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INTRODUCTION

WRITING THIS BOOK has involved a steady stream of choices, large and small, from what to write about in the first place to whether the initial word of this sentence should be "writing" or "drafting" or even "crafting." If you plan to read any further, you too will have to make a number of choices: To read straight through in the order I've imposed? To read only the chapters that interest you? To look in the index and pick where to land? The table of contents and index, even the chapter headings, are there largely to help you decide.

You are unlikely to be rattled by having to choose among these several, discrete alternatives, however. A great deal of contemporary life is given over to studying menus of various kinds and then making deliberate, preference-driven selections from among the options presented—which is generally what choice today entails. We shop for goods we desire in supermarkets, at flea markets, in chain stores, and, increasingly, online. We pick what we want to watch, read, hear, follow, even (sometimes) believe to be true. We vote our favorites: for bond issues, for presidents, for winners on television game shows. We select—or hope to select—friends, lovers, and spouses, places to live or travel, subjects to study, jobs, hobbies, even insurance and health plans to hedge our bets when something we cannot choose occurs.

A few years ago, when I boarded a flight to Japan on Air Canada (whose slogan at the time was "Choice is good"), my own choices of the day started on a screen with hundreds of entertainment possibilities available at the touch of a finger. There was even a weepy Nicholas Sparks movie on offer called, appropriately, *The Choice*. The necessity

of making such determinations only concluded when, after disembarking, I had successfully eaten dinner by grabbing at what I took to be the most attractive sushi options in a Tokyo restaurant as they came endlessly around a snaking conveyor belt, a menu come to life. The business of selecting and the logic of the menu of options have become both a way of life and, it is widely assumed, a means to build a life—or what we now call a "lifestyle."[1]

For choices, from this vantage point, not only help each of us get what we want. We *are* the sum of our choices. (Even opting out, like Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, has come to represent one among many possible choices about how we want to live and who we want to be.) Although we rarely make up the rules of the game or craft the banquet of possibilities, we like to think that when we are expressing our personal preferences, we are engaged in the business of self-realization as distinctive and independent people. Both having choices and making choices are largely what count these days as being, indeed feeling, free.[2]

This conception of the self, and even more of freedom, spans the political spectrum in the contemporary United States. It forms the basis of what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once called a *doxa*, the set of largely taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird all explicit fights in a given era.[3] Consider "reproductive choice" on the left and "school choice" or even choice in health-care providers on the right. One reason for this recurrent rhetoric is that few Americans today see themselves as opposed to the maximization of either alternatives from which to make selections or occasions to do so. We generally only disagree about what those alternatives are supposed to be.

This *doxa* is not, though, limited to North America, even if that's perhaps where it exists right now in its most exaggerated form. The language of democracy and human rights, running parallel with capitalism and advertising campaigns like Air Canada's, has spread globally, if highly unevenly, the idea that human autonomy, dignity, and even happiness and fulfillment depend on the ability to make one's own, personally satisfying choices, with a minimum of impediments, from among a range of options. Today that faith even anchors official charters and

constitutions in many parts of the world. A commitment to individual choice has become fundamental to the kind of formal statements of equality of opportunity, if not outcome, that nowadays suggest a free society (which is also why even autocratic regimes usually pay lip service to this ideal, instituting sham forms of voting, for example, no matter how little they count in practice).

The "free choice of employment" (art. 23), the "right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (art. 26), and the "right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives" (art. 21): all already appear in the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 as basic principles states should uphold.[4] Religious rights were reworded by the United Nations in a similar way in the 1960s as a right to choose a religion.[5] So were marriage rights, where talk of the "free and full consent of the intending spouses" gave way by the late 1970s to "the same right [for men and women] to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent."[6]

Since then, the range of those choice-based rights has continued to expand, at least in theory. The Indonesian constitution states that "every person shall be free to choose and to practice the religion of his/her choice" (though the choice is among six official religions, in effect a limited menu of state-sanctioned possibilities). The constitutions of Ethiopia, Ukraine, and Finland guarantee choice in place of residence. In Fiji, India, and Zimbabwe, citizens have the right to consult a legal practitioner of their own choosing. Ecuador protects citizens' right to join trade unions and other organizations of "their choice." In Nepal there is even a provision in the 2015 constitution laying out one's "right to choose" when it comes to "endemic seeds and agricultural species."[7]

The categories of peoples purportedly holding these rights have grown as well, from the disabled to the gender nonconforming to (with limits) youths. Partly this is rooted in the assumption that, as the Canadian philosopher Michael Ignatieff puts it in a rousing twenty-first-century defense of human rights, individuals are only free when they have agency, which he defines as the "right to choose the life they see fit to lead."[8] But this momentum also stems from the widely shared notion

that being able to choose is not just worthy of our attention on instrumental grounds. What has "intrinsic value," explains the American philosopher Gerald Dworkin, is "being recognized as the kind of creature who is capable of making choices. That capacity grounds our idea of what it is to be a person and a moral agent equally worthy of respect by all."[9]

