

The Contested Concept of Political Freedom

by Olivier Yasar de France

Does human history work towards a progressive emancipation of individuals? If it does not, should it? Definitions of freedom have been contested across all traditions of intellectual history, both in and outside the ‘West’. They will all tend to vary, however, according to the answers they provide to these two central questions – one analytic, the other normative.

Definitions of freedom are also dependent on the elementary assumptions they harbour about the individual itself. If the rational, utility-maximizing individual is the basic unit of collective political existence,¹ then individual flourishing will constitute an end in itself. If the unit of analysis changes, then the definition of freedom is likely to change with it. Alternatives to a broadly defined ‘liberal’ concept of freedom may simply not subscribe to the idea that the individual is the philosophical beginning and end of all things. They may view social relations from the ‘outside-in’ more decidedly than from the ‘inside-out’² – or focus on the underlying relation between individuals and the group, state, species or ecosystem they belong to.³ The answer to the two liminary questions will adjust in kind.

Many such ancient abstractions, however, have now broken to new mutiny: any and all theoretical brands of freedom must account today for the blunt material reality of ecological and technological change. Its very scale has rewritten some of the discussion’s key assumptions: none more so perhaps than the long-standing compact struck by European modernity between freedom, growth and abundance – which has simply come up against the limits of the planet itself.

Facing The Sartrean Test

The metaphysical terms of freedom’s old quandary have lingered on throughout the ages with stubborn familiarity. Jean-Paul Sartre’s claustrophobic play *No Exit*, which he wrote surrounded by the desolation caused by the Second World War,⁴ is often cited as one of its most edifying renditions. It features an individual named Joseph Garcin who attempts to escape the hotel room to which he is confined with two complete strangers. He is forced, however, to arrive at the gradual realisation that there is no escape – and that his sole remaining choice is to find a *modus vivendi*

¹ ‘Mainstream scholarship in the West largely sees the world as composed of discrete and independent entities acting and interacting, very much with the push of outside forces. An application of this logic to the social world leads naturally to a belief that individual actors are entities independent of one another and each endowed with *a priori* properties and attributes. Rationality is [...] a great discovery, for it defines clearly and succinctly the characteristic attributes of human beings: they are egoistic individuals, always ready to maximise their self-interest at the lowest cost. Starting from rationality so many influential social theories have been developed, from economics through sociology to political science.’ Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. xi.

² Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, ‘G comme Gauche’, *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1988).

³ ‘The majority of IR theories are substantialist – they presume entities precede interaction, or that entities are already entities before they enter into social relations with other entities. The most common of these presupposed entities is “the state”, but it is not the only substantial list starting point. Other scholars begin with “the individual” or “the ethnic group”, but the basic ontological move is exactly the same – units come first, then, like billiard balls on a table, they are put into motion and their interactions are the patterns we observe in political life. This analytical or ontological commitment to substances cuts across conventional divisions in the field, including theories in all of the major “paradigms” of IR.’ Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus, and Nexon, Daniel H., “Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(3), (September 1999), p. 293.

⁴ Jean-Paul, Sartre, *No Exit: A Play in One Act*, Acting edn in French (New York, 1958), p. 43. Author’s translation.

which will allow for collective cohabitation. As all three of the play's characters will come to acknowledge, having 'a say in their own hell' is the most they can hope for, and indeed the best they should strive for.⁵

Theories of human freedom can no more escape this foundational dilemma than Garcin can leave his hotel room. *No Exit*'s philosophical conundrum arises so long as a multiplicity of human beings inhabit a bounded space from which there is no effective exit. In such a context, political theorists will typically contend that an individual is bound to ensure and protect their survival, livelihood, interests or values, which will ultimately threaten or appear to threaten the survival, livelihood, interests or values of another.⁶ Hence the philosophical conundrum yields a specifically political dilemma. International political theorists will argue along similar lines that 'the self's identity can only be formed with a negative and hostile other, an outsider who poses existential danger and threat'⁷ in the relation between nation states.⁸ Within an anarchic system of states, the philosophical conundrum generates in this case an incipient security dilemma.⁹

