



Peak Oil, Sustainability and the Problem of Freedom

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on June 7, 2009 - 10:22am

Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

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The following is a guest essay by Kurt Cobb exploring the concept of freedom via a resource depletion filter. Kurt speaks and writes frequently on energy and the environment and is featured on many sites including [Energy Bulletin](#) and [EV World](#). His personal weblog is [Resource Insights](#). Previously on TheOilDrum, Kurt wrote [Peak Oil and Mass Communication](#).



In the film "[A Beautiful Mind](#)" the putative hero is [John Nash](#), the Nobel prize-winning mathematician who struggles with paranoid schizophrenia and ultimately overcomes it. The same John Nash early in his career created a model of human behavior that lives on in our institutions and policies and which has significantly constricted our views of human freedom. So says a BBC documentary series entitled "[The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom](#)."

(The three episodes of the documentary are available on YouTube: [Episode One: F*ck You, Buddy](#), [Episode Two: The Lonely Robot](#), [Episode Three: We Will Force You To Be Free](#).)

The documentary's thesis is that Nash's view of humans as "self-seeking, almost robotic, creatures" has been incorporated into public policy and culture both in the United States and Great Britain in a way that undermines human freedom. The issues discussed in the broadcast and in a seminal essay by philosopher [Isaiah Berlin](#) entitled "[Two Concepts of Liberty](#)" which is referenced in the program have profound implications for those concerned about peak oil, resource depletion in general or any set of issues that falls under the rubric of sustainability. The ideas of negative and positive freedom outlined by Berlin in his famous essay and the Nashian

model of human behavior pose difficult challenges to those who want to put human society on what they perceive as a more sustainable path.

First, let me briefly outline Berlin's definitions of negative and positive freedom though a complete reading of his essay is necessary to comprehend all the nuances. Negative freedom is essentially the freedom to be left alone. It is freedom from coercion, but within a well-defined realm that has differed from age to age. It would now commonly include one's home life, religious life, leisure pursuits and even voluntary economic transactions (that is, those involving something other than paying taxes). It is the realm of personal choice. But it is also the realm of privacy including the right to be free from arbitrary searches and the right to confidentiality in our financial and medical affairs.

Positive freedom is more difficult to explain. It involves the amount of autonomy we have, that is, the power we are able to exert over our own lives outside the realm reserved for personal choice and privacy. For example, at work your employer has a great deal to say about what you do, where you do it and how you are compensated. If you are member of a union, then you along with your fellow employees will have a bit more to say about these issues. If you are self-employed, you may have yet more autonomy, but your customers will limit what autonomy you have through the demands they put on you. If you are independently wealthy and do not have to work, you may have yet more autonomy though your autonomy will never be absolute.

If you live under a dictatorship, even if the dictator is very benevolent and gives you a great deal of negative freedom, you will still have very little autonomy in the political sphere. If you have a say in who governs you, then your positive freedom will increase. But it does not necessarily follow that your negative freedom will also increase. Berlin takes pains to point out that democracy does not always coincide with greater negative freedom. Democratically elected governments can decide to curtail severely the realm of personal choice and privacy. Witness the increasingly intrusive security measures enacted in the wake of the September 11th attacks on the United States.

Perhaps most important of all, each type of freedom is subject to being turned into an absolutist doctrine that perverts and undermines the very notion of freedom.

This is a mere sketch of Berlin's two kinds of freedom. But, it will serve my purpose of showing how contemporary notions of these two views of freedom affect efforts to reform society. The social reformer is always on the side of positive freedom. As it turns out, everyone who has a child is a social reformer. Parents believe they know what's best for children, and so they constantly correct their behavior. They try to set them on a course that will allow them to prosper emotionally, physically and mentally, a course that will prepare them for adult life.

Certainly, parents normally allow a realm of play and free expression for their children that can be seen as a type of negative freedom. But when it comes to brushing their teeth, eating their vegetables, and taking their vitamins, most parents take the view that an unhealthy child with rotting teeth and stunted growth will not be truly free to pursue his or her talents to the greatest degree possible.

This is where positive freedom comes in. Without the ability to act autonomously either due to poor health, imprisonment or impoverishment, all the negative freedom in the world is useless. A hungry person has little use for negative freedom and far more use for food. True, a hungry person with wide latitude to act in the marketplace to obtain the food he or she needs may have advantages. But lack of food may prohibit him or her from taking full advantage of that freedom in the first place.

In addition, parents also generally insist on education for their children. Again, without any skills or social training, all the negative freedom in the world is meaningless.

Governments often act like parents with respect to their citizens. They may insist on compulsory education for the young. They may insist on vaccinations as a public health measure. They may make laws to ensure the safety of food and automobiles. This is, of course, where controversy rages. The government as social reformer is behaving as if it knows what's best for each of us in the belief that by compelling us to get an education or to follow certain procedures to produce disease-free food, it will enhance our individual and collective lives. The belief is that following these requirements will actually make us more free by increasing our chances for success and helping us to maintain our health.

How far should the government go in trying to get us to do what is supposedly "best" for us? And, should it compel us to help other people obtain an education or basic nutrition or essential health care through taxation? In other words, is our freedom enhanced when the positive freedom of others who live around is also enhanced?

Berlin isn't opposed to positive freedom, but fears its unrestrained trajectory. The 20th century is replete with figures who were certain they knew what would allow humans to discover their true nature and become their highest and best selves. The trouble with this sort of absolutist thinking is that it can end up justifying imprisoning, torturing and/or killing all who stand in the way of perfecting humanity. The examples of the [Stalinist purges](#) of the 1930s and the so-called [Cultural Revolution](#) in China in the late 1960s and early 1970s are just two among many.

