

From Solid Modernity to Liquid Freedom: Rousseau, Kant, and the Crisis of Liberation in Modernity

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Abstract:

This paper examines the historical development of the modern pursuit of liberation through the philosophical perspectives of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Isaiah Berlin, and Zygmunt Bauman. Beginning with Rousseau's critique of civilization and the loss of natural freedom, the study explores how modernity emerged from the tension between human independence and social constraint. It then analyzes Kant's Enlightenment philosophy, which transformed liberation into a project of rational progress and moral autonomy, establishing the intellectual foundation of early modernity. Through Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty, the paper further clarifies the conflicting understandings of freedom that shaped modern political and philosophical thought.

Keywords: Liberation; Modernity; Negative Liberty; Positive Liberty; Rousseau; Kant; Liquid Modernity; Bauman; Freedom; Enlightenment

1. Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously states in *The Social Contract* that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." This tension between natural freedom and civilized constraint has remained one of the central dilemmas of modernity. As human civilization developed, individuals gradually departed from the independent and instinctive state of the natural man and entered increasingly complex systems of social dependence, political authority, moral obligation, and rational discipline. Although civilization promises security, justice, and progress, it simultaneously generates new forms of restriction that shape both the ex-

ternal and internal life of the individual. The modern human being thus lives in a paradoxical condition: while seeking liberation through civilization, they also become increasingly constrained by it. Rousseau identifies this contradiction as a fundamental problem of modern humanity. In the natural state, human beings possessed an unrestricted form of independence and mobility, living according to instinct rather than social expectation. In contrast, civilized individuals are externally dependent on social structures and internally divided between reason and passion, personal desire and collective obligation. Since there is no return to the natural state, modernity becomes inseparable from the continuous attempt to resolve this

contradiction and recover some form of freedom within civilization itself. The pursuit of liberation, therefore, is not merely a political issue, but the defining historical movement of modernity.

To understand this pursuit of liberation, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of liberty itself. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Isaiah Berlin distinguishes between negative liberty and positive liberty. Negative liberty refers to the absence of external interference, asking to what extent an individual is free from the obstruction of others. Positive liberty, by contrast, concerns self-mastery and autonomy, asking who or what governs the individual’s actions. These two notions of freedom illuminate different dimensions of the modern struggle for liberation. Rousseau’s concern with escaping oppressive dependence largely reflects the problem of negative liberty, while the Enlightenment tradition, especially in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, increasingly emphasizes positive liberty through rational self-governance and moral autonomy. The development of modernity can thus be understood as a historical transformation of the pursuit of freedom. Early modern political thought attempted to replace arbitrary social dependence with legitimate and universal structures such as the social contract, law, and rational morality. However, contemporary modernity has gradually shifted away from constructing stable collective frameworks and toward dissolving restrictions altogether. This transformation is described by Zygmunt Bauman as “liquid modernity,” a condition characterized by flexibility, mobility, deregulation, and the weakening of stable social bonds. In liquid modernity, freedom is increasingly defined through mobility, choice, and the reduction of constraints, simulating a return to the unrestricted condition of Rousseau’s natural man.

This paper argues that the crisis of contemporary liberation does not stem from insufficient freedom or insufficient liquidity, but from the mistaken belief that all forms of limitation can and should be dissolved. By tracing the intellectual development from Rousseau’s critique of civilization, through Kant’s rational modernity and Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberty, to Bauman’s analysis of liquid modernity, this study examines how the modern pursuit of liberation gradually transformed into an obsession with unrestricted fluidity. Ultimately, the paper contends that genuine liberation requires moving beyond the childish desire for absolute independence and toward a more mature reconciliation between individual freedom, collective existence, and the unavoidable weight of human life.

2. The Past: Rousseau, Kant, and Early Modernity

The modern pursuit of liberation originates from the tension between humanity’s natural condition and the structures of civilization. Before contemporary liquid modernity attempted to dissolve social restrictions through mobility and flexibility, earlier modern thinkers sought liberation through the construction of rational and legitimate social orders. Rousseau and Kant represent two decisive stages in this intellectual development. Rousseau identified the loss of natural freedom caused by civilization, while Kant transformed this problem into a project of historical and moral progress grounded in reason. Together, they laid the philosophical foundation of early modernity and its understanding of liberation.

2.1 Rousseau and the Natural State

Rousseau’s conception of the natural man provides the starting point for understanding the modern crisis of freedom. In the state of nature, the human being exists independently, guided entirely by instinct and immediate need. Unlike civilized individuals, the natural man is not embedded within fixed systems of social dependence, economic obligation, or political hierarchy. From the perspective of Isaiah Berlin’s distinction, the natural man enjoys almost complete negative liberty because no external authority systematically interferes with his actions. At the same time, he does not require positive liberty, since there is no internal division between rational duty and irrational desire. The natural man does not struggle between competing identities or moral obligations because instinct entirely governs his existence. He simply lives according to his passions and immediate necessities.

