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# Freedom, Vulnerability, and Capitalism

Jeremy M. Johnson

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how economic vulnerability plays a role in the functioning and maintenance of today's economic and political systems. It investigates how substantive freedom is threatened by economic precarity and why widespread vulnerability is minimally addressed by the state. It concludes with potential reforms to the current economic and political structure that could be made to ameliorate material harm. Much focus has been dedicated to the study of the coercive power of capitalism, but by analyzing how vulnerability is caused, perpetuated, and taken advantage of, a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the working class, as well as their ability to actualize their freedoms, can be gained. I argue that individual freedom is diminished by economic vulnerability as those that are the least affluent, while legally being free, are severely restricted in how they can live their lives, and I argue that the vulnerability produced by our economic system is not merely a byproduct, but a feature. Furthermore, I investigate the material and empirical extent of vulnerability within the United States and attempts by the state and politicians to remedy economic vulnerability. These solutions often fall short in a variety of ways and rarely intend to directly challenge or restructure the core incentives and motives driving the capitalist system. Finally, I offer potential reforms and large-scale changes that could work to lessen or completely eliminate the burden of material harm and subsequently enhance the freedoms of those within the United States.

## PART I: INITIAL CONCEPTS

### *What Does it Mean to be Free?*

To begin, I will argue that the colloquial understanding of freedom is insubstantial, and for freedom to more faithfully exist in our society, it must be understood in both positive and negative terms and cannot be detached from its roots in equality. For centuries, freedom has been an important yet rarely well-defined term in political discourse, and despite the various conceptions of freedom being considered and debated endlessly, freedom has never been ubiquitously and equally available to all people. Unlike today, historical conceptions of freedom were often held abstractly in opposition to enslavement. For the ancient Greeks during Athenian democracy, freedom was a state of being rather than an individual right held by all that was to be fought for, and being free meant simply not being enslaved (Ciprut et al., 2009). To the Greeks, freedom was therefore a distinguishing characteristic between the free man and the slave, and rather than freedom existing as a right to be possessed, it was a community to be a part of.

Furthermore, the Greek conception of freedom was inseparable from their unique and democratic form of government. For Aristotle, democracy required a willingness to “rule and be ruled” and for free men to live as they please, two concepts embodying negative and positive freedom respectively, described later in more detail. A core characteristic of democracy then, according to Aristotle, is “freedom based upon equality” (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E/1920). Aristotle, however, was not an advocate for democracy as a form of societal organization, and Athenian democracy was highly exclu-

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sive. Political power, while being accessible regardless of wealth, which may appear as a foreign concept in the modern era, was provided only to men of age. In contrast, women, immigrants, and the enslaved were denied the ability to participate in the Ecclesia, the Athenian assembly, and as such, were denied all access to political power. While not being a slave is undeniably a precondition of being free, freedom must be considered in more substantive terms than simply being unbound by the constraints of slavery, and in a starkly unequal society such as Ancient Athens, it cannot be reasonably concluded that the fullest extent of human freedom was achieved. Thus, Athenians held a robust ideal of freedom that included equality in political power as a prerequisite that was never fully realized as they maintained a society based largely on exclusion.

In more recent centuries, freedom has been viewed with an entirely different perspective. Since the birth of the United States, freedom and liberty have been core motivating concepts in political discourse, yet their roots in equality have since been severed. Rather than existing as prerequisites for each other, equality and freedom, in the modern era, are now regarded as opposites and antagonists to one another—that is, allowing inequality to persist has become necessary for society to be free (Taylor, 2019). The history of the United States is rife with invocations of idyllic freedom, from Thomas Jefferson’s search for an “Empire of Liberty” with the Louisiana Purchase to politicians, both old and new, using some form of “freedom” or “liberty” in speeches, addresses, letters, and declarations ad nauseam (Ciprut et al., 2009). While freedom is ostensibly the preeminent value of American life, often left out of popular discourse throughout the history of the United States is a concrete discussion and commitment to the ideal of equality. It seems contradictory that the U.S. Founding Fathers were, on the face,

intensely interested in liberty for all while liberty, in legal terms, applied only to white propertied men at the nation’s inception. Without equality being a key consideration, the material manifestation of freedom and who is deemed “free” is often taken for granted, and freedom continues to exist as an ethereal, intangible ideal that very few can access despite its promise of ubiquity. Along with the discord between freedom and equality has been the slow watering down of the two terms—they are now held in a less substantive regard compared to centuries past. “Freedom” to many now means being left alone or being free to pursue material gain, while “equality” is seen as a finished project following legislative action that enshrined civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s, and any further attempts at equality represent the threat of total sameness to freedom. Overall, the intimate linkage between freedom and equality has been deconstructed over time, and although both freedom and equality have never been truly realized even when paired together, this disconnection between the two concepts damages and jeopardizes the actualization of both.

Freedom must be understood in two distinct forms: negative and positive. Negative freedom, put simply, is the ability to exist without oppression and restraints on one’s decision making. Positive freedom, on the other hand, is the actual ability to make use of one’s freedoms, it is the existence of the conditions necessary for freedoms to be manifested in reality. Paired together, positive and negative freedom offer a comprehensive view of what it means to be free, but human freedom cannot be observed in a vacuum. As with any political concept, freedom exists, or struggles to exist, in relation to other societal structures such as the government and the economy. Placed in context, the manifestation of freedom may vary depending on existing social, political, and economic structures that work in unison to define

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what it means to be free and who is considered free. In ancient societies, the extent of freedom in relation to the existing social-political-economic order meant not being a slave, whereas in the modern era, where the institution of slavery no longer exists, freedom is regarded as the freedom to consume and compete in a market. However, for freedom, held in both positive and negative terms, to be truly realized, equality must be applied across all planes of existence. In other words, the power embedded in all of society's institutions must be evenly distributed. Lacking the even distribution of power across civilization, the domination of those with less power is inevitable, and the existence of domination necessarily threatens the protection of freedom. In simple terms, freedom is both the absence of oppression and the presence of the components required to make use of liberties, and the possibility of domination through unequal hierarchy diminishes or completely eliminates freedom for all.