Indeed, it follows that if more and better choices on the part of more people is considered the desired effect of good policy in what we now call liberal democracies, good policy depends on the aggregated but democratically determined choices of individual citizens. According to the great late twentieth-century liberal political theorist John Rawls, people cannot and should not be expected to agree on preferences, aspirations, or even the conditions for a good life. However, they *can* agree on the need for the state to establish stable institutions by which to adjudicate equitably among different and conflicting goals. And they can agree on the process.[10] Democratic theory turns today on the idea of the individual citizen as a rational maker of personally sound choices who has consented, largely out of self-interest, to follow a set of collectively proscribed choice-making rules and to live by the results. Ideally, these results will guarantee the further expansion of personal choice, albeit with certain necessary if often controversial limits, going forward.

The modern economy is supposed to work on a very similar premise. Choices, rooted in individual wishes and desires, are created by and then work to drive effective markets. In response, effective markets generate more options for more people to pick among.[11]

We should not be surprised, then, that the notion of the human as an autonomous choice-maker acting on his or her closely held and distinctive penchants, values, and tastes is currently at the core of standard explanatory mechanisms as well. This conception of the self animates rational choice theory in the social sciences, with its reliance on the model of the utility-maximizing subject. It also holds weight when we are engaging in more prosaic talk at kitchen tables or in courtrooms about individual actors "taking personal responsibility" for choices freely made. That includes the ones that turn out badly.[12] In fact, stories about the deliberate choices we have made and their consequences are major parts of how we narrate our own existences today, albeit with varied

cultural inflections among those of different backgrounds. Truly alternative versions of the self generally make us a bit nervous. As the commentators in a recent American updating of the traditional Passover Haggadah point out, people who identify as Jews have a much easier time these days thinking of themselves as choosers than as chosen.[13]

Arguably, though, it is feminism where the full power of the concept of choice is most evident today, and it is women's lives and identities that have been most buffeted and ultimately transformed globally in this concept's wake. It was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that Isabel Archer, the central character of Henry James's great novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, announced that she wanted to know even the things one shouldn't do, not to do them, but "so as to choose."[14] Since then, what counts as a good (virtuous) choice versus a bad (unvirtuous) one has become less and less clearly defined. The range of possible paths has also greatly expanded. But from Isabel Archer's time onward, more or less, the mainstream women's rights movement has adopted and made good use of the idea that emancipation requires extending to women the same choice-making opportunities, conditions, and options as those previously accorded to men, plus a few others that are sex-specific. Fundamental still to most strains of feminism is the conviction that women become empowered precisely at that moment when (a) they each get to choose for themselves what they most desire (following Ignatieff's logic), and (b) they are recognized by themselves and others as capable, autonomous choosers (following Dworkin's).

This was certainly the reasoning behind the decision of American feminist organizations like NOW to advocate for legal abortion services in the 1970s with the slogan "the right to choose." Such language was intended, as we will see, to tie a controversial medical procedure to what had become a relatively uncontroversial economic, political, and moral outlook.[15] We now know it didn't work out quite as hoped. Still, the basic premise continues to hold sway: choice *is* freedom as we conceive of it in much of the world. This is, bluntly, the Age of Choice.

So, how did this happen? How did we—meaning primarily residents of the West but increasingly the people of all places around the globe that

bill themselves as capitalist democracies—come to turn choice-making into a proxy for freedom in so many different realms of modern life and transform the social roles of both women and men in the process?

Not everyone would agree that this is a question for a historian to tackle at all. To a certain degree, of course, to choose is natural to people of both sexes. We humans have probably always had preferences for some things over others, from particular foods to particular persons. Scientists, along with philosophers, have also helped us see people, across space and time, as hardwired for certain kinds of autonomous decision-making tasks.[16] Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, in particular, have insisted in recent years that how and what we choose are shaped by the long-term process of evolution—meaning the needs of our species—as much as anything else.[17] Women, for instance, much as they think they are expressing personal predilections when it comes to mates, are biologically programmed over time to choose men with certain characteristics that will ensure their own replication. These choices then further shape the evolutionary process.[18]

Such claims are, perhaps, reinforced by the apparent dominance, even hegemony, of choice—as a term, as a value, and as a social practice—today. To be asked to make a choice, even an essentially meaningless one between, say, two or three or twenty different shampoos in the pharmacy or one hundred different profiles on Tinder, has come to seem such a natural, unexceptional part of life in much of our globalized world that it is rarely considered as culturally or historically specific behavior. On the contrary, it can often feel, especially among the earth's more prosperous inhabitants, as if what we confront is just a ceaseless expansion of opportunities and options, both material and abstract, to do what we were meant to be doing all along.

