

Bedtime Radicalism

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**WHAT IS
FREEDOM?**

*ft. Slavoj
Žižek*



WHAT IS FREEDOM?: A LOOK INTO THE DEADLOCK OF LIBERALISM'S IDEA OF FREE CHOICE

What is this famous "freedom with responsibility" if not a new version of the good old paradox of forced choice? You are given freedom of choice on condition that you make the right choice; you are given freedom on condition that you will not really use it.

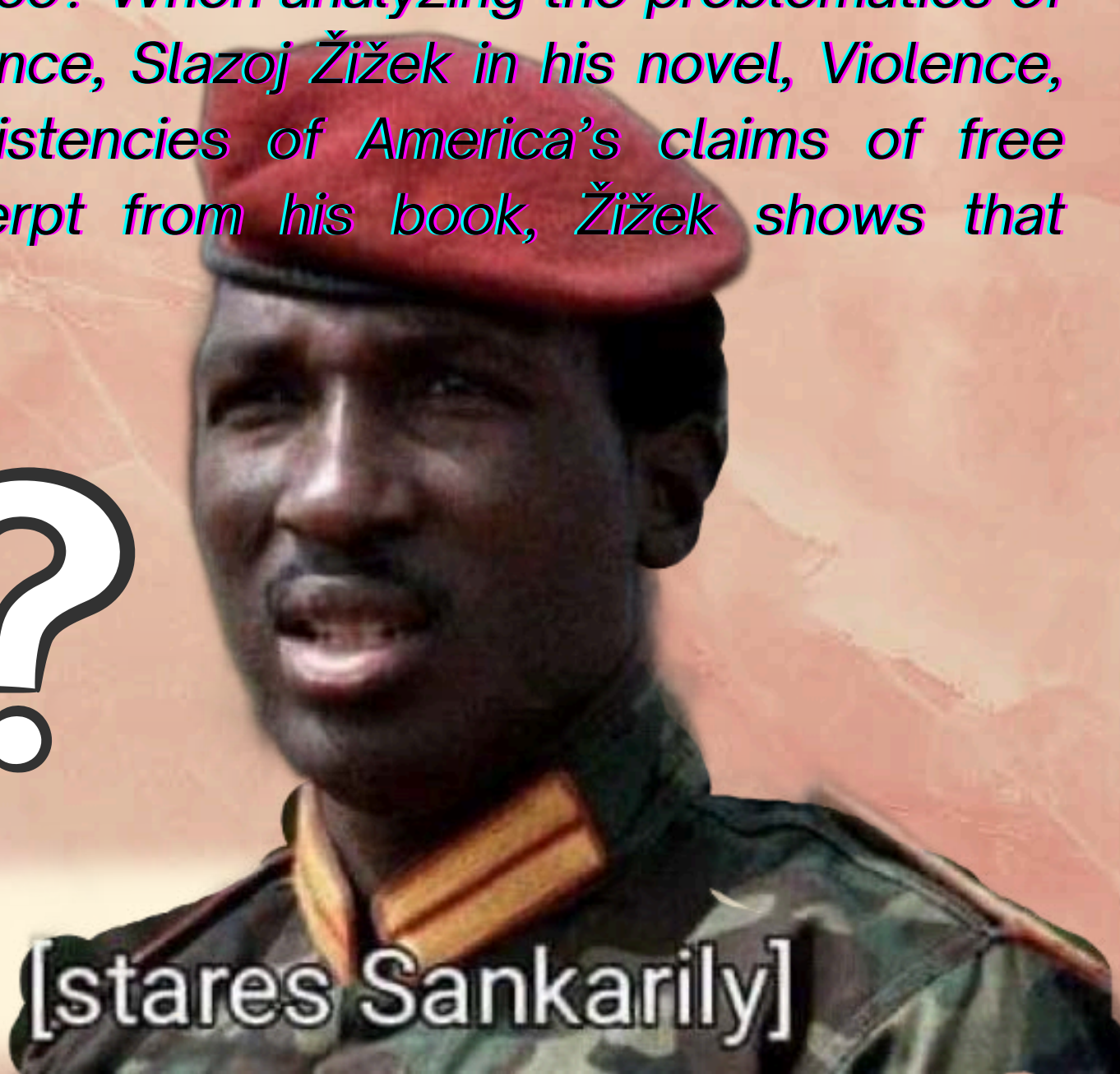
Pg 129 Antinomies of Tolerant Reason

Freedom to me has become a buzzword that holds many implications to many people, yet is truly hard to pin down to a singular meaning. To exercise freedom implies that there was previously a state of subjection or lack of choice. Western society can use Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and Hamilton as the archetypal forgers of freedom as well as events such as the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, or the contemporary examples of landmark decisions such as *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) and *Roe v. Wade* (1973) as examples of freedom prevailing. While we could surely spend pages critically analyzing these historical touchpoints and their impact on our understanding of freedom, I would prefer to look at the context in which we understand freedom today.