In Western liberal democracies, it is uncontroversial to advocate for political equality. It is a commonly held ideal that all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or belief system should, as a normative claim, be allowed to participate in society's political systems to an equal degree. The extent of that participation can be debated, but the existence of some form of participation available to all is today regarded as a natural expression of political freedom. Put simply, political equality is generally agreed upon as a necessary condition for all to enjoy their freedoms—any particular individual or group holding more political power than others by matter of right would be seen as undemocratic and therefore unjustified. Often completely ignored, and considered wholly separate, is economic equality as a prerequisite for political equality and subsequently for a free society. Politics and economics are permanently linked as both,

generally, refer to power relations within any given society, and the existence of political equality is necessarily impossible without the existence of complementary economic equality.

Ignoring, for the moment, any specific variation in economic organization (free market capitalism, state capitalism, feudalism, and so on), so long as economic inequality exists, as a feature or as a malfunction, and it engenders an interaction of wealth with existing political systems, the more affluent will use their economic influence to produce beneficial political outcomes. Today, those with exorbitant wealth influence politics through lobbying, advertisements, and other forms of electioneering to steer the course of politics to their benefit while that mode of exercising political power has no expression for those without wealth and is therefore inaccessible. In this way, the unequal distribution of economic power gives rise to unequal political power, which jeopardizes democracy, a prerequisite of freedom. If simply owning more of society's resources provides power over others, then freedom exists not as a right enjoyed by all, but as a luxury purchased by those that can afford it. The existence of freedom, then, is not simply a matter of who receives legally codified rights, but a matter of on whom societal power is centered and the degree of its concentration.

At its core, freedom is a political concept, one that cannot be detached from its roots in democracy and equality. If society is to value freedom to its fullest extent, equality across all realms of existence must be applied, a pursuit only attainable if power, both economic and political, is distributed and shared evenly among all. Freedom and inequality are thus incompatible and cannot exist when placed in the context of economic systems that produce, replicate, and perpetuate the unequal distribution of economic power. It is not merely a matter of resource

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allocation; rather, it is a matter of who holds decision making ability, and if this ability is not democratized, domination necessarily becomes a feature of whatever economic organization is being considered. If a society is not controlled democratically, then it is, by definition, controlled by a smaller, selective group of individuals that rule without a mandate from the people being ruled, and that mode of governing necessarily threatens both positive and negative freedoms. While the legal right to freedom is important, and progress has certainly been made to that point, a more substantive understanding of freedom includes the tangible ability to make use of one's freedom and having access to the conditions required to make freedoms accessible. In this regard, the actualization of freedom requires not a focus on the extension of legal rights, but a focus on where power is located and concentrated. Thus, democracy and equality are prerequisites of freedom in its full form. With this philosophical understanding of freedom as both an abstract and political concept, the existence of true freedom in the United States becomes questionable. To gain a holistic understanding of freedom in the context of current society, its relationship to the existing economic superstructure must be investigated.

### *The Political Technology of Capitalism*

Next, I will discuss how capitalism, as the dominant economic system today, necessarily limits freedom through its undemocratic design. Over the last several centuries, capitalism has not only become regarded as required for freedom to exist, but synonymous with all applicable definitions of freedom. Beginning around the 16th and 17th centuries, capitalism grew to be the dominant economic system and undeniably jettisoned humanity forward with enormous leaps in technology, production, and standards of living (Lippit, 2005). As with any and all economic systems, capitalism has experi-

enced vast variation throughout its history, but core to all forms are several features: accumulation of surplus (whether it be directed by the state or private actors), expansion in search of greater profitability, a worker-to-capitalist power relationship, and concentrated control of private productive property. For the purposes of this analysis, the American version of capitalism will be the focal point where production is controlled, in large part, by private businesses that direct employees to drive increased profit accumulation.

Despite capitalism's contributions to human advancement, the progress made through capitalist production has never been evenly distributed, and the inequality produced by this method of economic organization is, by necessity, a feature. For a capitalist to accumulate profit and therefore be a successful competitor in the marketplace, the workers employed by the capitalist must be compensated less than the sum total of the revenue that is produced, meaning that the worker-to-capitalist relationship is one of perpetual inequality (Lippit, 2005). For this system of profit to be maintained, it must not only be that revenue is unevenly distributed, but power too. This is the political technology of capitalism: for the system of capitalism to be maintained, decision making ability must be concentrated on a class of owners, whether it be the state or private capitalists. The political technology of capitalism borrows from Michel Foucault's idea of the political technology of the body, that is, how bodies organized in space can portend specific power relations (Foucault, 1975). Within capitalism, private ownership of production imparts not only economic power, but also political power. Because capitalists own production, they hold control over both the economic growth of the state and the maintenance of social order through employment, giving the capitalist extraordinary power to control the nation and its pop-

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ulation. Thus, capitalists have the power to direct both the material existence of the non-owning class and the political direction of the nation within which the capitalists operate (and with capital globalization, other nations as well). In this way, capitalists become both an economic and political authority. While capitalists will not each exercise their power collaboratively at all times, this class maintains the ability to direct civilization in ways not accessible to non-capitalists—this is a fundamentally undemocratic function that exists primarily to sustain conditions conducive to continuous accumulation. The genius of this system is that it maintains a façade of freedom while implicitly working to restrict freedom for all but the capitalist class. Because of the existence of a plethora of employment options (ideally, this may not always exist in truth) and the apparent freedom imparted from the ability to choose what one consumes, capitalism portrays itself, through its champions, as a system of free association and liberty. Obfuscated by this façade, however, is the unevenness in the relationship between employer and employed and the constraints placed on the worker's freedom (Taylor, 2019).

Masked by the illusion of choice between employment opportunities is the physical need to survive, a need that is dependent upon one's ability to work for a capitalist. While an alternative for any given individual worker could be for themselves to become a capitalist, it is immediately apparent that this alternative could not be universally applied as the capitalist system relies on a laboring class for its existence. That is to say, for capitalism to exist, there must be a class of people that are required to work for their physical survival. If one lacks alternatives, if on the other side of unemployment is marginalization (or worse, perhaps starvation and death), then it is unreasonable to conclude that the process of employment is thus consensual, fair, and one of freedom. Thus,

the entire basis of American capitalism, and capitalist systems abroad, is one of coercion and enforced reliance on the capitalist to survive, all to maintain the process of profit accumulation. Not only is the worker unable to choose otherwise, but the conditions necessary for the worker to exercise their freedoms are limited by their inability to escape subordination to any given employer. Put simply, the pursuit of self-interest, in an economy where all goods necessary for survival are locked behind payment, is determined by one's affluence and is accessible only to the capitalist and those willing to be dominated, and the latter group is still ultimately less free than those above them. In this way, both positive and negative freedom are constrained under a capitalist organization of the economy because of the extremely unequal distribution in power, both politically and economically. This disparate power distribution gives rise to the wide gulf in resource allocation between the capitalist class and the working class, one that engenders the great economic precarity of the masses.