In response, poets and politicians have been known to conjure up the bracing *utopia* and *uchronia* of an antediluvian Golden Age. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, opens with the depiction of a sweeping, honeyed and somewhat hackneyed scene in which there are 'no steep ditches surrounding towns, no straight war-trumpets, no coiled horns, no swords and helmets. Without the use of armies, people passed their lives in gentle peace and security.'¹⁰ In the real world, however, effective freedom cannot escape the presence of the outside world, under the guise of other human beings or of their natural habitat – which European modernity has meticulously contributed to separate out from the human one.¹¹ The surrounding worlds, both human and natural, force a constraint upon individual liberty which is interpreted as liberatingly fertile, insufferably limiting or potentially hostile, according to one's underlying philosophical assumptions. Outside human *utopia* and *uchronia*, real-world theories of freedom are condemned therefore to set out how individuals, communities and nation states may have 'a say in their own hell'.

Concepts of freedom will differ according to how they rise to the challenge of coexisting without the possibility of coexisting – as per Jean-Paul Sartre's account in *No Exit*. Following on (with some caveats) from Isaiah Berlin's distinction between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', the liberal tradition will tend to pit 'negative' freedom against 'positive' freedom. The former, of which there are elements in the work of Francis Fukuyama, can be likened to an absence of constraints. The latter, which is more common in the work of Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Jan-Werner Müller and contemporary social democratic thinking, allows for the possibility of freely assigned constraints, with a view to enabling individuals to pursue desired opportunities.

Gerald MacCallum and Charles Taylor qualify the binary nature of the distinction between negative and positive freedom, and argue that both types include elements of freedom 'from' and freedom 'to'. It may be argued however that all conceptions of freedom – not merely negative conceptions

⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, 'If any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavour to destroy or subdue one another.' *Leviathan*, chapter XIII.

⁷ See Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, p. 134.

⁸ Reality tends to assent: as Oleksandra Matviichuk stated in her Nobel Peace Prize lecture, 'In this war, we are fighting for freedom in every meaning of the word.' Oleksandra Matviichuk, 'Time to take responsibility', Nobel Peace Prize lecture on behalf of the Center for Civil Liberties, 10 December 2022, Oslo City Hall, Norway.

⁹ John H. Herz, 'Idealist internationalism and the security dilemma', *World Politics*, 2(2) (1950), pp. 157–80.

¹⁰ 'Sine militis usu mollia securae peragebant otia gentes.' Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Book I, 99–100 (author's translation).

¹¹ Philippe Descola. *Par-delà Nature et Culture*, Gallimard, 2005.

– relate to constraints. ‘Dialectical’ freedom could be defined differently: it understands both as part of a broader process which leads to a richer form of negative and positive freedom. Many aspects of Lea Ypi’s work are consonant with dialectical freedom, which follows on from neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian scholarship. Republican freedom and its variants, interpreted and reframed as below, might be described as neither positive, negative, nor dialectical.

Yet there also exists a range of more fundamental critiques of liberal conceptions of freedom. Uncovering them requires reaching further afield outside ‘the West’, or further back to periods of history which held different assumptions about freedom and sovereignty. Many such alternatives are wary of the idea that the individual is the philosophical beginning and end of all things – and distrust the view that human history works towards a progressive emancipation of individuals in, of and for themselves. Benedict Spinoza, for example, offers up a definition of freedom which is rich but neither teleological, anthropomorphic, normative nor indeed liberal in the contemporary senses of the word.

Fashioned from his radical critique of individual agency, Spinoza’s philosophy allows us to understand how any genuine increase in individual power can be channelled only through the expansion of collective freedom. In an early modern period devoid by definition of the monopoly exerted by states on political power, its political ramifications brook neither the modern dichotomy between the state of nature and the social contract, nor the numbing contemporary opposition between methodological individualism and methodological nationalism. They contribute to laying out an iconoclastic set of ideas for rethinking (geo)political coexistence outside the liberal conceptions of freedom, the social contract, and the individual whose diktat may have been cemented too wide and too deep by political modernity. In this, Spinoza’s philosophy can help contemporary political enquiry find new pockets of collective agency in an age of tectonic ecological and technological change.

Negative and Positive Freedom

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama argues that human societies have progressed from primitive tribal societies to feudalism and liberal democracy, which represents the final stage of human political evolution.¹² With some caveats, his understanding of freedom is grounded in the belief that human history ultimately charts – and indeed should chart – a course towards greater freedom of the individual. The best chance of achieving it is by fashioning liberal democracies. Liberal democracy for Fukuyama is characterised by a set of institutions and values that promote individual freedom. Such institutions include free and fair elections, the rule of law, protection of individual rights, and an independent judiciary: they allow individuals to pursue their own interests and express their own opinions without fear of persecution or oppression. A strong civil society ensures individual rights are protected and is ultimately the best bulwark against state centralisation and authoritarianism.