But to the historian—and particularly one with a long-standing interest in the history of the *doxic*—it is evident that the specific forms choosing has taken and, even more, the significance that we have accorded it as a hallmark of freedom from consumer capitalism to human rights and feminism *are* historical developments. This claim holds even if we accept that the ability to choose is part of what makes us human. It holds even if we accept that many of our choices are a lot

more biologically determined than they appear to us. Our investment in choice-making as a lived experience, and the special weight we attribute to this experience despite its clear limitations and exclusions, constitutes a crucial element of the story of Western modernity. So is seeing the world as structured by these choices and humans as fundamentally freely choosing selves. "Take your choice!," as Major John Cartwright urged his British contemporaries in 1776, is, in fact, a deeply culturally and temporally distinctive battle cry.[19]

For we also know that not only did people, male or female, have and make quantitatively fewer choices in the distant past, but understandings of what freedom means or feels like have also changed substantially over the last few hundred years. Until relatively recently, to be free in the Western world actually had almost nothing to do with having the capacity to make unconstrained decisions at every turn about how to forge a life path or worldview out of the possibilities available. What made a nobleman in early modern Europe free was quite the opposite: the knowledge that, as a result of his status, he was not dependent on or dominated by anyone else (an ideal that never fully went away either).[20] That, and the security of having a predetermined set of beliefs, life partner, landholdings, income, belongings, and social role before, in many cases, even reaching adulthood.[21] In a world where continuity and stability were exceptionally prized and so much was handed down, maximizing choice-making opportunities was not just of limited appeal. It was also unlikely to matter much, especially for those at the top of a relatively fixed social hierarchy.

For women this was even more obviously true, even if liberty was long personified as a heroic female holding a flag or staff or book. Plus, where alternative paths did exist for either sex, they were, as we will see, typically framed in the register of "Hercules' Choice," a popular, early modern allegory (and subject of much great literature, music, and art) in which decision making boiled down to two, unequal options. One could do the right and proper thing associated with the good of others. Or one could choose badly by acting on one's fleeting and selfish instincts and, as a result, head down the path of licentiousness and vice.[22]

The rest of what happened generally came down to luck, fate, God's larger plan, or something else quite outside human control. Even the point of the biblical story of Eve was, for most Christians, that it was important for humans not to misuse their divinely given capacity for free choice unless they sought to bring suffering upon themselves.[23] Freedom, in a spiritual and moral sense, traditionally meant living in inner peace with a set of already widely agreed-upon rules and obligations. This is quite different from how we usually think about choice *or* liberty in the twenty-first century. In other parts of the world, notably South and East Asia, conceptualizations of freedom traditionally took even more radically alternative premodern forms and, to a certain degree, still do. Consider, for example, Gandhi's "non-willing" freedom, which was all about relinquishing rather than affirming one's will or surrendering without subordination.[24]

The Age of Choice is thus an account of how a very particular transformation establishing, first, liberal and, then, what is sometimes now called "neoliberal" freedom came about, from its initial stirrings in early modern commercial and religious contexts across the North Atlantic world (albeit always with some connection to specific extra-European developments) to its mid- to late twentieth-century quasi-global turn (though without denying that it has been remade with distinctive variations in every context and fiercely rejected in plenty too).[25] This is the previously untold story of an idea and way of life that have been fundamental to defining the modern world—told now as their future looks increasingly unsure.

Four key propositions about how best to narrate this complex tale govern this inquiry from the get-go. The first concerns the time frame—and historical time more generally. The current hegemony of freedom-as-choice was, I want to suggest, the result of a long-term, staccato, and in no way inevitable or even unidirectional historical process. Commitment to this conception of the world did not suddenly spring full-blown into life in the Western Hemisphere in the 1970s and 1980s, as some historians of neoliberalism or second-wave feminism would have it.[26] But neither did it spontaneously emerge back in the age of democratic

revolutions as a natural extension of transatlantic enlightened rights talk, as is sometimes imagined by other scholars.[27] Early statements of the *droits de l'homme*, such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, make no mention of the protection of individuals' "choice" or "choices." Classic early texts concerned with "the woman question" say nothing of the sort either. And when Thomas Paine did urge Americans in 1776 to make a "choice" about a new political order, he was referring to a collective determination and never indicated that this plan would require the adoption of a procedure to measure, then aggregate the specific preferences of every individual, or even adult male individual, person by person.

On the contrary, I submit, our contemporary attachment to freedom-as-choice (and choice-as-freedom) has deep if loose roots stretching all the way back both to the first age of empire, as new elements of consumer culture started to take root around much of the globe, *and* to the intellectual fracturing of Europe in the aftermath of the Reformation and Wars of Religion. That's especially the case when it comes to material goods and to beliefs. We can in both arenas trace the origins in broad strokes of a move away from choices on the model of Hercules and toward those predicated on the satisfaction of one's own preferences in a world rich with increased, as well as less morally freighted, options.