Western society, also dubbed the freeworld,¹ boasts of many freedoms such as the free market, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom to bear arms, etc. This commitment to freedom is shared across political affiliations as seen by those on the right contending for their freedom for to [popular right issue] and those on the left, fighting for a women's rights to their own body. Constitutionally, these partisans are within their right to advocate for their interests, however, can these partisans truly say that they are exercising free choice? When analyzing the problematics of the notion of tolerance, Slavoj Žižek in his novel, *Violence*, reveals the inconsistencies of America's claims of free choice. In an excerpt from his book, Žižek shows that freedom is not



[stares Sankarily]



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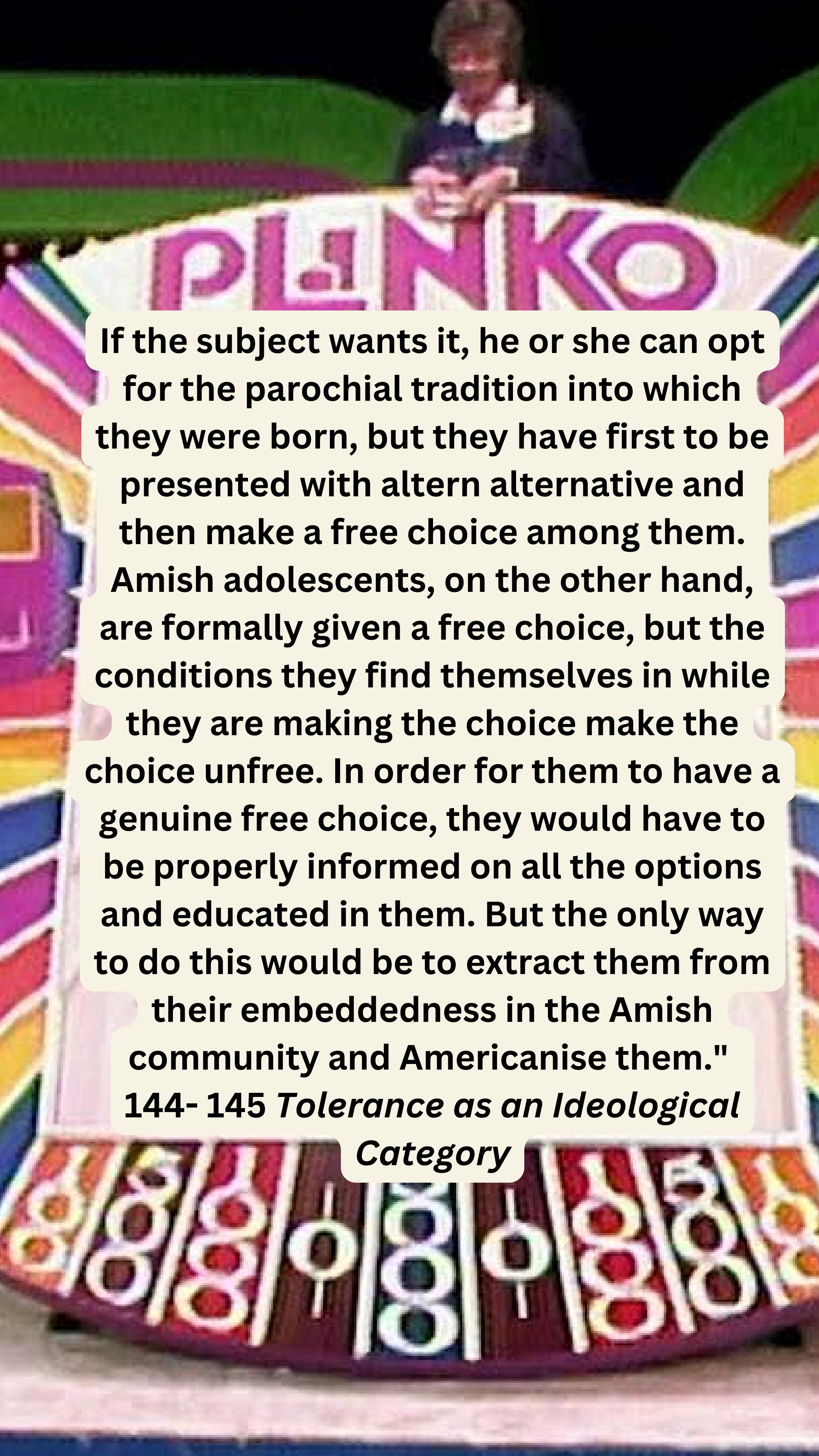


"Firstly, it is not truly universal, kulturlos, without culture. Since, in our societies, a gendered division of labour still predominates which confers a male twist on basic liberal categories (autonomy, public harbours male dominance). and relegates women to the private sphere of family solidarity, liberalism itself, in its opposition of private and public, harbours male dominance.

