

# Freedom?

by TWO FUSE



Síreacht *Longings for another Ireland*

Below is the introduction to *Freedom?* (Cork University Press, 2018)

In this contribution to the *Síreacht* series, the collaborative platform Two Fuse examine the practice of freedom in the context of neo-liberal enterprise culture, focusing specifically on how this is shaped by power relations that sustain social suffering by generating an equality of inequality. Responding to this situation, Two Fuse look to socially-engaged art with a view to exploring possibilities to reimagine the practice of freedom, paying particular attention to the 2016 performance *Natural History of Hope* by Fiona Whelan, Rialto Youth Project and Brokentalkers.

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## Introduction

*Look at the little crazy guy, swaggering down the hall,  
he could dance his way to freedom if you don't make him fall ...1*

Many of the words and concepts we use in everyday language have the peculiar feature of being ready to hand and easy to use, until the moment we are asked to explain or defend our usage. This is partly because we may not always be fully aware of *how* we are using words that are so familiar that their meaning appears self-evident.<sup>2</sup> ‘Democracy’ is a good example. When we say a government or organisation *is* democratic, we are most likely also making an evaluative statement – we are implicitly or explicitly expressing a positive appraisal of the government or organisation in question.<sup>3</sup> ‘Freedom’ can be a troubling word to use for similar reasons. Is there a valid way to distinguish between the use and misuse of a word such as freedom? There is an extensive and interesting academic literature that can assist us in this regard, for example by enabling us to distinguish freedom *from* (tyranny or domination), freedom *to* (pursue a particular conception of the good life or the good society), and freedom *as* (self-determination or autonomy).<sup>4</sup> If we take the time to study exemplary texts written by philosophers and social scientists on the topic of freedom, then we can learn to grasp – in our mind – the *idea* of freedom. However, this way of knowing is not always satisfactory, not least because many of the great minds who have written on the topic of freedom have done so

by retreating from the messiness of the real world in order to construct a purified and unified concept or theory.<sup>5</sup> If we instead begin with a question such as: ‘what is it that motivates people to act and struggle in the name of freedom?’, then we are perhaps obliged to pay attention to the substance of freedom. In other words, freedom is something we *experience* and *practise* in everyday life.

Freedom is also something we can imagine, but this is arguably different from engaging in theoretical abstraction. To imagine freedom is not the same as being able to debate the work of eminent philosophers on the topic of freedom. To imagine is to imbue our thoughts, and possibly our actions, with the power of creativity; it is to begin to sense that the world we inhabit can be altered, maybe even transformed. This might also serve as a reminder that freedom has a fugitive quality in that it always promises to be more than it actually is. To phrase that slightly differently, to imagine freedom is to reach for something that doesn’t exist in the ways in which we might imagine it, and yet does exist to the extent that we can and do experience degrees of freedom in our everyday lives. Does it matter whether we practise and experience *this* type of freedom as opposed to some other imaginable freedom? We think it does matter, which is in part what this book is about.

In contemporary Ireland we are free to participate in what has been described in a series of policy frameworks and economic strategies as the ‘knowledge economy’. Predating the sweeping austerity programme that commenced in 2008, it remains a curious feature of the times we live in that the policies which have failed in the past are expected to somehow rise to the challenges of the future. Hence, as talk of economic recovery gains traction, so the idea of a ‘knowledge-based and innovation-intensive’ economy is again becoming an audible mantra.<sup>6</sup> It is worth recalling that at the height of the boom once known as the Celtic Tiger economy, commentators began using the phrase ‘Ireland Inc.’, and not always in an ironic sense, which was both instructive and troubling. Tuning into this language as it circulates in the form of spoken and written words, it is all but impossible to miss repeated references to ‘innovation and enterprise’, two words that follow each other as though joined by an invisible cord. In the language of bloggers and social-media enthusiasts, the innovation/enterprise couplet has gone viral and, as with ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, these are words that have consequences in terms of how we use them. To take the notion of ‘Ireland Inc.’ seriously is to assume that democracy has somehow morphed into an enterprise, and insofar as we are free, we are free to innovate and manage ourselves *as* enterprises. We will be using the phrase Enterprise Society as shorthand for this set of issues.<sup>7</sup> This will take some explaining, but for now perhaps we should pause to reflect on the degrees of freedom available to us in the Enterprise Society: we are free

to consume – for those who can afford it, and for the rest the alternative is to become enslaved to debt; we are free to choose – from numerous drop-down menus with the available options chosen for us; we are free to compete – making cooperation and solidarity a liability; and we are free to fail – as individuals, meaning that each must take ownership of their own misfortune. However, we are also free to refuse to live on these terms. If we can reimagine freedom, then we can also find ways to do things differently. This is also what this book is about.