However, this distinctive way of seeing the world only very gradually and fitfully came to fruition, with different timing and different sources and effects in every domain. Individuated political choice, in particular, was a very late piece in the puzzle—for men and, especially, for women. The end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, when the secret ballot combined with universal male and then female suffrage became the global norm, might actually be thought of as encompassing a second major age of democratic revolutions quite distinct from the first. For only after this moment did different spheres of life and different parts of the world become entwined and, to a certain degree, synchronized around notions of individual choice in ways that began to feel natural even if they weren't—and also to generate resentments that continue to this day.[28] That story continues into the twentieth century with the foundation of whole sciences dependent on the naturalization

of the act of personally motivated choice and, finally, through the growing fusion of liberal democracy with capitalist values, the reinvention of choice as itself the critical moral value for our times.

The larger point, though, is that conventional periodization around established turning points like regime changes and major wars is mostly irrelevant here. So is any kind of strict chronology. When it comes to big stories, historians are sometimes better off, I believe, telling them in discontinuous ways, cutting even jarringly across time as well as space, as will repeatedly happen here. Past and present illuminate each other in what follows because we see new things when we pay attention to contrast and continuity at the same time.

Which leads to my second proposition: that to understand how any of this came about, we need to turn our gaze, at least initially, less to philosophy or political theory than to mundane social practices. By this I mean the ordinary, often formulaic behavior that men and women have long engaged in around the business of selection from among defined alternatives, whether of goods for sale, ideas and beliefs, romantic partners, candidates for office, occupations, or most anything else. For I am also convinced that new attitudes about choice-making, not to mention freedom, developed largely in the *doing*, or what the French call *usage*, especially in people's "free" time.[29]

Outside of working hours and at the nexus between public and private life, men and women from varied backgrounds increasingly took up varied physical as well as mental rituals of choice-making (think shopping or voting or picking a dancing partner, for example). They did so in a variety of specialized spaces using a range of small-scale technologies (think restaurant bills of fare, election ballots, dance cards, catalogs and advertising circulars, library registers, commonplace books, surveys and quizzes, and a whole new world of largely paper inventions related to organizing, determining, and registering their choices).[30] As such, they allowed the experience of picking from sets of options to be understood in a very specific way: as the externalization of self-defined interior preferences and thus an act of independent self-making. This happened even as other people and forces almost always defined who got to pick which options from which menus and with

what implications. Over time, the constant repetition and routinization of such activities, indeed their intellectual *and* corporeal performance by ordinary people in the role of "choosers," did much to make this association second nature or *doxic* in the sense of no longer consciously feeling chosen.[31] Eventually this was true even for the poor and the illiterate, despite the reliance on paper and print.

One of Hannah Arendt's great insights for historians was, to my mind, that political norms always depend on historically specific but socially widespread mental habits.[32] A liberal order, for example, needs distinctive ways of thinking, judging, seeking truth, and more, both for its creation and for its reinforcement. From the work of Bourdieu, we have also come to appreciate that such norms, or what he calls "political mythologies," are first and foremost embodied.[33] They require, for solidification, physical enactment according to directives and patterns set out in advance but soon learned by heart. That is why the metaphor of choreography is important to this book as a whole and not only in the discussion of social dance to follow.[34]

I do not mean, however, that we should ignore the claims of great thinkers of the past or discard the history of concepts and their expression when it comes to the story of freedom-as-choice or choice-as-freedom. What you are reading is still primarily an intellectual history, even if built out of the history of ordinary activities, and you can rest assured that you will still meet familiar figures here and there—Cotton Mather, Voltaire, John Stuart Mill, Betty Friedan—talking about big abstractions. My contention is simply that doing, thinking, and talking about, or what might also be called conduct and culture, are always linked and multidirectional. Existing ways of describing and basic cultural presuppositions shape how new practices are understood by those performing or watching them; but social practices, especially if frequently repeated over time, also reshape language and, ultimately, meaning. This is how *doxic* ideas gain their power.

Just as significantly, this book is also a study of obstacles to and constraints on free choice, from official rules, to customs and social conventions, to lack of funds or even locks on doors. My third proposition is that these multiple factors, along with those imposing them, limited at

every turn who within any population got to choose; what choices were on offer; and how those choices were to be made, registered, put to work, and, ultimately, valued. New forms of choice-making were, in short, always built on new forms of exclusion and prohibition. Simultaneously, though, these same impediments—formal and informal, externally imposed and also eventually internalized—made choice-making navigable. In addition, they rendered it sufficiently organized and circumscribed for it to be relatively safe for mass participation. What needs recognition is that, paradoxically, freedom of choice has always required, and still requires, rules, regulations, even restrictions of multiple kinds in order to prevent it from threatening individual well-being or the stability of the social order as a whole. That's also why all the choices discussed in this book, no matter how open-seeming, are necessarily what I term "bounded choices," limited by parameters both visible and not.[35] One might even say that the proliferation of impersonal laws of all kinds in the modern world should be seen as a function of and complement to the proliferation and celebration of individuated, personalized choice.[36]