Furthermore, it is only modern Western capitalist culture for which autonomy and individual freedom stand higher than collective solidarity, connection, responsibility for dependent others, the duty to respect the customs of one's community. Liberalism itself thus privileges a certain culture: the modern Western one. As to freedom of choice, liberalism is also marked by a strong bias. It is intolerant when individuals of other cultures are not given freedom of choice-as is evident in issues such as clitoridectomy, child brides, infanticide, polygamy, and incest.

However, it ignores the tremendous pressure which, for example, compels women in our liberal society to undergo such procedures as plastic surgery, cosmetic implants, and Botox injections in order to remain competitive in the sex market.

The liberal idea of a "free choice" thus always gets caught in a deadlock.



If the subject wants it, he or she can opt for the parochial tradition into which they were born, but they have first to be presented with altern alternative and then make a free choice among them. Amish adolescents, on the other hand, are formally given a free choice, but the conditions they find themselves in while they are making the choice make the choice unfree. In order for them to have a genuine free choice, they would have to be properly informed on all the options and educated in them. But the only way to do this would be to extract them from their embeddedness in the Amish community and Americanise them."

144- 145 *Tolerance as an Ideological*

Category



Žižek in this excerpt shows how Western culture is predominated by patriarchal and individualist dogma therefore inflects the seemingly universal pillar of freedom. Through this framework of liberalism, although we are not forced to this rigid caste of work, income, or leisure (as was so feared with the threat of Socialism), the question again arises: can we truly say that we are free?

A


Put another way, we are given a choice between option A, B, or C, (or perhaps even fewer options) even if the options are not in our best interest.

B

From then we are convinced or rather coerced to accept that we have free choice despite the alternative options condition's being to our detriment.

C

For example, if you choose to vote, this façade of free choice is seen every single election cycle.

A group of people are seated around a large wooden table in a meeting room. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair is seen from the back, wearing a purple top. To her right, a man in a blue shirt is looking towards the center. Further down the table, a woman with blonde hair is gesturing with her hand while speaking. Other participants are visible in the background, some looking at documents. The room has large windows with blinds and a modern interior design.

We are given two candidates from either the Democratic Party (option A) or Republican Party (option B) and are given the “free choice” to choose between the two. In reality there are several other choices that can be made such as voting for an independent, writing in your choice, or simply not voting. However, the latter options are deemed as “irresponsible” or “non-patriotic”. Therefore, although you are given the option of a free choice, the ramifications that follow often deter people from choosing freely because they do not want to experience a social death², which leads to a circumstance of limited decisions.