At bottom, capitalism is an undemocratic system by design, one that negates freedom and imparts widespread economic vulnerability. This vulnerability is both a byproduct and a necessary condition of capitalist economics and presents itself as a politically useful tool for coercing the working class into undesirable conditions of employment that drive the economy. This vulnerability can exist in varying degrees, at times apparent and at other times subtle. A worker in one nation may enjoy a variety of de commodified services but still be coerced into labor nonetheless while a worker in another nation may struggle to eat as their expenses pile up. Regardless of the particular manifestation of vulnerability, a vulnerable working class is one that can be easily coerced into consenting to a system based wholly on their exploitation. The concentration of political

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and economic power on the capitalist class perpetuates an undemocratic and unequal system of control that limits freedom while maintaining an illusion that capitalism is the only system that can deliver freedom. As Milton Friedman, an ardent defender of capitalism, ironically puts it, “the combination of economic and political power in the same hands is a sure recipe for tyranny” (Friedman & Friedman, 1980). In this way, the existence of material vulnerability represents a reduction in both positive and negative freedom, and the alleviation of this vulnerability to maximize freedom available to all relies on creating systems that democratize power relations throughout society, a concept that runs in fundamental opposition to the logic of capitalism. In the following section, the existence of material vulnerability in the United States will be discussed and the lack of response from the state will be investigated.

### **PART II: THE NECESSITY OF A VULNERABLE WORKING CLASS**

#### *Manifested Vulnerability & Types of Inequality*

In the United States today, despite constant GDP growth year after year (World Bank, 2021a), material vulnerability exists for an enormous number of people. As of 2020, more than half a million Americans are housing insecure, with more than 200,000 of that group sleeping on the streets, sidewalks, in parks, or in otherwise unsheltered areas (Continuum of Care, 2020). Additionally, one third of Americans reported having difficulty managing regular costs such as food and rent, and most Americans reported living paycheck to paycheck. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated many economic inequalities, more than a third of Americans noted that they would be unable to cover a \$400 emergency expense without going into debt (Selyukh, 2020). For the first time in decades,

the younger generations are set to earn less than previous generations, with only half of those born in 1984 earning more than their parents at age 30, “compared to 92% of those born in 1940” (Luhby, 2020). At the same time, real wages in the U.S. have been relatively stagnant since the mid-1970s (Desilver, 2018), while healthcare, housing, education, food, and childcare costs have all outpaced inflation since 1996 (Ingraham, 2016). As the working class continues to struggle to make ends meet in the United States, economic inequality has skyrocketed, with the top 20% of earners increasing their wealth by 13% between 2007 and 2016, while the second quintile of earners, one tier above the poorest 20%, lost 39% of their wealth in the same period (Horowitz et al., 2020). According to the U.S. Federal Reserve, the top 1% of earners in the U.S. hold more wealth than the bottom 50% of earners, a trend that has been developing since 1989 (Beer, 2020). Simply put, economic vulnerability is systemic in the United States. While the widening gulf between the richest and poorest Americans starkly illustrates the siphoning of wealth from the bottom to the top, it does not fully convey the structural necessity of vulnerability for the capitalist system.

The aforementioned manifestations of material vulnerability only depict dramatic economic trends in the last several decades and American capitalism has been in existence for much longer with inequality omnipresent. The unequal allocation of resources and wealth has varied in degree throughout history, but it has always existed in some form and has, in recent centuries, stemmed from the disproportionate distribution of economic and political power engendered by capitalism. Whether it be the usage of slave labor through the mid 19th century, poor working conditions and child labor throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, or the loss of employment oppor-

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tunities through deindustrialization and the globalization of capital, the various methods and forms of production, based on capitalism, have been the source of inequality and subsequently material vulnerability. While working conditions and practices may have generally improved over time, these improvements are often in resistance to the logic of capitalism. The pursuit of profit does not provide space for humanitarian considerations—more simply, progress towards the prioritization of human well-being is not accomplished because of capitalism, but rather in spite of it. To clarify, capitalism cannot be blamed for all of society's woes. Racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and other forms of prejudice, both interpersonal and structural, have undeniably played a role in perpetuating systems of oppression such as slavery and inhumane working conditions, but capitalism has been the vehicle through which these modes of oppression are delivered and the economic methods utilized to treat certain marginalized groups as lesser have stemmed from capitalism. Put plainly, the subordination of marginalized groups has been made tangible through the same economic system that oppresses non-owners generally and vulnerability has been core to the American capitalist system since its inception.

It is clear, then, that regardless of degree, inequality has persisted in many forms throughout American history on the back of American capitalism. However, focusing merely on the allocation of resources in society is insufficient in resolving the core tensions that underpin and cause inequality. The inaccessibility of healthcare, housing, food, and other necessities for millions of people today is derived from an economic system that demands profit from any and all production that occurs. The point of production, within capitalism, is not to service human needs, but to create wealth for the class that owns the productive forces. In this

way, inequality is not only a byproduct of the capitalist system, a system that portends the unequal distribution of economic and political power and subsequently the unequal distribution of resources, but also a feature. Three distinct forms of inequality can be identified that are inherent to capitalism. First, there is an inherently unequal power relationship between employee and employer. When taking a job, workers have no choice but to subject themselves to the private rule of a boss, and while the level of agency and worker control from workplace to workplace may vary, generally speaking, are at the total behest of their employer. This unequal employee-employer power relationship portends a second form of inequality, the unequal distribution of societies material resources, as previously discussed. Because labor is a cost of production, workers can never be paid the sum total of the value they produce otherwise there is no capitalist accumulation to be had, and thus the power dichotomy between workers and owners spawns an unequal allocation of resources in society. Finally, political power becomes unevenly distributed as the owning class maintains control over the working class, the value created by their labor, and the material resources needed for survival. As previously mentioned, the unequal distribution of economic power necessarily engenders the unequal distribution of political power as the owning class can purchase greater access to government officials and functions or otherwise manipulate existing political institutions to their benefit. Put simply, the material vulnerability observable in the United States today is directly related to the core mechanisms of and the inequality inherent to the capitalist mode of production.