## A Summary of the Contents

As outlined in the Acknowledgements, Two Fuse is a platform that brings Kevin Ryan and Fiona Whelan together through a commitment to thinking across the boundaries of disciplinary enclosures while also acknowledging the collaborative nature of inquiry. Both of these considerations have a bearing on the internal organisation of the book, which is in four sections. Section 1 is titled ‘Degrees of Freedom’, and the aim here is to begin to add flesh to the idea of the Enterprise Society by reflecting on how the practice of freedom is conditioned and constrained by visible, intangible and invisible forms of power. Sections 2 and 3 span three fields of practice: sport, academia and art. Section 2, ‘Freedom in the Enterprise Society: catch up, keep up, get ahead...’ is a comparative analysis of two of these fields: high-performance sport, with a focus on professional cycling, and academia. At first glance these fields might seem to have little in common outside of sports-science and sports-studies programmes. However, there are less obvious ways in which these fields of practice are beginning to shade into each other. In France, one of the historical strongholds of sports cycling, road racers were once known as ‘pedal workers’ because making a living from the sport was understood to be hard manual labour. Things have since changed, of course, and now top-tier professional cyclists live the lives of wealthy celebrities (though they are still the poor cousins of peers in more lucrative sports, such as soccer and tennis). Many more, however, only dream of reaching the top, and the things they do in order to rise up the rankings, or in some cases merely to stay in the sport, can tell us much about the ways in which competition in the more general sense is intensifying. One manifestation of this is the use of performance-enhancing drugs, a contentious issue that affords insight into the excesses of ceaseless innovation. For example, it is not unusual for aspiring young cyclists to pay their own wages in exchange for a chance to race for a professional squad, so that their status as a ‘professional’ masks the reality of working as an unpaid intern. In the case of seasoned professionals, the terms of employment are typically short contracts of one to three years in duration – which is essentially a form of on-demand labour – a practice that is becoming common in other fields, too, including higher

education. Academia produces its own stars – intellectuals who acquire celebrity status<sup>8</sup> – but, as with professional sport, many more struggle to stay in the game and academia is increasingly in step with the wider trend towards flexible and precarious labour. This generates practices which are analogous to performance enhancement in the sporting arena. If professional cycling was once perceived as an exploitative form of manual work and academia an exemplary and prestigious form of mental work, then both have now become a type of machine powered by the excesses of the Enterprise Society. To juxtapose these two fields is to see something of how the practice of freedom is shaped by the pressure to excel, the imperative to do whatever it takes to keep up with one's peers and rivals, and the opportunity to fail.

The field of art is by no means immune to these trends; indeed, a growing emphasis on the economic potential of the 'cultural and creative industries' might be taken as an indication of the extent to which art is becoming yet another enterprise.<sup>9</sup> However, many artists are working at or beyond the fringes of the culture industry and some push beyond the boundaries of art itself so that art becomes a form of social practice. This is why we turn to the field of art in Section 3, which is titled 'Reimagining the Practice of Freedom'. Presented as a dialogue, our conversation focuses on *collaborative* and socially *engaged* practice, that is, artistic processes and projects concerned with social issues and/or political change, orchestrated through meaningful engagement with people, and typically manifesting beyond the confines of galleries, museums and festivals. More specifically, we discuss Fiona's collaborative art practice, which is based in Dublin and spans more than a decade, exploring and addressing power relations through durational, reciprocal engagements with people and place. It is important to make this connection between power and freedom explicit from the outset. We will be focusing on how the practice of freedom is shaped and formed by power, and in different ways, so that power constrains but may also enhance or transform the practice of freedom. In short, power and freedom are inextricably linked, which is why we will have much to say about power in this book. In addition, and as noted above, there is nothing intrinsic to the field of art that sets it apart as a privileged site from where alternatives to the Enterprise Society might emerge. Insofar as alternatives are possible, these will have to emerge within spaces sometimes described as 'interstices' – spaces *between* aesthetics and politics to be opened out from within the tissue and texture of social life itself. In this way we also hope to respond to the aims of the *Síreacht* series, and here it might be worth recalling a slogan born from the tumultuous events of May 1968 in Paris: 'Sous les pavés, la plage!' ('Under the cobblestones, the beach!').<sup>10</sup> Another world is always possible, but first we must be able to imagine it.

