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Fundamental Freedoms and the Problem of Freedom

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COVID Affecting Human Rights and Democracy

Fundamental Freedoms and the problem of Freedom

- For more than a year now, we have been witnessing the biggest limitation of fundamental freedoms since the Second World War, at least in Europe and in many democratic countries.
- An unprecedented limitation of freedoms (*in the plural*) urges us to question ourselves about the nature of freedom (*in the singular*): **what does it mean to be free?**

What Does It Mean to Be Free?

Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty (1958)

- **Negative freedom** is the mere absence of external limits or interference → has to do with society and concerns the action of the agent (corresponds to what is lawful and allowed) → can be easily understood in the plural (in the sense of the fundamental freedoms) → now vastly more limited than it was before the pandemic.
- **Positive freedom** can be understood in terms of self-control and self-determination → concerns the will of the agent → corresponds to autonomy, in the sense of the power of the subject to give norms to themselves.

The Two Components of Positive Freedom (beyond Berlin)

The Ability to do what you want and the Ability to want to do what you do

- The ability to choose between different options and to do what you want (=free will) → an innate capacity of the human being that we need to assume.
- The ability to truly want to do what you do, to fully own your actions → an ability which develops over time, i.e. a path to take → it happens when you act motivated by love (not by fear, resentment, envy...) → is being one with yourself → "Love and then do what you want" (Saint Augustine).

A Neoliberal and Pervasive Idea of Freedom

Believing themselves to be free, individuals are actually servants who exploit themselves

“Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom”.

“People who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as a responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system”.

(Byung-Chul Han *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 2014)

Democracy and the Challenge of Freedom

At the same time Democracy guarantees Freedom and presupposes truly free citizens

Even on a political level, freedom cannot be understood as mere indifference, as mere possibility to think or not to think. Democracy not only guarantees freedom, but presupposes and needs citizens that are truly capable of free action and thought. The democratic form of sovereignty can only be achieved if citizens are fully in control of themselves, of their wishes and needs - if they are truly free. A people incapable of controlling their wishes and needs produces a democracy of slaves.

Thank you!

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