Furthermore, vulnerability is a structural necessity, not necessarily in the sense that there are laws or organizations ensuring people stay vulnerable, but because for capitalism to function as an economic



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system, vulnerability must exist to some degree to act as a coercive force to compel people into the workplace. The level of vulnerability varies from place to place and from time to time, but it is always present as a means of implicitly forcing the continuation of capitalism. It appears less violent when compared to former economic systems, the sword of a monarch, for example, but is still coercion nonetheless and therefore restricts freedom. In summary, vulnerability is both a byproduct and structural necessity for the capitalist system.

### *Freedom and Vulnerability*

Given the various tangible forms of material vulnerability in the United States, I argue that freedom does not exist substantially for broad portions of the American population.

Freedom, previously described in both negative and positive terms, appears almost nonexistent in both forms for the millions of Americans that struggle to make ends meet. It is not reasonable to conclude that one can make plentiful use of their freedoms if their days are dedicated to labor to afford the cost of necessities such as food, housing, emergency expenses, and so on. Although all Americans, generally speaking, enjoy an equal level of codified freedom, the ability to make use of one's freedom is severely limited implicitly as one's survival depends wholly on one's ability to labor. In addition to the implicit coercion that forces workers into labor is the total loss of freedom once in the workplace. Because workers must labor for the resources necessary for survival, workers must submit to the command of a boss, and while workplace protections established by the government vary across time and location, generally, bosses control all aspects of work, the pace of production, when workers arrive, when workers take breaks, what workers wear, and even, at times, what workers do outside of the workplace (Taylor,

2019). To call this arrangement one of freedom would be to considerably reduce the meaning of freedom for all that must labor to live. Although a choice may exist to the extent that workers can ideally choose where to work, in effect, because the employee-employer relationship is necessarily unequal within capitalism, there is no choice to be made. The privatization of basic goods requires all non-owners to work in some capacity to survive, and the presence of this type of coercion portends a restriction on the freedom available to most people. In sum, freedom is severely limited for those without the economic resources necessary to utilize and actualize their freedoms, and once in the workplace, the loss of freedom is total. The façade of consent within this system works to mask the vulnerability and coercion felt by workers. A more free society is one that involves democratic decision making from top to bottom, within the workplace and in all other areas of existence, a possibility foreclosed by capitalism that will be discussed later in further detail.

In summary, the vulnerability that is created through the capitalist mode of production works to create massive economic inequalities through a disparate power distribution, and subsequently manufactures material vulnerability which serves as a political tool to coerce individuals into the workplace. Thus, freedom is restricted for the working class within the United States and the full exercise of freedoms becomes dependent on one's position within the economic order. Put simply, greater vulnerability diminishes the robustness and accessibility of freedom.

### **PART III: THE ROLE OF THE STATE**

Next, I will analyze the role of state action in limiting vulnerability as a means of enhancing freedom. Properly contextualizing the economic vulnerability felt by a substantial amount of the American population

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requires an investigation of the history of state action and an examination of current action to curb economic suffering. The U.S. government has, at various points in history, worked to alleviate vulnerability and limit its capacity to diminish freedom, yet economic precarity persists. The following presents a detailed discussion of the various eras of state intervention in the economy to manage vulnerability and examines the state's effectiveness, its shortcomings, and its position within the context of capitalism.

### *Historical Action*

To begin, I will document the state action, both successful and insufficient attempts, that has been taken to reduce economic vulnerability throughout the history of the United States.

Prior to the Great Depression, programs to provide relief to Americans in need were not commonly managed by the federal government as the responsibility of welfare fell on state and local governments. The federal government did intervene in the economy to stimulate business and commerce by providing grants for land during the 19th century, and these grants would occasionally be issued to organizations that sought to provide services to those in need, but these organizations were often private (Trattner, 1988). Additionally, Congress would, at times, provide disaster relief in the form of food and supplies, but these funds were typically sent to states to be managed. Following the Civil War, Congress also took an interest in providing assistance for groups in need such as the blind and war veterans (Trattner, 1988). Overall, the federal government was not completely detached from providing relief and welfare programs prior to the 1930s, but the modern application of welfare had not yet been realized. Furthermore, various states attempted to enact labor regulations to protect workers prior to the 1930s, many of which were struck down by

the Supreme Court of the United States. The Supreme Court undermined labor protections by striking down minimum wage laws for women and child laborers in *Adkins v. Children's Hospital*, overturning restrictions on the trade of products made with child labor in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, negating union power in cases such as *Commonwealth v. Pullis* and *Adair v. United States*, and more. This period of anti-labor regulation activity from the Supreme Court is referred to as the Lochner Era, referencing *Lochner v. New York*, and was a concerted effort by Supreme Court Justices to insulate business from federal government regulation, increasing the grasp capitalists maintained over workers (Propkop, 2015). The actual motivations of the Supreme Court are irrelevant, whether the body purposefully aimed to protect businesses and disarm workers is not the point of this study. More consequential is the practical effect it had on radically reducing the power workers could exercise and the degree to which they could be protected by the federal government. This period did not come to an end until the 1930s when the economic conditions of the Great Depression motivated, or perhaps forced, the United States government to take a different path. In all, welfare programs and labor protections were minimal before the 1930s, and the vulnerability felt by the working class as an effect of the lack of protections diminished their freedom.