But for the historian, this claim requires a shift in thinking. At the very least, it means moving away from any binary distinctions, as famously introduced at the height of the Cold War by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, between "freedom from," or the elimination of external barriers to picking to do what one wants, and "freedom to," or the creation of the conditions that make it possible for one to achieve self-fulfillment.[37] In fact, one cannot exist without the other. That means any story about choice necessarily becomes a double one. Even as we chart the growth of deregulation and the apparent rise of laissez-faire attitudes and policies, we must also pay attention to enhanced state reach—evident, for example, in new forms of street lighting or new laws governing the institution of marriage—and the flourishing of unofficial regulative ideals in civil society, such as standards of taste, reason, truth, virtue, and decorum. As this book tries to make clear, the nineteenth century was the great age of rules, offering up protocols for everything from how to flirt before dancing with a chosen member of the opposite sex to how to register political opinions (though there was always some

room for playing with the possibilities). All of these kinds of constraints—not to mention the often unrecognized "choice architects" behind them, from shopkeepers to dancing masters to party leaders and election officials to, now, the makers of algorithms—are central to the story of how choice has been distributed, experienced, protected, promoted, occasionally thwarted, and understood.[38] They, too, along with all of those doing the actual choosing, are an overlooked part of the long story of today.

Fourth and finally, as might already be apparent, I am convinced that women deserve special attention on all sides of this story's unfolding. That's partly because of their distinctive roles in it and partly because of the way their example brings the big issues here into sharp focus. Long denied many opportunities for individuated choice and disparaged for doing badly those they were afforded (to the detriment of this innovative kind of choice-making too), women might seem marginal to the main action. Yet women actively made use of this particular power going back to the eighteenth century, and a small subset eventually hitched their destiny to this specific ambition, twinning it with liberation more broadly in an effort both to challenge and to capitalize on mainstream liberalism. Ultimately, they both succeeded and failed, entrenching this core idea still further. Uncovering women's fraught role in the long history of choice-making illuminates something important about the peculiar kind of feminism we have inherited from our foremothers and forefathers. But even more, to understand how and why such unprecedented stature has been accorded to preference-driven, increasingly value-neutral choice-making in so many different realms of life today, it pays to keep an eye on women—and especially women with some social power—and their evolving struggles over the last few centuries around autonomy and freedom.[39]

Of course, the long story of freedom-as-choice and choice-as-freedom is *also* necessarily interlaced in much of the West with that of chattel slavery and abolition, real and metaphoric, as will be evident throughout this book as well. Freedom and slavery have historically depended on each other for force.[40] And even as coerced labor and reproduction have formally ended and been replaced with equality under

the law in most democracies, including our own, freedom has remained thoroughly racialized. New social hierarchies established around the outcomes of choices made, rather than explicitly around conditions of birth, have not dispelled that reality. Perhaps they have even made it more invidious by making it less visible. This feature of the modern choice landscape renders it all the more important to highlight those who have been, and in some cases remain, often shut out of its terrain: children, the seriously poor, the institutionalized, many rural people, and, in much of the West, people of color of both sexes. To a considerable degree, individualized choice eventually came to define all of their horizons anyway, whether as aspiration or as rubric for pathologizing their fates.

But what needs emphasizing is that over the last few hundred years, adult women of a certain level of privilege and prosperity—and by extension largely urban, white women in Western Europe and its former colonial domains for much of this time—both repeatedly found themselves excluded from choice-making rituals *and* became the paradigmatic modern choosers. As such, they will feature especially heavily among the cast of characters in this book. My last proposition is that focusing on women as both tropes and historical actors, from the fictional Isabel Archer to the many real women who filled out reader surveys in twentieth-century women's magazines, brings the tensions and contradictions around the equation of choice with freedom—and thus liberal democracy itself—into high relief.

And those trade-offs matter. For there is also a growing body of contemporary (and decidedly nonhistorical) scholarship indicating that the model of self-as-chooser and freedom-as-choice that we are so collectively enamored of today and that is so central to our reigning political-economic paradigms is a flawed one.

How so? Let's start with the chooser. Several decades of research by psychologists, behavioral economists, and now neuroscientists have helped us see that even fully adult men and women are not as good at making choices as we have long tended to think they are. Or at least they are not as good as rational choice theorists, who imagine every choice

as the externalization and optimization of a standing interior preference, would have us believe (though, arguably, this is something that Freudians, Marxists, and, before them, fiction writers and key religious thinkers have long known).[41] It turns out we humans suffer from faulty intuitions, context dependence, risk aversion, short-term thinking, and simply not knowing our own minds. When choosing among different options, we are too driven by our emotions and transient desires, too likely to overvalue our own judgment (snap or not), and too easily swayed by the wrong factors. We overestimate what we know. We fail to accurately predict what we will want in the future.

We are also inconsistent about our preferences and value the objects we possess over the ones we lack in ways that do not make objective sense. More information doesn't always help either. That is because we also tend to ignore facts that do not jibe with the outcome we desire, focus on the wrong information, or see patterns where they do not exist. Add to that the discovery that we are also easily manipulated by those designing the menus as well as by peer pressure and the desire for external approval. Even our desires, in other words, are rarely entirely of our own invention—and to think otherwise is just to engage in another kind of self-deception.