This meaning of freedom is anchored partly in the tradition of ‘negative’ freedom, which insists upon the importance of limiting external constraints on, coercion or oppression of individuals. If freedom is the absence of coercion or interference, then it is key to the protection of individual rights and liberties. Robert Nozick’s work, for example, is an emblematic contemporary example of libertarianism insofar as it advocates a strict and minimalist notion of negative freedom. It argues for a minimal state to protect individuals from external interference in their life, liberty and property. In general, the liberal view of freedom emphasizes the importance of individual

¹² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press 1992).

autonomy and self-determination, and it asserts that individuals should be free to pursue their own interests and goals as long as they do not harm others.

Since the late nineteenth century, many major liberal theorists have also attempted to combine individual and social perspectives. One of the most important was L.T. Hobhouse in his seminal book *Liberalism*, where he writes:

Mutual aid is not less important than mutual forbearance, the theory of collective action no less fundamental than the theory of personal freedom [...] the life of the individual [...] would be something utterly different if he could be separated from society. A great deal of him would not exist at all.¹³

Hence it is worth noting that describing the 'liberal conception of freedom' is necessarily reducing a complexity to a singularity, which is typical of many critics who seek to generalise liberalism to discredit the whole. It is typically accepted however that the liberal tradition refers back to the work of John Rawls, Raymond Aron or Karl Popper, and the roots of the liberal worldview reach back to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, classical liberalism and thinkers such as John Locke, Benjamin Constant, Montesquieu and John Stuart Mill. Isaiah Berlin argues that they reach back to Hobbes' theory of liberty.

'Positive' interpretations of freedom look to address the gaps in the liberal classical definition of 'negative' freedom. Although it is prone to a certain rhetorical plasticity across time, it is more common today in social democratic thinking such as that of Amartya Sen or Martha Nussbaum. It allows for the possibility of assigning constraints freely, with a view to enabling individuals to pursue desired opportunities:¹⁴ it sets out the role of the state in ensuring that individuals have the necessary resources and opportunities to pursue their goals. Such positive definitions of freedom thus recognize the importance of the social and economic conditions which are necessary to enable individuals to be authentically and effectively free. They are anchored in a political theory that views freedom not only as the absence of external constraints but also as the ability to accomplish one's desires and interests. Martha Nussbaum's concept of capabilities¹⁵ builds upon Sen's work to build a comprehensive political theory underpinned by a positive conception of freedom.

As a result, positive freedom is sometimes called effective freedom. Under negative freedom, for example, any individual is formally free to go to university, insofar as there are no tangible external obstacles that prevent him from doing so. However, he may not be effectively free to do so because he might lack funding. Positive freedom tends to argue that negative freedom is merely about formal freedom, not actual freedom. Negative freedom, also known in some contexts as liberty, indeed implies that individuals are free to act as long as they do not harm others or violate the law. It may be at the detriment of the understanding of collective action and institutions, and fail to provide sufficient guidance on how to deal with social and economic inequalities that limit people's freedom. If an individual lacks access to education or healthcare, they will not have the same

¹³ Leonard Hobhouse, 'The Heart of Liberalism', in *Liberalism* (1911), chapter VI.

¹⁴ See Isaiah Berlin's initial distinction in his Inaugural Lecture as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at the University of Oxford in 1958: 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Henry Hardy (ed.) *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 166–217. For an in-depth analysis, see Hubert Czyzewski, 'Isaiah Berlin as a historian', *History and Theory* 61, (3) (2022), pp. 450–468.

¹⁵ See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard University Press, 2011), chapter 1.

opportunities as others to exercise their freedom. In return, critics will argue that positive freedom can lead to an excessive concentration of power in the hands of the state, and that it contributes to limiting individual autonomy.