The genesis of the modern welfare system in the United States can be traced back to the federal programs within the New Deal. Following the economic calamities of the 1930s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pushed forward his New Deal programs which included infrastructure investment, jobs programs, the creation of Social Security and unemployment insurance, disability benefits, various worker protections, government funded housing, and more. While these new laws and programs represented a devi-

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ation away from previous methods of curbing vulnerability in the population and was a boon for many communities, its benefits were not evenly distributed and came with many limitations and shortcomings (Cohen, 2020). Labor unions, while being strengthened by New Deal legislation, still faced a strong uphill battle in bettering working conditions, and black Americans, who were hit disproportionately harder by the Great Depression than other communities, were often excluded from participating in New Deal programs (Leuchtenburg, n.d.). For example, the provisions in the Social Security Act of 1935, a hallmark piece of legislation in the New Deal, intentionally excluded agricultural and domestic workers, a large portion of which were black Americans (DeWitt, 2010). Furthermore, the implementation of many of FDR's desired policies were stifled by the Supreme Court and other actors in the government. By 1935, the Supreme Court had declared many New Deal programs and agencies unconstitutional, limiting the federal government's ability to prioritize economic growth for the most vulnerable. The Supreme Court only halted their assault on the New Deal when FDR threatened to expand the court, meaning that the Supreme Court likely planned to undermine many more federal welfare and regulatory programs (Leuchtenburg, 2005). In his 1944 State of the Union address, President Roosevelt proposed a second Bill of Rights, which would have included, among other things, the right to healthcare, food, clothing, and "a useful and remunerative job" (Priluck, 2018). This proposal was never taken up by Congress and remains unrealized to this day but would have represented a seismic shift away from the prioritization of capital and the concentration of economic power on the owning class. While New Deal programs were not the only factor contributing to the end of the Great Depression, they served to place greater emphasis on the limitation of

material vulnerability through government programs that offered much needed relief. However, the New Deal did not directly confront the processes of capitalism that necessarily engendered economic precarity, and in this way, likely served to dampen calls for more radical changes to the U.S. political economy as the desire for wholesale change diminished alongside vulnerability. Thus, the 1930s witnessed a vast improvement in the state's capacity to limit vulnerability through the modern welfare state, a conquest that can be used to inform future action to limit economic harm, but it did not equally distribute these benefits to all and did not fully resist nor combat the core logic of capitalism that causes vulnerability.

The following era of neoliberalism marked a dramatic shift away from the New Deal-era policies. After the 1970s, the welfare and social safety-net programs from previous decades experienced a massive rollback in favor of austerity and the free movement of capital globally, a mission executed by both major political parties to varying degrees. Neoliberalism became the dominant ideology of the government during this period and was characterized by several core beliefs: government should reduce deficits through expenditure cuts, state interference in the economy through labor regulations and welfare programs hinder development, and the state should avoid regulating foreign trade and international markets (Navarro, 1998). Most notorious for hollowing out the federal government's capacity for providing public aid is President Ronald Reagan, but the creation and enforcement of neoliberal programs can be traced through most administrations since the 1970s regardless of the party in power. Under Reagan, severe cuts were made to many welfare programs that aimed to help vulnerable Americans such as those concerning healthcare, disability, and family benefits. At the same time, tax policy was altered

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to shift the tax burden onto the poorest people while tax cuts generally “failed to compensate for the loss of benefits from welfare programs” (Stoesz & Karger, 1993). Furthermore, the rate of poverty increased following the 1970s in many of the western nations implementing neoliberal policies, including the United States (Navarro, 1998). This era represented an unprecedented growth for the power of capital as capital gained greater global mobility. It became commonplace for capitalists to outsource production to avoid U.S. labor, environment, and tax regulations which diminished the state’s capacity to regulate business and provide for the population. The austerity programs championed by Reagan and his allies produced an enormous trade deficit, alongside budget deficits and an ascending national debt, and redirected much of the remaining American capital towards military production (McCormick, 1995). While subsequent presidencies deviated, in various ways, from the economic ideology of the Reagan administration, a full return to New Deal-era politics has yet to occur. Both President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush bought into neoliberalism, with President Clinton promising to “end welfare as we know it” in 1991 (Carcasson, 2006). President George W. Bush proposed enormous tax cuts once he took office in 2001 that heavily skewed towards helping the wealthy while contributing greatly to the federal deficit (McGahey, 2013). Thus, neoliberal political action, supported generally by both major U.S. political parties, ushered forth a reversal in New Deal-era ideology and reduced the role of the state in limiting economic precarity. With the state’s capacity to regulate capital dramatically diminished and the willingness to introduce and improve public programs annihilated by neoliberal political actors, economic vulnerability today remains insufficiently addressed.

### *Current Action & The Illusion of Democracy*

Moving on, I examine the current state of government action to manage economic precarity and argue that true resolution to vulnerability, and subsequently maximizing freedom, is impossible under a capitalist organization of the economy.

The defining characteristics of United States welfare programs following the neoliberal reforms at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century are work incentivization and means-testing. The 1996 reforms to the welfare system in the United States had the primary goal of increasing employment among recipients (Moffitt, 2002), not to be confused with increasing the actual income and economic status of those in need. These reforms saw the elimination of the Aid for Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) and its replacement with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). Unlike AFDC, TANF comes with work requirements for able-bodied single mothers and limitations on the duration of benefits, which had the effect of boosting employment rates but not the average income of those utilizing the program. Following the changes, many women lost income and the U.S. Congressional Budget Office (CBO) assessed that failure to meet the new work requirements has played a role in pushing more families into poverty rather than lifting them out of it (Congressional Budget Office, 2022). Similarly, programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid have, at times, imposed work requirements onto able-bodied recipients which revoked needed benefits and moved recipients towards greater economic vulnerability (Congressional Budget Office, 2022). Given evidence that work requirements do not substantially improve the lives of those receiving welfare, it becomes clear that the motivating principle behind work requirements is not to produce positive outcomes for recipients;

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rather, it is to manufacture an additional layer of coercion to the necessity of labor for survival.

Alongside work requirements has been the usage of means-testing to receive welfare, which is the practice of targeting benefits to specific portions of the population often by linking eligibility to income or other measures indicative of need. Means-testing is pervasive throughout the United States welfare system and is present in programs such as TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid. When compared to other nations, the U.S. practice of employing means-testing alongside programs meant to reduce poverty substantially reduces the effectiveness of the programs. Generally, nations that utilize non-means-tested strategies, meaning programs that provide a form of social insurance ubiquitously, see greater success in reducing poverty than those that use means-testing (Nelson, 2004). While directly comparing nations that differ in a variety of ways may present numerous complexities, it is worthy to note that the U.S. falls behind in alleviating poverty when put up against other nations. Even when comparing means-tested programs, the U.S. trails Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Canada in terms of the effectiveness in reducing poverty (Nelson, 2004). Moreover, means-testing, in some cases, has the effect of disincentivizing economic growth for individuals as raising one's economic status beyond the limits of eligibility threatens the benefits that keep individuals afloat. When eligibility requirements are loosened in programs such as SNAP and TANF, households are incentivized to engage in activities to improve financial standing such as buying a vehicle or holding a bank account (Johnson & Ludovice, 2022). More simply put, evidence seems to suggest that the more people feel their access to necessities are stable, the more likely they are to seek to improve their life economically, and the revocation of benefits

through strict requirements only harms those in need. Because of the general imposition of strict means-testing throughout U.S. welfare programs, the programs' capacity to reduce poverty is stunted. In sum, the use of work requirements and means-testing in welfare programs in the United States has proved insufficient in addressing economic vulnerability.