Civilization fundamentally transforms this condition. Once human beings settle into organized societies, they become dependent upon others for survival, recognition, and security. Property, labor, political institutions, and social expectations create networks of interdependence that restrict individual autonomy. The civilized individual is therefore externally constrained by social structures and internally divided between conflicting desires and obligations. Reason confronts passion; personal interest conflicts with collective expectation; the pursuit of recognition undermines natural self-sufficiency. Rousseau’s famous statement that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” captures this transformation from natural independence to civilized dependence. For Rousseau, however, there is no realistic return to the natural state. Humanity

has irreversibly entered civilization, and liberation must therefore be pursued within society rather than outside it. This problem motivates Rousseau's theory of the social contract. Through the social contract, individuals voluntarily surrender natural freedom in exchange for civil freedom and legal equality. The legitimacy of this arrangement rests upon the "general will," which represents the collective interest of the people rather than the arbitrary interests of individuals or rulers.

The social contract attempts to resolve both the external and internal conflicts of civilized humanity. Externally, dependence on unequal personal relations is replaced by dependence on a universal and legitimate political order. Individuals become subject not to the arbitrary power of others, but to laws grounded in the collective will. Internally, Rousseau seeks to reconcile the conflict between private desire and public obligation by encouraging individuals to identify themselves with the common good. In this sense, Rousseau introduces an early form of positive liberty: individuals become free not merely by escaping interference, but by participating in and willingly obeying the rational collective order that expresses their "true" will. Yet this solution already contains tensions that later modernity would inherit. The more freedom becomes associated with participation in a higher rational or collective order, the more easily coercion can be justified in the name of liberation. Rousseau's attempt to reconcile freedom and authority therefore becomes one of the central foundations of modern political thought.

2.2 Kant and the Enlightenment Project

Immanuel Kant expands Rousseau's insights into a broader philosophy of historical and moral progress. While Rousseau focuses primarily on the contradiction between natural freedom and civilization, Kant interprets this contradiction as part of humanity's developmental destiny. Human beings are no longer understood as creatures who tragically lost nature, but as rational beings progressing toward moral maturity. In "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?", Kant defines enlightenment as humanity's "emergence from self-incurred immaturity." Immaturity refers to the inability to use one's own reason independently. Enlightenment therefore represents liberation through rational autonomy. Humanity progresses by gradually freeing itself from ignorance, superstition, instinctive dependence, and external authority.

Kant transforms the problem of freedom into a fundamentally positive conception of liberty. A truly free individual is not one who merely acts without interference, but one who governs himself according to rational and universal principles. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,

Kant argues that moral actions are free precisely because they are performed out of duty rather than impulse or desire. Freedom becomes self-mastery through reason. This philosophical shift profoundly shapes the development of modernity. Liberation is no longer simply the removal of external chains; it becomes a process of rational self-perfection. Humanity is placed on a historical path toward greater civilization, justice, and moral autonomy. Modernity itself acquires a progressive structure: society must continuously improve its institutions, political systems, and moral consciousness in order to approach greater freedom. However, this project also introduces new tensions. The belief that humanity progresses toward a rational and universal form of freedom risks imposing a singular vision of the "correct" way to live. If reason represents humanity's true destiny, those who resist this direction may be regarded as irrational, immature, or in need of guidance. The modern pursuit of liberation therefore begins to contain the possibility of coercion in the name of freedom itself.

3. The Present: Liquid Modernity and False Liberation

If early modernity was defined by the attempt to resolve the contradiction between natural freedom and civilized constraint through stable political and moral structures, contemporary modernity is characterized by a radically different trajectory. Instead of constructing solid frameworks of legitimacy and rational order, present-day society increasingly seeks liberation through the dissolution of structure itself. Zygmunt Bauman describes this condition as "liquid modernity," a form of social life in which fixed institutions, stable identities, and enduring relationships are replaced by constant mobility, flexibility, and transformation. Freedom is no longer imagined as participation in a rational order, but as the absence of constraints and the maximization of individual choice.

3.1 From Solid Modernity to Liquid Modernity

In contrast to the "solid" phase of modernity, where institutions such as the nation-state, class structure, and moral systems provided relatively stable frameworks for collective life, liquid modernity is defined by the weakening or fragmentation of these structures. Bauman argues that early modernity carried an "illusion of completion," the belief that society could eventually reach a rational and stable form. In liquid modernity, this belief collapses. Modernization becomes an endless process without a final endpoint, driven not by the pursuit of a stable ideal, but by the continuous need for adaptation and self-reinvention.