Choice can also, at its worst, turn into compulsion or addiction, meaning choice-making without any actual control. The upshot of all of this, say psychologists, is that, whether shopping or picking a mate, people frequently end up selecting what is not in their own best interest. Or what they pick is not consonant with what they thought were their preferences. Poor choices then come with serious economic and also psychic costs.

This phenomenon, says yet another group of social scientists, has only been magnified in recent years, as technology has expanded beyond anyone's wildest dreams both our need to make choices and our options, not to mention the time, energy, and know-how required to navigate them all.[42] It is not only a matter of exhaustion, it turns out (though I suspect I am not alone in finding that even selecting an electric teakettle or a vacuum cleaner has become an arduous task insofar as one aims to find the "right" or "best" one). We have taken on so much

imagined responsibility for crafting our own happiness and success that many of us find ourselves feeling guilty over the last choice, anxious about the next one, and potentially overburdened, even paralyzed by such mundane questions as what to eat for lunch.

This may be especially true for those of us without sufficient means to employ others—consultants, advisors, experts, guides, managers of all kinds, both human and algorithmic—who promise to map out the choices we confront and make "suggestions" or even "selections" for us. (And the wealthy *do* get a lot of help, including help in making bad choices go away in an era when, thanks to the internet, their traces otherwise live on indefinitely.)[43] Consider here Immanuel Kant's prescient proposition on the eve of the French Revolution that the discovery of choice might well have given the initial human beings their first taste of freedom, but it came at a high cost. This same realization also introduced stress and fear into their lives for the duration. For the possibility of choice opened up what Kant called an "infinite range of objects," with little guidance on how to select among them, one choice foreclosing another with no way of knowing in advance what the different effects would be.[44]

Nearly two centuries later, in her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath transposed this same ambivalence onto her female heroine's imaginary confrontation, in an age of ever-increasing options for women of her class, with a fig tree: "I [Esther] saw my life branching out before me. . . . From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked," including one fig representing a husband and a happy home and children, another becoming a famous poet, yet another adventures in Europe, Africa, and South America, and many others, including some futures she can't yet even make out. The point is that a world of delicious possibility lies before her—at least in theory. Yet the Garden of Eden has its own traps for this modern Eve. Esther continues, "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."[45]

Similar experiences of required choices with few obvious directives have today prompted a flourishing market for self-help guides, on the one hand, and for so-called libertarian paternalist policy manifestos, on the other, all purporting to employ the latest experimental cognitive science for assistance in the business of selection. Neither genre is designed to challenge choice's proliferation. Nor is either intended to undermine the understanding that to choose by and for oneself is broadly constitutive of freedom.[46] But their collective promise is that we *can* be helped, whether with a book in hand or with a "nudge" from the state, to choose a little better (however defined), and with a little less mental anguish, henceforth.[47]

Meanwhile, in ways that diverge from the behavioralists and often from each other, a diverse group of political philosophers has drawn our gaze to the larger, negative social and political consequences of all this attention to maximizing choice and thinking of it as a synonym for liberty. Their arguments often begin from the premise that there is much that this preoccupation either distracts us from or elides. At a minimum, goes one strain of critique, we have become so preoccupied with needing to choose so much and so often, from teakettles and vacuums onward, that we no longer have much residual appetite for collective decision making or, indeed, for investment in community affairs. That is, beyond Facebook "likes." The only exception, perhaps, is when the agenda is to promote the creation of more opportunities for individual choice or choices themselves. This is a theme that recurs in postcolonial literature too, like Vivek Shanbhag's haunting novel *Ghachar Ghochar* (2013), where the new experience of consumer society and individualized choice leaves a once-poor extended family of spice traders in Bangalore in moral disarray, no longer able to act as one to advance their common well-being.[48]

Just as seriously, claim other contemporary critics, a discursive focus on choice and personal responsibility has come to function not as a fig but as a fig leaf: a way of covering over or even reinforcing structural inequalities inherent in our democratic, capitalist order.[49] We blame the poor, in particular, for their bad choices as individuals, or even for the choice of poverty itself, rather than recognize the ways in which

opportunities to choose and the choices themselves, starting with the menu of options, are constantly and everywhere inequitably defined by race, gender, location, education level, social expectations, age, and especially wealth. Most of those factors themselves fall outside the realm of choice. In fact, all people are not equally free to choose, regardless of what human rights decrees say.[50] All choices also aren't equal. They aren't even all real. More often than not, the language of choice is, as one legal scholar puts it, a "rhetoric of the powerful" that helps those already on top and harms the powerless.[51]

This is also a major theme of Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's 2017 American novel, *A Kind of Freedom*, which focuses on several generations of an African American family and the array of suboptimal choices its members confront even as formal equality, the legal possibility of determining one's own life course, grows.[52] The protagonists only get to be full-fledged individuals at the cost of being repeatedly punished, formally and informally, for what they pick. Something similarly punitive happens disproportionately to women across racial, class, and ethnic differences, albeit with different effects depending on these variables. In practice, women are still often tasked with full responsibility for risk management, not least when it comes to their reproductive "choices." Or they are left with impossible choices, like family *or* income-producing job. This hardly counts as liberation.