In Fiscal Year 2016, the U.S. spent around \$2.7 trillion on social programs in totality (Desilver, 2017). While this is a large figure, the strategy of its implementation has proven to not fully and sufficiently address economic vulnerability. There are many other programs, both at the state and federal level and aside from those already discussed, that ostensibly aim to reduce costs for necessities such as housing, education, transportation, and the like that may warrant further investigation, but the existence of extreme vulnerability and the lack of willingness for the state to ameliorate it indicates that these programs too are insufficient. The ineptitude of poverty reducing programs in the United States, whether on purpose or coincidentally, can be traced back to these state-run programs being built to be subservient to the power of capital and not undermine the wage system. The use of means-testing and work requirements are compatible with capitalism as it serves to limit the options available to workers as the need to work for survival grows and pushes them towards dissatisfactory employment—it is a wholly coercive arrangement. By welfare programs requiring work and disincentivizing saving, the choices average people have available to them and the degree to which they can actually exercise free choice is severely limited, these are restrictions on both negative and positive freedom. In this way, escaping marginalization and achieving the alleviation of economic vulnerability, which may only be slight, requires submission to an employer,

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and the core processes of capitalism that produce vulnerability go uncontested.

Because of the capitalist arrangement of production within the United States, the state is severely limited structurally in the choices available for regulating capital and mitigating vulnerability. Abstractly, because the state relies on capitalist production to fund the state, and to employ the populace as a means of maintaining social order, and because capital interests hold enormous weight over electoral success, politicians on all levels and in both parties are compelled to adhere to the interests of capital while attempting to appeal to as wide a range of voters as possible, two goals that may often conflict — this is known as the legitimization crisis of democracy (Held, 1996). The state's reliance on capitalist accumulation as the source of social maintenance and production prohibits many actions that could be taken by the state to redistribute resources and power and thereby limit vulnerability. Furthermore, because capitalist economics is prone to booms and busts, the state is incentivized to take a greater role in intervening in the economy to avoid recession by protecting the accumulation of profit. More practically, this offers an explanation as to why the state has grown larger but vulnerability persists on a mass scale. As efforts to ameliorate existing inequalities prove to be insufficient, subsidies, tax cuts, and other forms of support offered to corporations are plentiful throughout many of the capitalist economies of the world (Farnsworth, 2013). Proponents of state intervention to support businesses may argue that funding from the state stabilizes capitalism and maintains growth; however, government investment in the wealthiest echelons of society at the expense of sufficient support for the working class has contributed greatly to wealth inequality (Akinçi, 2017). State expenditures for corporations thus may endeavor to maintain profitable production but engenders massive disparities in wealth as the state attempts

to act as a glue to hold together democracy and capitalism, two otherwise incompatible systems. In other words, the ineffectiveness of the state's response to vulnerability over several decades is directly related to the power of capital and the state's role in ensuring production continues. The state, then, fails to act in working towards the elimination of vulnerability because doing so would require resistance to the power of capital, an impossible mission for a state designed to support capitalism.

### **PART IV: ELIMINATING VULNERABILITY**

Given the massive number of people experiencing some level of economic precarity as previously discussed, it is clear that current methods of social welfare and strategies used to limit vulnerability are inadequate and therefore both positive and negative freedom remain limited. For material vulnerability to be relieved in the short-term, a number of policies can be adopted at both the state and federal level. Long-term solutions, however, present a greater challenge. For the government, very often working on behalf of the interests of capital, to establish policies that effectively resist the logic of capitalism, a society-wide paradigm shift is required that includes a reorientation in how production is managed, where power is centered, and how people regard each other. The following section contains both a discussion of potential short-term solutions that could be utilized in the context of American capitalism and long-term solutions that will require greater change. For the purposes of this discussion, the probability of adoption for each solution is not the focal point; rather, the focus is the effectiveness of each proposal in reducing vulnerability and maximizing freedom.

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### *Short-Term Solutions*

Short-term solutions can be understood as policies that could be implemented anywhere between the present day and over the course of several decades, either through legislation at the federal level or any other tier of government. These solutions are meant to be applicable within the system of capitalism while attempting to resist the need for profit embedded within capital accumulation. The following solutions work to reduce economic vulnerability but do not completely eliminate the structural causes of vulnerability as capitalism is left intact — these could be seen as more practical than potential long-term solutions, discussed later. Keeping in mind that means-tested programs with harsh requirements are less effective at reducing vulnerability than social insurance programs that afford benefits to those in need generally, the adoption of policies and programs that apply ubiquitously is preferred. Two specific policy areas, healthcare and higher education, will be the focus, but this does not mean that policies for other need areas are unnecessary, only that they are beyond the scope of this study. The following is an overview of the current state of each policy area and suggestions for policy changes that could be implemented to soften the effects of economic vulnerability.