Within this context, liberation is increasingly identified with the reduction of dependence. Technological development reduces dependence on nature, globalization reduces dependence on locality, and market deregulation reduces dependence on institutional constraints. At the level of everyday life, individuals are offered an expanding range of choices: consumption options, career trajectories, mobility opportunities, and forms of identity. In this sense, modern life appears to approximate the condition of Rousseau's natural man, who moves freely without fixed attachments or imposed obligations.

3.2 The Rise of Negative Liberty and the Disappearance of Collective Structure

One of the defining features of liquid modernity is the dominance of negative liberty as the primary social ideal. Freedom is increasingly understood as the absence of interference: fewer regulations, fewer obligations, fewer collective constraints. Political, economic, and cultural life all move toward the reduction of externally imposed limitations on individual choice. Yet this expansion of formal freedom is accompanied by a parallel erosion of collective structures that previously provided stability and protection. Public institutions weaken, social solidarity declines, and long-term commitments are replaced by short-term, reversible arrangements. The individual is increasingly positioned as an autonomous unit responsible for navigating an expanding field of choices without the support of stable collective frameworks.

3.3 De Jure Freedom and De Facto Constraint

This tension produces a fundamental contradiction between de jure freedom and de facto freedom. On the surface, individuals in liquid modernity enjoy unprecedented legal and formal autonomy. They can move across borders, change careers, construct identities, and participate in global networks of consumption and communication. However, in practice, this freedom is unevenly distributed and structurally constrained. The expansion of choice does not eliminate inequality; instead, it reorganizes it. Individuals are formally responsible for their own success or failure, yet the conditions that determine outcomes remain deeply unequal. In this sense, liquid modernity transforms social problems into private responsibilities. The result is a paradoxical condition in which individuals are simultaneously "free" and overburdened. They are free to choose,

but also forced to bear the full consequences of choices made within structurally unequal environments.

3.4 Individualization and the Fragmentation of Solidarity

Another defining feature of liquid modernity is the process of individualization. As traditional social bonds weaken, individuals become increasingly isolated from collective forms of identity and support. Family structures, class identities, and long-term communities lose their stabilizing role, replaced by temporary networks and fluid affiliations. This fragmentation of solidarity intensifies the experience of freedom as isolation. Individuals are encouraged to construct their own identities through consumption, mobility, and self-optimization, yet they do so without durable social foundations. The result is a condition in which autonomy expands formally, while existential insecurity deepens. Modern spaces—cities, workplaces, digital platforms—reflect this transformation. Individuals coexist physically in dense environments yet remain socially disconnected. Relationships become reversible, competitive, and instrumental. Even intimacy is increasingly structured through choice-based systems that mirror market logic. Freedom thus takes the form of continuous selection, replacement, and adaptation rather than stable belonging.

3.5 The Illusion of Liberation

The ideology of liquid modernity presents this condition as the fulfillment of liberation. The removal of constraints is equated with progress, and the multiplication of choices is interpreted as an increase in freedom. In this sense, contemporary society appears to realize the long-standing aspiration of modernity: the removal of chains and the expansion of individual autonomy. However, this liberation is fundamentally ambiguous. It produces what can be described as false liberation—a condition in which formal freedom increases while substantive freedom becomes more fragile. The individual is no longer bound by visible external chains, yet is increasingly governed by invisible structural forces such as market volatility, technological systems, and global inequalities. The deeper problem, therefore, is not the absence of freedom, but the transformation of freedom into burden. In liquid modernity, the individual becomes the sole bearer of responsibility for navigating a world that is structurally unstable and unequal. Freedom is no longer experienced as empower-

ment, but as pressure.

4. The Future: Toward a Mature Form of Liberation

The development of modernity reveals a continuous transformation in humanity's understanding of freedom. Rousseau identified the loss of natural independence brought by civilization; Kant transformed liberation into a rational and historical project of human progress; liquid modernity, in turn, attempted to dissolve restrictions altogether through mobility, flexibility, and individualization.

4.1 The Weight of Freedom

One of the defining contradictions of liquid modernity is that freedom itself becomes a burden. Every expansion of individual choice simultaneously expands individual responsibility. In a society where individuals are expected to determine their own identities, careers, relationships, and futures independently, every success and failure becomes personalized. This burden is inseparable from freedom because every choice necessarily produces consequences. To choose freely means to bear responsibility for the outcome of that choice. In liquid modernity, where freedom is increasingly individualized, responsibility is individualized as well. The modern subject therefore carries not only the pressure of making choices, but also the anxiety of potentially making the wrong choices in a world where certainty no longer exists. At the same time, individuals are affected by countless decisions made by others within global networks of economic, technological, and political interdependence. A corporate decision made on another continent may determine the livelihood of workers thousands of miles away; fluctuations in global markets may reshape personal lives without warning.