On the other hand, we celebrate figures such as Rachel Carson, who helped to spawn the modern environmental movement which has been in part focused on preventing the uncontrolled poisoning of the environment by human activities, especially the indiscriminate use of pesticides. This has been done primarily through government regulation. And, while in some circles controversy still swirls around the mandatory vaccination of children, Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, is hailed by most as a hero for creating a vaccine which every child is now essentially forced to receive.

(Berlin might have been perplexed by the perversions of negative freedom as well. At least one of the justifications for the war in Iraq was to bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East. But the two words are not necessarily interchangeable as explained above. The result has been to bring the tradition of negative freedom as we know it to Iraq, particularly in the functioning of the economy where the previous socialist system of government control was dismantled almost overnight. Bringing our type of negative freedom to a country at the point of a gun hasn't worked out as well as planned.)

So, what is the state of interplay of these two notions of freedom today? The answer in the United States and Great Britain is that we are as cultures one-sidedly wedded to the idea of negative liberty. But even that idea has been further constricted by the widespread application of the Nashian model of human behavior in public policy. Nash's model was designed to describe a two-player game, namely The Cold War, in which the best posture was constant suspicion, and the most fruitful tactic betrayal. Nash's model is based on [game theory](#) and is related to the situation hypothesized in the now famous [prisoner's dilemma](#) problem. Each player plays to maximize his or her own gains without concern for the other. This has become what the documentary "The Trap" refers to as the maximizing information processor model of human beings with particular but not exclusive reference to their economic transactions.

If humans are atomized self-maximizers, scheming and calculating for their own advantage at all times, then any policy that treats them otherwise is foolishly misguided. Now, here is the crux of the problem for anybody who wants to reform society, that is, help others achieve more positive freedom. If this model of humans is correct, then leaders in every part of society including government are only out to enhance their own well-being and power to the exclusion of everyone else.

[American economist James M. Buchanan](#) (covered in the BBC documentary mentioned above) even posited that there is no such thing as "the public interest." There is only the competing self-interest of government officials and politicians trying to maximize their own gains, i.e. more pay, more power, more promotions, more election wins, etc. Therefore, the only way government could be made to serve the populace would be to provide incentives that make it in government employees' self-interest to serve the self-interest of members of the public. (There appears to be a bit of a contradiction here since citizens all working for their self-interest seems to be Buchanan's definition of what's best for society as a whole, i.e. the public interest. But let's leave this problem aside.)

Creating government services and protections for the public is problematic from the beginning, Buchanan and his fellow theorists explain. It is better to leave everything one can to the marketplace. That is where individuals can truly operate to satisfy their own interests most effectively and efficiently.

Buchanan was a consultant to the governments of both British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her successor, John Major. It is Thatcher who once said: ["Who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families."](#) If you read the entire passage, you'll see that she didn't quite embrace anarchy though her ideas reflect the libertarian notions evinced by Buchanan. But the effect of Buchanan's ideas can be seen even in the efforts of so-called left-of-center governments such as we find in a Clinton-era program referred to as ["Reinventing Government."](#) It is not the attempts to make government more effective at delivering services that should concern us here. It is the notion that there is no such thing as the public interest. If this is true, then there can be no meaningful program for improving society as a whole, only attempts by individuals to pursue their own improvement (or not) as they see fit.

In the context of resource depletion and sustainability such a view can only mean that the marketplace will determine all. No government intervention can take place save to enhance the interests of particular groups at the expense of others. That is the sole meaning of "government program." In Buchanan's view it cannot be construed otherwise.

The problem for those who seek widespread sustainability preparations is that this view has come to be widely accepted by the public and even by politicians. And, its corollary--that humans are all independent information processors that aim to maximize their personal gains at all times--has also achieved a broad purchase on the public mind.

What strategy, then, might one pursue to counteract this view which is now so prevalent? I no longer concern myself with the diehard cornucopians and techno-optimists who will never be convinced that anything truly catastrophic could ever happen to us or the natural systems that support us. The way to win any battle for the public mind is to focus on the so-called "persuadables." These are the people who haven't really made up their minds about an issue, and they tend to be the largest segment of any population. On this count my worry grows exponentially. As Robert Rapier has explained on this site previously in a piece entitled ["We Won't Stop Global Warming,"](#) most people say they want to do something about global warming. But when one places a price on actually doing something, say, raising the cost of gasoline \$1 a

gallon through taxes, support for action drops precipitously. People see themselves as maximizing consumers first, and citizens with duties to a greater society second.

Therein lies the conundrum. Any public-spirited sacrifice--even for people who believe there is a problem--seems out of a question in societies whose entire politics and culture are dominated by the idea that personal wants are the equivalent of the public good. In the longer run the question of human freedom becomes even more nettlesome in my view because a sustainable *industrial* society implies two things: a steady-state economy and a stable population. [And, that implies considerable regimentation of daily life, the likes of which people in Western-style democracies have never experienced.](#)

It is conceivable to me that the privations of a post-peak oil world or, say, a food and water crisis brought on by the collapse of one or more key natural systems could alter the current paradigm of humans as selfish maximizers. But, by then it will be too late to prepare; we will only be coping.

I wonder whether anything can be done to change the way people think about freedom *now*, while there is still some time to do something that might be labeled as preparation. Certainly, the negative freedom we enjoy today in places such as Britain, the United States and Canada, allows individuals to make their own preparations. But that can only go so far. It seems to me that collective action in many areas will be required to avoid the worst consequences of resource depletion and to forestall ecosystem collapse. For that we need an entirely revised understanding of human freedom. But, if that's desirable, is it even possible?



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