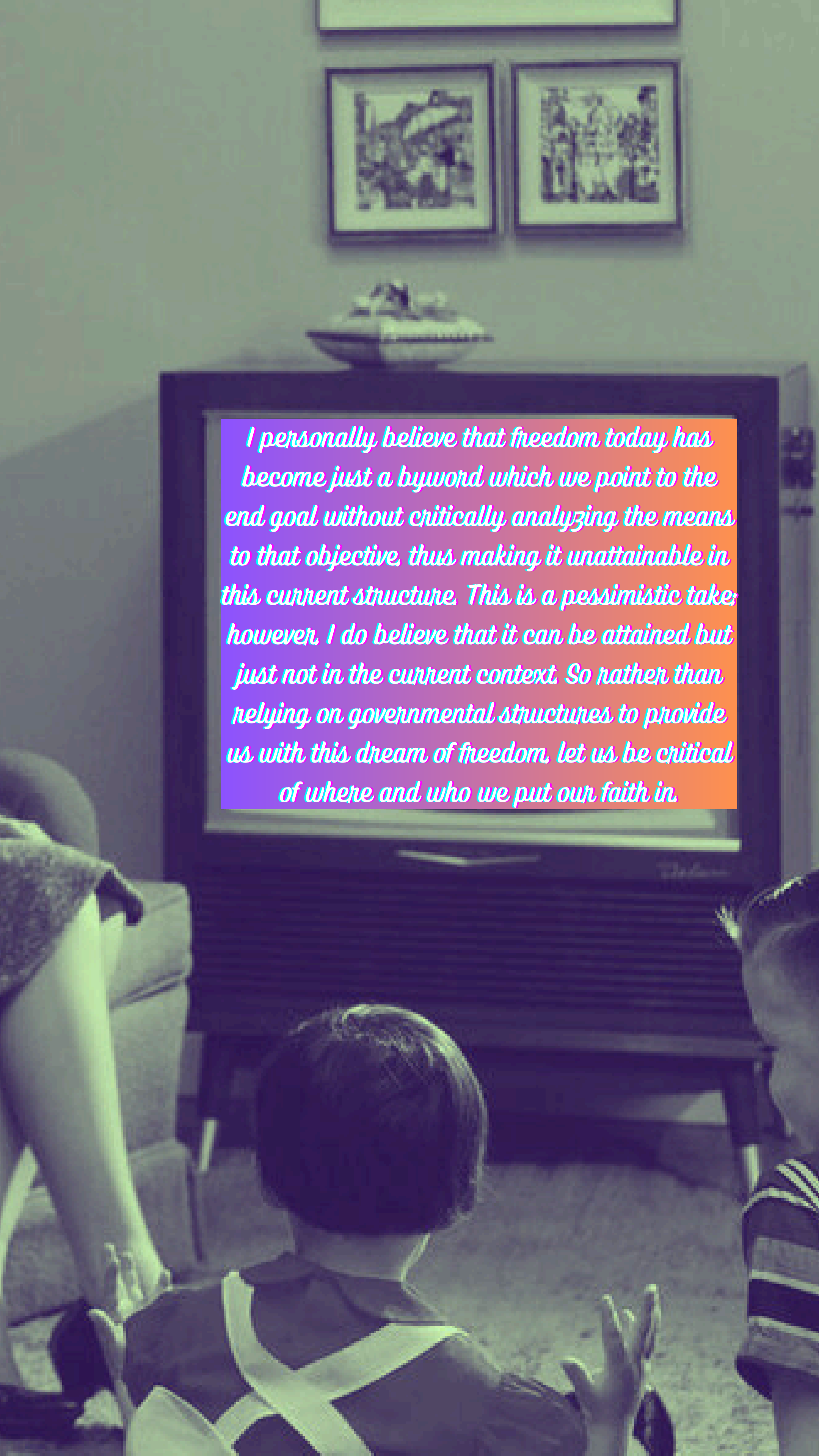
Žižek uses an example of Muslim women who are freely permitted to wear their veil if the choice is not imposed upon them. Despite them exercising their freedom to faith, in Western society, once the veil is worn "It is no longer a sign of their belonging to the Muslim community, but an expression of their idiosyncratic individuality". Žižek describes "the 'subject of free choice' in the Western 'tolerant' multicultural sense" to be due to an emergence of an "extremely violent process [that tears] out of a particular lifeworld, of being cut off from one's roots." 146

So then if we live in the hegemon of Western liberal free choice, we are conditioned through violence to accept the limited options provided to us and are disillusioned to believe that we are better off than those who are not provided the West's twisted idea of free choice.

"One can, of course, argue that, in a way, the Western situation is even worse because in it oppression itself is obliterated and masked as free choice (What are you complaining for? YOU chose to do this.) Our freedom of choice effectively often functions as a mere formal gesture of consent to our own oppression and exploitation. However, Hegel's lesson that form matters is important here: form has an autonomy and efficiency of its own. So when we compare a Third World woman, forced to undergo clitoridectomy or promised in marriage as a small child, with the First World woman "free to choose" painful cosmetic surgery, the form of freedom matters-it opens up a space for critical reflection."

P 147-148 Tolerance as an Ideological Category

So then how do we begin to reflect on who's free, what is free, and if freedom is even attainable? In his novel, *Violence*, Žižek has a lot more to say about this topic, specifically in the chapter "Tolerance as an Ideological Category".

A photograph of a living room scene. In the foreground, the back of a young child's head and shoulders are visible as they sit on a light-colored sofa, looking towards a television. To the right, another child is partially visible, also watching the TV. The television is a large, dark-colored model with a wide screen. On top of the TV sits a small, white, modern-looking boat. Above the TV, two framed pictures hang on the wall, and a small decorative object is placed on a shelf above them. The room has light-colored walls and a carpeted floor.

I personally believe that freedom today has become just a byword which we point to the end goal without critically analyzing the means to that objective, thus making it unattainable in this current structure. This is a pessimistic take; however, I do believe that it can be attained but just not in the current context. So rather than relying on governmental structures to provide us with this dream of freedom, let us be critical of where and who we put our faith in.



*Questions?
Comments?
Email me your
thoughts to
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.com*

- 1. A name given to non-communist powers due to its former opposition to the Soviet bloc*
- 2. Social death is a relative term because although white people can feel the ramifications of going against the hegemon, I would argue they cannot truly socially die. Orlando Patterson noted that Black people or people of color, on the other hand, experience a natal alienation caused by a continual social death because they were never supposed to be woven into the social life of America/ whiteness. Therefore, this is a flimsy example if applied to Black or POC because in the American psyche the terms of being "irresponsible" or "non-patriotic" are already woven into their (non) being.*