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Article

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What's the price of freedom?

On liberal thinking in the age of climate change

[Michael Zürn](#)

Some 15 years ago, I had a discussion over lunch with Lord Dahrendorf on the relationship between liberalism and climate change. Something he said that day has become ingrained in my memory as a quotation: "I would rather die as a free man than live as an unfree one." I guess that's what you call being principled. In any case, the answer to the question posed in the title that underlies Dahrendorf's statement is clear and concise. Freedom is priceless.

What is the concept of freedom behind this? Ralf Dahrendorf was one of the outstanding liberal thinkers of the 20th century. In fact, both etymologically and genealogically, liberalism is the theory that puts freedom at the center of thinking. Being free from outside interference and constraints, especially from coercion exercised by others, is the core of the liberal conception of freedom. This is also evident in the seminal distinction introduced by Isaiah Berlin – another great liberal of the 20th century – in his Oxford inaugural lecture in 1958: the distinction between negative and positive liberty. Negative liberty is about the individual's external relationship to other people and government institutions. It is, to borrow a phrase by Gerald MacCullum, about freedom from someone. Positive freedom, by contrast, means freedom from something to be able to do something. Positive freedom, then, refers not only to being constrained by others but also to internal constraints, a lack of education and skills, or the lack of resources necessary to do something.

At first glance, Isaiah Berlin seems to argue that the distinction between positive and negative liberty is a distinction between two equal aspects of one comprehensive concept. Yet he saw a hierarchy between negative and positive freedom. To Berlin, negative freedom was essential, and the political efforts in his time to bolster positive freedom – especially the creation of the welfare state and the expansion of social benefits – even made him concerned about a potentially dangerous number of policies violating freedom. After all, he believed the individual's (negative) freedom should not be subordinated to an abstract collective good (equal access to education and resources for all). Whereas the perception of negative freedom is self-determined, positive freedom requires an agreement of a collective body on what is good and right. Consequently, it has a touch of paternalism, with the collective practically imposing on the individual an understanding

of what is good and right. According to Berlin, having the agency to do something becomes meaningless if true freedom of choice does not exist. While negative freedom is surely not everything, Berlin insists that without it, everything else will become unattainable. According to this logic, freedom from external coercion is paramount. Even John Rawls, in his theory of justice, prioritizes the liberty principle over his difference principle (emphasizing equality) – albeit for different reasons. This negative concept of liberty also seems to underlie Dahrendorf's bon mot quoted above. In the absence of freedom from outside coercion, life becomes worthless. Freedom cannot be traded for something else; that is why it is priceless.

However, Dahrendorf was a leading theorist of social liberalism. Like John Rawls and Bernard Williams, he is among the liberal thinkers who rejected a one-sided focus on negative freedom and developed a more comprehensive concept of liberty. Bernard Williams, no doubt with polemical intent, once referred to the concept of liberty that lets the individual do whatever they want without the possibility of others using coercion to stop them as "primitive freedom." A liberal concept of freedom, by contrast, must be political in nature and by necessity imply that the freedom of one stops where someone else's freedom is constrained. And defining this boundary is not up to the individual but to liberal society, that is, ideally, a society of free and equal citizens acting together. In this view, individual freedom is so closely tied a social structure that enables and maximizes freedom that prioritizing negative freedom over positive freedom becomes obsolete. This calls for a comprehensive concept of freedom. Of course, societal structures must be designed in such a way that the principle of self-determination is preserved. Opportunities for democratic participation must be in place to ensure that restrictions to negative freedom are installed in a self-determined manner. Democracy, in precisely that sense, is self-government by the people: the constraints on individual liberty imposed by society serve the purpose of enabling all members of society to equally realize their freedom. Ultimately, even in this comprehensive concept of freedom, the price of freedom remains undefined. That is because the potential costs of individual freedom concern the freedom of the others. In such choices, different aspects of freedom are weighed against each other, but freedom is not weighed against other goods. Freedom can only be exchanged for freedom. Freedom remains priceless because it cannot be traded for other values.

In this comprehensive liberal concept of freedom, Dahrendorf's statement quoted at the beginning remains enigmatic in normative terms. After all, any society dedicated to enabling freedom must ensure that the preconditions of freedom are provided – and these include an ecosystem where human life is possible. Individuals who cannot survive because of global warming experience the highest conceivable form of outside restrictions to their freedom through other people. The focus on negative freedom calls for an ecological society that gives people the positive freedom to act in ways that do not cause irreparable harm to the ecosystem. Survival and freedom become one; the same is true of death and unfreedom.

So much for ideal liberal theory. Now let's consider the political practice of liberal-democratic societies. If democratic decision-making – because of political gridlock, imbalances of power, and a lack of human wisdom – in practice produces decisions that destroy the natural environment, then such decision-making either jeopardizes the survival of humankind or it necessitates the abolishment of that political system. In such a scenario, we do indeed face the conflicting alternatives that Dahrendorf resolved in favor of liberal democracy. He would rather live in an imperfect and, therefore, doomed free and democratic society than in any kind of authoritarian regime where freedom is compromised. This is a clear position – one, however, that becomes more threatening as climate-related disasters increase. What was still abstract and distant when I talked to Lord Dahrendorf in 2006 has now moved much closer. Even today, defending that position is easier for older men than for young people who still want to inhabit a hospitable planet fifty years from now. And yet, the position is still shared in essence today even by young authors who argue, like Jonas Schaible in a recent book, that we can and must stop the climate meltdown only with the help of our liberal-democratic systems. Authoritarian political systems, they insist, fare much worse than democracy when it comes to climate policy. Accordingly, there is no alternative to democracy in climate policy either. And again, freedom has no price tag. In this view, we do not trade it in even if it no longer functions properly and endangers our living space – because the alternative is even worse. Churchill's aphorism about democracy being the worst form of government except for all others shines through.

Such a reading of Dahrendorf's dictum is only partially convincing, however. For one thing, it equates the ideal concept of freedom with concrete life in our liberal democratic society. All those who are daily exposed to the exercise of power and domination by others in our society would probably disagree with this. The position is based on the dichotomy of democratic and authoritarian political systems, recently revived by US President Joe Biden. However, a political system other than liberal democracy as we know it today is not – as this dichotomy suggests – necessarily authoritarian. It might as well come closer to the normative ideal of a society of free and equal citizens. It might be a society that limits existing privileges in the use of natural resources; it might be a society that protects the survival of ecosystems from the vagaries of majority opinion in the same way that we already protect individual rights; it might also be a society in which strong citizen participation helps to preserve the environment – but such a society need be neither undemocratic nor unfree. It could also be more democratic and more conducive to freedom than the one we live in today. In that case, freedom, understood in comprehensive terms, also remains the highest good, one that cannot be priced. The question concerning the price of freedom only arises if we believe that the political and unecological status quo offers a maximum of freedom. Then, of course, the price of freedom could turn out to be horrendous

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