It was never our intention to write a conventional conclusion to this book, which is why

we have framed freedom as a question in the title. Freedom is as much problem as practice, and to try to reach a conclusion as to what freedom *is* or *ought to be* would be an exercise in folly, because it would be like trying to harness or shackle the imaginable. In place of a conclusion, we are instead writing towards a transitional point, and thus in the final section (Section 4) we present extracts from a public performance called *Natural History of Hope* (Fiona Whelan, Rialto Youth Project, and Brokentalkers, 2016). This is discussed in detail in Section 3; for now it is enough to point out that this way of ending the book is intended as an invitation to others to join us in exploring the possibility of reimagining the practice of freedom. Sections 1–4 might be described as a set of cumulative steps. The first step gathers together the tools to be used for critical inquiry, the second step conducts a type of diagnostics, and the third and fourth steps explore the possibility of breaching the constraints of the Enterprise Society. Imagine yourself working at a computer and it starts to do odd things; it's not broken exactly, but it's glitchy to the point where it stops being a useful tool and starts to become a stress-inducing hindrance. Someone who knows their way around the computer's operating system can probably put their finger on the problem, even if they don't necessarily know how to fix it. This is essentially what Section 2 attempts to do. By examining recent developments that traverse the fields of high-performance sport and academia, we attempt to show how comparative analysis can yield insights of more general relevance, in effect constructing a portrait of freedom as practised in the Enterprise Society. This type of diagnostics reaches its limits, however, at the point where it runs up against the question of what comes next. We have no satisfactory answer to that question, but we are keen to explore it through dialogue. There is something of an invisible boundary that often separates academic inquiry from the world of practice, exemplifying a more general tendency to partition the social world along the contours of specialisation, in turn giving rise to enclosures of knowledge. By engaging in dialogue (Section 3) that crosses this invisible boundary, our aim is to approach freedom as a question and to use dialogue as a way of keeping this question open, thereby avoiding the temptation to close it down. In other words, we are not writing towards a terminus where we claim to have answered or resolved our question (as in: The End), and we will not be presenting a fictional Utopia or hypothetical account of life after the Enterprise Society (whatever that might look like). Instead, our objective is to learn from what people are actually doing as they engage with the ways in which power both constrains and augments the practice of freedom.

Notes:

1. Horslips, 1977. 'Sure the Boy Was Green'. From the album *Aliens*. Produced by Alan O'Duffy and Horslips (Dublin: Horslips Records).
2. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
3. W.B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 1956, pp. 167–98.
4. J.S. Mill, 'On Liberty', in *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).
5. See for example P. Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001).
6. See for example Government of Ireland, *Innovation 2020: Excellence, Talent, Impact: Ireland's Strategy for Research and Development, Science and Technology* (Dublin: Interdepartmental Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation, 2015); Government of Ireland, *Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2016* (Dublin: National Competitiveness Council, 2016).
7. M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); P. Dardot and C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013).
8. An example is the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. His YouTube channel has over 35,000 subscribers and has recorded almost three million hits since 2013.
9. See for example the European Creative Industries Alliance, <http://eciaplatform.eu/about-ecia/> (accessed 16 December 2016).
10. Punctuated by a general strike, with students and workers occupying universities and factories, and also by street battles between protestors and police, the events of May 1968 have been lauded as a revolutionary turning point by some, and lampooned by others as the revolution that never happened.