4.2 The Limits of Total Liquidity

Liquid modernity assumes that liberation can be achieved through the endless dissolution of restrictions and solid structures. The freer the individual becomes from obligations, traditions, and collective limitations, the closer society supposedly moves toward emancipation. However, this assumption overlooks a fundamental reality: human existence itself possesses unavoidable limits and weight. No amount of liquidity can fully eliminate inequality, vulnerability, mortality, or dependence. Even in a world of maximum mobility and choice, individuals still differ in power, resources, abilities, and opportunities. Those with greater economic or institutional power inevitably benefit more from liquidity than those without it. Global elites move through the liquid world with far greater ease

than ordinary individuals, while the burdens of instability disproportionately fall upon the vulnerable. The pursuit of unrestricted freedom therefore becomes self-defeating. As modernity attempts to dissolve all forms of solidity, it simultaneously dissolves the very conditions that make meaningful human life possible: trust, responsibility, solidarity, continuity, and collective purpose. A society composed entirely of isolated and infinitely flexible individuals risks becoming incapable of sustaining any durable form of community or public life.

4.3 Beyond False Liberation

The failure of liquid modernity does not imply that freedom itself is undesirable, nor does it require a return to rigid traditional structures or authoritarian forms of order. Rather, it suggests that liberation must be reimagined in a more mature form. Genuine freedom cannot consist solely in the absence of constraints; it must also involve the capacity to live meaningfully within the unavoidable conditions of human existence. This also requires the reconstruction of public space and collective responsibility. If all social burdens are privatized, individuals become isolated and powerless before global systems of power. A sustainable form of liberation must therefore restore forms of solidarity capable of distributing responsibility collectively rather than leaving individuals entirely alone within liquid systems of competition and insecurity. Moreover, freedom must be separated from the illusion of infinite possibility. The mature individual recognizes that limits are not merely obstacles to freedom, but conditions that give human life coherence and meaning.

4.4 Toward a Mature Modernity

The future of liberation depends on whether modernity can move beyond its obsession with unrestricted fluidity. Humanity's historical development should not be understood as a linear process toward the complete elimination of all constraints, but as an ongoing effort to balance freedom with responsibility, individuality with solidarity, and mobility with stability. In this sense, the pain of modernity does not stem from insufficient modernization or insufficient freedom. A mature modernity would therefore reject both rigid authoritarian structures and the fantasy of total liquidity. Instead, it would seek forms of liberation that acknowledge human limitations while preserving individual dignity and autonomy. Freedom would no longer mean escaping all bonds, but participating consciously in forms of collective life that enable both personal development and shared responsibility.

5 Conclusion

The history of modernity can be understood as humanity's continuous pursuit of liberation. From Rousseau's critique of civilization and its chains, to Kant's vision of rational progress and moral autonomy, and finally to Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity, the meaning of freedom has undergone profound transformation. What began as an attempt to reconcile human independence with civilized society gradually evolved into a modern project aimed at dissolving restrictions altogether. Contemporary society increasingly equates liberation with mobility, flexibility, and the removal of stable structures, believing that greater individual choice necessarily produces greater freedom. However, this paper has argued that liquid modernity ultimately produces a form of false liberation. Although modern individuals possess unprecedented freedom *de jure*, they remain constrained *de facto* by structural inequalities, global systems of power, and the burdens of individualized responsibility. The dissolution of collective structures does not eliminate dependence; rather, it transforms dependence into more fragmented and invisible forms. As stable institutions, public solidarity, and enduring social relations weaken, individuals become increasingly isolated while simultaneously bearing the full weight of freedom and its consequences.

The contradiction at the center of modernity therefore cannot be resolved simply through further liquidity or the endless expansion of choice. The modern obsession with unrestricted freedom rests upon the mistaken belief that all limitations are oppressive and that human fulfillment can be achieved through the perpetual dissolution of constraints. This does not imply a rejection of freedom or a return to rigid authoritarian structures. Rather, it calls for a more mature understanding of liberation. Genuine freedom cannot consist solely in the absence of restrictions; it must also involve the capacity to live meaningfully within the realities of collective existence and human limitation. A mature form of liberation would therefore seek balance rather than absolute fluidity: balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility, between mobility and

stability, between personal freedom and collective solidarity. The future of modernity depends on humanity's ability to move beyond the childish dream of complete independence. Liberation should not be understood as the destruction of every bond, but as the creation of forms of social and political life that allow individuals to flourish without denying the relational and finite nature of human existence. Only by recognizing the unavoidable weight of humanity can modernity move toward a more sustainable and genuinely emancipatory future.

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