comprehensive economic administration by the household. Where, under the pressure of economic circumstance, the family farm gives way to a highly capitalized enterprise with a sizable labor force, we do nothing about it. And almost any farm with less than a million dollars of invested capital or two airplanes can still be called a family farm" (*The Liberal Hour* [New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960], 108).

with much that Simon says about the family farm, the shortcoming of his treatment of the problem of agriculture in his reflections on democracy and technology is that he does not really examine the effect of technological developments in agriculture on the units of production. This does not mean that we must accept a kind of technological determinism, or assume, as Marx did, that there will be large agricultural factories just as there are large industrial ones. But the conditions of modern agriculture may indicate the need for new forms of association which, while taking into account the laws of agricultural work, will provide new opportunities for self-government. Unless it is believed that the family farm is a more durable institution than I have supposed, this is the direction in which the quest for autonomy in rural life must turn.

Throughout his writings on work, Simon revealed a concern for the secessionist or rebellious tendencies of the working class. To counter this tendency, already an old aspect of the modern industrial order, Simon proposed measures that would provide for the integration of the working class in modern society. This integration presupposed the joint operation of the two principles of authority and autonomy. It would provide not only for the technical culture of the worker, but the increased self-government of the working class. This remains an important issue in the contemporary industrial order.

When he turned his attention to agriculture, Simon quite understandably praised an institution that to a considerable degree had achieved the joint operation of the two principles, the family farm. If the quest for autonomy in rural life can no longer rely on this institution as a basis, then an inquiry faithful to the Simonian project must canvass other possible institutional forms. If it is not the task of the social philosopher to invent such forms, it surely is his duty to show the need for them.