One result has been public efforts to regulate further the lives of the disadvantaged and sometimes quite literally tell them what to do. Food subsidy programs for the poor, for example, generally specify what recipients can and cannot purchase to eat. But even laws framed around respect for choice can, in practice, end up functioning to curtail the rights of the vulnerable rather than expand them, rendering greater freedom an illusion. Consider, for example, the "freedom of choice" laws enacted in some southern American states in the 1950s and 1960s in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that let parents determine what schools their children would attend, but also intimidated nonwhite parents into "picking" nonwhite options, thereby violating the promise of equal opportunity associated with school desegregation.[53] Or consider the 1993

Méhaignerie Law or Second Pasqua Law that modified the French citizenship code (until it too was overturned a few years later), replacing birthright citizenship for individuals born in France to immigrant parents with a system in which such individuals would need henceforth to demonstrate their allegiance to the state through "an expression of choice" in order to become citizens.[54] Or, still more recently, we might think about how laws preserving "choice" in health insurance plans in the United States leave much of the public exposed to the coercion of the marketplace, with the result that health care costs more rather than less.[55]

Little wonder, then, that some commentators argue that to create real freedom for *all* people, we need a change of course. To realize many of our most important collective aims—say, clean air to breathe—we may need more policies that encourage shared responsibility and resist marketization as individual choices. On occasion, we may also need to place formal limits on the choices of the most privileged sectors of society (what if, for example, one couldn't "choose" a private or magnet school for one's own children?) with the goal of increasing the number and quality of options available to others. Otherwise the sum of our choices may well be a world no one would actually choose.

In just this vein of critique, some contemporary feminists have struck back at mainstream women's rights discourse too, calling it, following Linda Hirshman's clever pejorative tag, "choice feminism."[56] The name is intended to shine a negative light on two particular qualities of this discourse. One is advocates' tendency to see empowerment as a matter of women having the widest range of lifestyle and career options possible for self-invention. The other is proponents' suggestion that any choice counts as a feminist one if a woman who understands herself as a feminist has freely made it, thereby discouraging any criticism of those choices whether they involve kitchens or boardrooms, burqas or G-strings.

According to philosopher Nancy Fraser, among others, such attitudes assume the existence of a world of value-neutral freedom, where neither money, nor internalized social attitudes, nor relations with others from families to bosses function as constraints on choice. That

world is, though, purely imaginary, especially for women. Still worse, such "respect for all choices" attitudes in the here and now make feminism complacent in or even a buttress for the status quo rather than a challenge to it—to the benefit of media, advertising, and retail outfits, not women themselves.[57]

Instead, say these critics, feminists today need to make clear that some things are too morally weighty or dangerous to be described as a legitimate "choice." This is why, for example, we cannot legally buy children, or sell our own organs, or even opt for a decidedly unsafe job. What's more, today's feminists need to acknowledge that some choices, whether made by women or men, are trivial from a political standpoint (lipstick shades, for example?) or, more seriously, detrimental, exacerbating sexist stereotypes, inequalities of power and money, or the destruction of the earth we all share.[58] The "choice" to engage in sex work is one obvious site of contention. But so is something as small as what kind of vehicle one drives to work; one person's freedom to choose can come at the expense of another's or the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants as a whole. As the Black feminist legal scholar Dorothy Roberts pointed out some time ago, focusing repeatedly on choice as liberty "does nothing to dismantle social arrangements that make it impossible for some people to make a choice in the first place"—which is precisely what she believes feminism should be about.[59] The Canadian journalist Meghan Murphy puts it in historical terms: "Choice is no longer a rallying cry for change."[60] It has, from this perspective, lost its emancipatory bite for all of us.

Can the historian do more than simply show it was once otherwise or flesh out the details in the story? Can she use the evidence of the past to address normative issues alongside properly historical ones and thus have something to contribute to today's lively debates about choice?[61] Demonstrating that possibility constitutes my other key ambition in writing this book.

The Age of Choice is structured primarily as a work of history. Each chapter hones in on a specific social practice or ritual in the place(s) where and at the moment(s) when it also became a new arena for

individuated, preference-based, and increasingly value-neutral choice-making in daily life, apart from the demands of labor. But each chapter also explores the promises and perils that these developments entailed, as well as their relation to changing notions of freedom that remain central to liberal democratic theory and capitalist culture today.