Within the United States, healthcare is a major cost of living that many forgo due to its exorbitant price and relation to employment. As of 2019, around 10% of the U.S. population was uninsured, meaning that around 30 million people lived without any form of healthcare insurance while about 53% of people utilized some form of privatized insurance (OECD, 2021). At the same time, even when covered by insurance, around half of Americans indicate that they have difficulty affording healthcare costs, and about a quarter of Americans say they have challenges covering the cost of prescription drugs (Montero et al., 2022). While each country

utilizes different healthcare systems and delivery methods, the U.S. ranks last in healthcare outcomes despite spending the most as a percent of GDP on healthcare each year among comparable nations (Schneider et al., 2021). The burden of affording healthcare, a necessary good for survival, contributes greatly to economic vulnerability, and a more efficient and effective system of providing healthcare that can be created in the short-term is one that makes healthcare available regardless of one's income. The adoption of a single-payer healthcare system, a program already adopted in many comparable nations, could work to alleviate vulnerability and promote freedom in a number of ways. First, universal coverage allows everyone to have access to healthcare, thus the 10% that are currently uninsured in the U.S. would have the opportunity to receive care. Additionally, by not linking healthcare coverage to employment, workers have more freedom in where they decide to work as leaving an undesirable job would not threaten one's ability to access adequate medical care. If on the other side of unemployment is untreated illness or injury because of exorbitant healthcare costs, then one is not truly free to seek other employment opportunities. Furthermore, while a single-payer system would require taxation for funding, costs could be reduced for the average American by cutting administrative expenses that typically stem from the unneeded complexity of accessing care. Some estimates place administrative costs at around 15% to 30% of total healthcare spending for the U.S., and while some level of management would remain in a single-payer system, the bloat required to profit from healthcare could be dramatically reduced to save money (Health Affairs, 2022). The money saved from reducing administrative costs may not only reduce the amount spent by the nation, but could put more money into the pockets of individuals by eliminating the cost of premiums, de-

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ductibles, and the like, which would work to lessen vulnerability. This is not to say that single-payer systems do not engender problems and nuances of their own that may require consideration, but a transition away from privatized healthcare would both make care more accessible to those in need and work to dampen the effects of economic vulnerability. In sum, to minimize vulnerability and maximize freedom in the short-term, access to quality healthcare could be severed from employment and provided through a single-payer system.

Moreover, the growing student debt crisis and accessibility of higher education is an area that produces massive vulnerability. Over the course of several decades, the cost of attending an institution of higher education has increased enormously in the United States. Since 1963, the cost of tuition alone at a 4-year public university has increased 747.8%, meaning that tuition in 2022 is 37 times higher than 60 years ago (Hanson, 2022a). Alongside ballooning tuition prices has been a consistent rise in student debt. As of 2021, students are collectively in debt more than \$1.7 trillion, with the average loan balance, including federal and private student loans, sitting around \$40,000 per student. Excluding private loans, when obtaining a bachelor's degree from a public four year university, the average student will take on more than \$32,000 in debt (Hanson, 2022b). Nearly 43 million students are in debt (Hanson, 2022b) and it takes the average student 20 years to pay back their loans in full (Hanson, 2021). Obtaining higher education is one of the best ways to attain upward social mobility, that is, improve one's economic status and reduce material vulnerability (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). However, the unaffordability of college, and the debt that must be taken on to afford college, acts as a financial barrier for those that would use higher education as a means of upward social mobility. In a sense, college education is least

accessible to those that would benefit from it the most—this acts to extend vulnerability into new generations of people. An immediate short-term solution to make social mobility through higher education more attainable would be to eliminate federal student debt in the United States. Student debt acts as an anchor on economic growth, both for the individual and the nation, as being a debtor reduces one's ability to participate in the economy (Hess, 2021). Because 92.7% of student debt is owned by the federal government, an act on behalf of Congress to cancel student debt would immediately unshackle millions of Americans and enhance freedom (Hanson, 2022b). By no longer being tied down by debt and repayment, Americans become less vulnerable as they have more disposable income and can use it where they please, whether it be on their needs or new pursuits. Managing the rising cost of tuition is another, much larger, issue that likely requires a total restructuring in how the federal government regulates university administrations. In general, moving towards a higher education system wherein college is completely decommodified and treated as a service rather than a product to be sold would work to expand opportunity and lessen vulnerability for many. Education reform on its own, however, is inadequate in addressing economic vulnerability as higher education is not a path that all wish to pursue, and one's survival and wellbeing should not rely upon their completion of a degree. Therefore, making other routes more feasible, such as trades or other work, would be beneficial and increase freedom of choice. In sum, education must be made more accessible through the elimination of student debt and the reconstitution of federal regulation to minimize vulnerability and maximize freedom.

In summary, making healthcare and education more accessible to average Ameri-



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cans through the decommodification of both services would work to soften the vulnerability felt by millions of people and therefore maximize freedom. There are a plethora of policy areas that deserve analysis in terms of reducing material vulnerability, and although not discussed in this study, the same basic method of decommodification and universal access could be applied to produce positive outcomes. Often associated with providing broader services through the state is a potential hazard of laziness: the assumption that if people receive the necessities of life regardless of employment status, they will be incentivized to not work and the nation will therefore stagnate. First, it must be noted that in nations that utilize a single-payer healthcare system, the population is still employed. For example, Norway has a single-payer healthcare system wherein all citizens are automatically enrolled and pay into the system via taxation, and their unemployment rate is, as of 2021, at 4.4% (World Bank, 2021b). To suggest that limiting economic vulnerability would induce a sort of widespread apathy among the working population is not only incorrect, but also further suggests that proponents of capitalism favor blocking access to goods as a means of coercion and social control. By withholding important goods and services, such as healthcare and education, citizens are constrained in their options and face structural pressure to work for a capitalist, a limitation on freedom. If it were the case that workers were guaranteed bare minimums, the need to take jobs with undesirable conditions and compensation lessens and the freedom workers have in relation to employers to choose the direction of their lives increases. Simply put, the less vulnerable people are, the more free they are to make choices of their own volition, and providing basic necessities would not cause laziness; rather, it would force employers to compete for workers rather than rely on the structural coercion of

capitalism to force them into the workplace. Despite this, vulnerability is still not eliminated through short-term solutions, and for people to experience the fullest extent of their freedom, broader, structural changes must be investigated.

### *Long-Term Solutions*

In this section, I will argue for long-term solutions to vulnerability that will necessitate a broader reorganization of society. While short-term solutions may be implemented by an act of the state, long-term solutions will require a major shift in how economic production is organized, where power is centered, and how individuals regard each other. In contrast to short-term policy changes, long-term solutions are less empirical and demand a more holistic understanding of how an overhaul of societal norms and organization can benefit each individual, minimize vulnerability, and maximize freedom.

Because inherent to capitalism is an unequal power relationship between employer and employee that portends an unequal distribution of resources, and subsequent vulnerability, moving towards a freer and more democratic system requires a reconstitution of how society's goods are produced. The first step towards alleviating vulnerability must be to establish democratic control of all societal realms that impart economic and political power over others. Undermining the concentration of economic and political power on the capitalist class is key to moving towards social arrangements that benefit the whole of society rather than a subset of the population. Total democratization would allow for each person to truly be equal as no individual would hold power over others, and thus domination would be prevented, freedom would be maximized, and all could "rule and be ruled." It is conceivable that, over time, the basic structure of society could be reorientated such that

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each workplace is democratically controlled, meaning all leadership positions are elected, all hierarchy is justified by the will of the workers, wages and salaries, if they exist, are decided collectively, and so on. Collective decision making and planning would be central to this system and would guarantee equality in power among individuals. However, one can still imagine that vulnerability would persist in some form as individual workers obtain more desirable employment opportunities than others and some are still coerced into working for businesses, now cooperatively-owned, that they otherwise prefer to decline. Democratically operated workplaces are a necessary condition for a more just organization of the economy but may not necessarily resolve every tension associated with capitalist economics. It seems, then, that simply making workplaces democratic is insufficient for fully eliminating vulnerability and maximizing freedom. To completely eliminate vulnerability, a standard of living must be afforded to all people, one where the basic necessities of life are covered to ensure that all decisions made by all individuals are of free choice and not of coercion. A basic standard of living could include access to healthcare, shelter, quality food, clean air and water, and other provisions deemed to be necessary for dignified life in any given society. This standard would undeniably change over time and place depending on what is available given the circumstances—a natural disaster could make farming difficult and therefore limit the food supply, for example—but the equal distribution of the standard is necessary to ensure freedom is accessible to everyone. Functionally, this would make necessary goods publicly-owned resources rather than privately-owned commodities produced for profit. To ensure maximum freedom, there must be a baseline of material well-being that no person is allowed to fall below.

In addition, even with the total democratization of economics and politics and a set standard of living afforded to all people, freedom is not necessarily ensured for historically marginalized groups that may still experience discrimination or prejudice in some manner. While the effects of prejudice may be reduced as capitalism can no longer be the method through which discrimination is imposed, prejudice may still work to limit freedom as mobility, work options, and more could be restricted. Therefore, to maximize freedom for those groups, civil protections must be prioritized. To be maximally free, a basic standard of living must come along with protections against prejudice whereby, even through a democratic majority, minority groups of any kind cannot be oppressed. Minority protections, in this way, are key to maximizing democratic potential as the domination of a smaller group would undermine the equality that is required for democracy to exist in its most robust form. These minority protections would not only apply to historically marginalized groups but to all people such that if the current majority one day finds themselves in the minority on any given matter, they too are protected. More simply, democracy rules, but there must exist a set of universal basic rights that are never violated. To summarize, eliminating vulnerability and maximizing freedom requires a reorganization of production to a more democratic arrangement, a set standard of living afforded to all, and the provision of civil protections for groups that may experience discrimination.

The implementation and maintenance of such systems—democratic production, a standard of living, and civil protections—might be best overseen through collective planning wherein those who wish to participate may aid in the crafting of the laws and norms that guide such a society. The exact nature of such a system, including its finer details, is impossible to know, but its foun-

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dation must be based in democratic and maximal participation to ensure that no individual unjustly controls others and thereby limits their freedom. As systems of production change and new generations of people hold greater agency over their lives, and experience both ends of freedom, society will change in ways unforeseeable to those in the modern era.

Suggestions and estimations can be made as to the utilized methods of democratic organization post-capitalism, but the exact character of the future is unknowable. Outside of tangible implementation, the successful democratization of politics and economics will require a due regard for others. Core to democracy is a respect for people as human beings, an element that cannot be readily measured nor scientifically produced. Inevitably, some liberties must be relinquished when living with others—no civilization can, regardless of its economic system of production, feature absolute freedom—but the process of sacrificing certain freedoms must be to the benefit of the whole without undue detriment to the individual. Basic respect for others as humans and a willingness to engage in good-faith collaboration, and likely disagreement, is essential to a healthy democracy. The process by which other-mindedness becomes common in the collective and individual consciousness is, as well as the future, unknown.

To sum, long-term solutions for fully eliminating vulnerability require a total democratization of the economy such that political equality can be achieved and each person has agency and control over their own labor. Furthermore, to maximize freedom, a set standard of living must be established for all people that includes basic necessities to guarantee that no choice is made out of coercion, that is, the need to survive rather than one's own volition. Additionally, to protect groups that may experience arbitrary discrimination based on race, religion,

ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic, civil protections should be afforded to all people that preclude the possibility of oppression even through democratic decision making. While those three pursuits work to create a free world without vulnerability, it is not clear exactly how such a society is constructed and maintained, nor it is obvious how the required regard for others becomes commonplace in the minds of the populace. The fine details are, at this time, unknowable, but the general direction necessary to create a freer world is one that eliminates material vulnerability through the democratic control of society.

### **PART V: WHO GETS TO BE FREE?**

In conclusion, freedom, in its truest form, does not exist in the United States. Capitalism has jettisoned humanity forward in a number of ways, but the progress made through the capitalist mode of production has been distributed unevenly due to the asymmetrical division of power within the political economy. The unequal distribution of resources, and subsequent material vulnerability, is both a byproduct and feature of the capitalist system as coercion is required to maintain a labor population that will consent to their own subjugation. The massive power disparity between the workers and the capitalists creates a wholly undemocratic system wherein the capitalist holds massive influence over the state and the lives of the non-owning class. This power differential engenders vulnerability on a mass scale and therefore limits the freedom most people have available to them, in both positive and negative terms, regardless of the codified legal rights that all receive via citizenship. Simply put, lacking real choices and the actual ability to make use of liberties, freedom is limited for all but those with the power and wealth to purchase it. To maximize freedom for all people, all institutions and societal realms

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that impart economic and political power must be democratized such that no individual or group holds arbitrary power and can weaponize it to dominate others. Because the political technology of capitalism demands an unequal power distribution for the maintenance of the capitalist system, democracy and capitalism are incompatible, and thus, freedom is only maximized when capitalism is resisted and eliminated in favor of social good. In short, within capitalism,

those who get to be free are those who own what others need to survive, and within a system such as this, freedom is rarely expressed fully. For vulnerability to be entirely eliminated, the pursuit of three main ideals, all corequisites of each other, must exist at the forefront: democracy, equality, and freedom. If the mythologized American ideals are ever to be realized, a strict adherence to these three principles is paramount.

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