The first two chapters take up choices in what are "defined objects" from the perspective of contemporary choice theory. Chapter 1 focuses on *consumer* or *aesthetic choice*. Chapter 2 takes up *intellectual choice*. Two middle chapters then consider the selection of other people, as well as the development of ever-more restricted or "bounded" (in my terms) versions of choice. Chapter 3 looks at "interdependent choice" through an exploration of *affective choice*. Chapter 4 addresses the emergence of *political choice*, including the establishment of formal rules for "group choice." Chapter 5, finally, tells the story of the invention of *sciences of choice* centered on study of the abstract human as a choice-maker realizing his or her personal preferences and tastes in these various domains. It also relays how researchers and their subjects together helped turn choice-making into the moral telos of modern life. The epilogue then comes full circle, using the war over abortion rights since the early 1970s to reconsider the liberal conception of choice and what this might mean for future framings of freedom.

Throughout I pay attention to what has been left out of the hegemony of choice too. Think for a moment of recent discussions of gay rights that downplay the role of agency or motivated choice in the determination of one's sexual orientation—much as one might have done, in an earlier moment, in conversations about national character. The political implications of such bio-essentialism, with its starting point of born-this-way-ism rather than optionality, are enormous, sometimes fueling new forms of discrimination and sometimes leading to new areas of liberation, as in the marriage equality struggle.[62] Debates about gender identity today similarly draw on rationales related to both choice and birth, fueling yet more political fights (though this book will follow my historical actors in generally taking women to be a biological category

along with a political and social one).[63] And consider, too, the distinction between people advocating choice who want to be able to opt out of something that the government requires (i.e., vaccination in the age of Covid-19), claiming they are being denied their autonomy or coerced by the state, and people advocating choice who want to be able to do something that the government threatens to disallow as a possibility because of potential harms (as in the abortion debate, but also the debate around gun ownership). The subject of this book, in the end, is human actors' evolving choices about choices: what should be subject to choice, how should choosing happen, who should be able to do it, what should it mean.

Finally, a word is needed on the sources for all of this. Occasionally, I insert myself and my own experience into the story. Often, I turn to obsolete material objects, from preprinted paper dance cards to wooden ballot boxes, to see what they can tell us about choice in the past. I do something similar with works of visual art; precisely because choice is such a difficult idea to capture in images, efforts at its representation can make for especially revealing sources. I also draw on a wide range of different written texts (which is what historians generally do), including how-to manuals, laws, polemics, travelogues, and various forms of reportage. But a comment is needed about one particular kind of textual source that I have taken the liberty of employing frequently and not just in this introduction: novels.

The specific type of fictional story that we call a novel—itself a new commercial product of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—took up the subject of choice almost immediately. Not only did early (often female) novelists offer their (often female) readers detailed images of new (often female) forms of choice-making in action, placing their (often female) protagonists in the front rooms of shops, at writing tables and library counters, and in ballrooms and polling stations. These same writers also made the psychological experience of choice, that seeming hinge between interior preference and outward action, a central theme of the genre. Think of all the plots of novels ever since that turn on their heroes and heroines wrestling with what to do in the face of conflicts between, on the one hand, their innermost desires and, on

the other, laws, customs, expectations, obligations, and even the effects of past choices, all of which function to enable and constrain current options and opportunities. Think, too, of the discourse of rewards and punishments afterward. In crafting fiction this way, authors from Frances Burney to Sylvia Plath to Margaret Wilkerson Sexton have steadily helped invent, through their characters, the association between choice-making and the construction of an autonomous, free self.[64] For this reason, we might even call the realist novel the choice-genre *par excellence*; characters' particular situations become case studies in the psychology, sociology, and even ethics of choice. Isabel Archer did not—and does not—stand alone. She and her peers have much to tell us still.

As for you, the reader of *this* book: you can, of course, decide to follow along, disagree, modify what I say with a new interpretation, or even close the book in disgust! (More on how those possibilities came into being can be found in chapter 2.) I do not, in any case, ask you to accept any single, seamless, inexorable storyline about the rise of choice idolatry or even to read in any one particular way. But if this book contains a polemic about anything, it is about seeing clearly what we are doing and considering the implications when we go about our mundane business as pickers from menus of options, rather than just following the guidelines that we've internalized in a haze. For if I am shirking my responsibilities in not being more directive in my authorial or "choice architect" role, as the libertarian paternalists might put it, I am potentially overstepping them in attempting to use history to tell us something about not only the past but also where we might go in the future.

My hope is that by laying bare an obscure history, I might have something to contribute to a conversation begun by cognitive scientists, economists, feminist political theorists, and others, including novelists, that needs to make itself heard in larger circles. My belief is that study of choice's past effectiveness as well as its serious limitations as a means to emancipation can help us think freshly about when choice-making does and does not serve larger social goals; how opportunities for choice can expand but also become more just for more people; and even

what other modes for envisioning our future, beyond choice, are worth cultivating starting now, in light of current challenges to liberal democracy. For it seems that today's critics of American-style choice feminism are ultimately right: our reigning concept of freedom has lost its way, and it will be up to the next generation to right it, remake it, or replace it with something else.

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