Gerald MacCallum argues more broadly that any conception of freedom ultimately follows a similar underlying formula.¹⁶ All definitions of freedom include an x, a y and a z (for x to be free means to be free from y in order to z), but differ in what they hold these elements to refer to (for negative freedom, x is free when he is free from external obstacles to live the life as x wishes; for dialectical freedom: x is free when he is free from internal obstacles to live the life x truly wants, etc.). Here thereby qualifies the distinction, and argues that negative and positive freedom both include elements of freedom 'from' and freedom 'to'. Two fundamental ideas are contained in MacCallum's now classic analysis of the shared cluster 'x is free from y to do or become z'. First, the 'y' may be a presence or an absence. Second, the 'z' may be a static or a temporally dynamic process. That results in multiple variations. Liberals generally wish individuals to pursue their desired opportunities, but not opportunities that they do not desire and that are imposed externally.

Another key contribution to this debate may be found in the work of Jan-Werner Müller, who challenges the narrowly liberal individualistic conception of freedom. His theory of freedom is based on the two key concepts of social power and discursive control. Social power refers to the ability of individuals or groups to shape the social, economic, and political environment in which they live. This includes the ability to influence public policy, shape public opinion, and control the means of production. Discursive control refers to the ability of individuals or groups to shape the terms of political debate and to define what is and is not considered legitimate political discourse.

Hence Müller argues that genuine freedom requires the ability of individuals and groups to shape the social, economic, and political environment in which they live. Individuals must have access to the means of production and must be able to participate in the political process in order to shape public policy. It also means that individuals must have the ability to define the terms of political discourse and to challenge dominant discourses that limit the freedom of individuals and groups. Müller proceeds to argue that liberal conceptions of freedom which rest upon individual autonomy and non-interference are insufficient for promoting genuine freedom. Liberal freedom, he contends, fails to account for the ways in which social power and discursive control can limit the freedom of individuals and groups. In return, Müller lays out a theory of freedom that emphasizes the importance of collective action and social power in promoting freedom.

Dialectical and Republican Freedom

There are many meanings of freedom which exist outside the dichotomy between negative and positive freedom. They include dialectical freedom, republican freedom and their variants. Lea Ypi's theory of freedom is one such example. Grounded in her broader work on the nature of power, authority, and legitimacy in contemporary society, Ypi's definition of freedom is centred in a specific way around the concept of individual autonomy. She argues that individuals must be able to understand and articulate their own desires and preferences in order to exercise meaningful autonomy. One of the key challenges to achieving such freedom in contemporary society is the rise of neoliberalism.

¹⁶ See Josef Lolacher, 'Can we measure freedom?' (pp. XX-YY below) for a more detailed account.

The emphasis on free markets and limited government intervention in the economy has eroded the conditions necessary for individuals to exercise their autonomy, by promoting a narrow vision of individualism that prioritises economic success over other values. Ypi argues that neoliberalism has created a system of economic and political inequality that undermines the legitimacy of political institutions. In return, she highlights the role of political institutions in promoting freedom and in helping human beings live in a reasonable manner, conscious of the inherent limits of their rationality in a Kantian sense. In a democracy, they allow citizens to be the ‘subjects’ of their own freedom, insofar as their will is ‘channelled’ and represented by institutions. Democracies are able to say to their citizens: ‘You are free to the extent that you are the author of the laws that you are required to obey.’¹⁷ Political institutions thus have a crucial role to play in creating the conditions necessary for individuals to exercise substantive freedom and autonomy, as opposed to an ideal or formal version of it. As Ypi describes:

In the world in which we live in, not everyone has the same power and the same capacity to make these laws. The institutions and the rules that we abide with track people’s wills in very different ways. If you are an immigrant and you don’t have the capacity to participate in these forms of decision-making, then you are officially or formally in a democracy—but substantively you are not the author of the laws that you are required to obey. So this idea already in that category clearly shows itself to be more of an ideal than the institutional reality that we live under¹⁸.

Institutions should thus be designed to promote the interests of all members of society, rather than serving the interests of a privileged few, and be responsive to the changing needs and preferences of individuals, in order to maintain their legitimacy and effectiveness. Hegel also described the crucial role played by the state in achieving freedom. In Hegelian scholarship, the state is an expression of the collective will of the people and that it has the power to overcome the contradictions and conflicts that arise in society. It is necessary to provide the framework for individual freedom, as it ensures that individuals are not subject to arbitrary power or external constraints.

Like Hegel, Ypi contends that individual autonomy is not merely the absence of external constraints, but rather the result of a process of self-realisation. For Hegel, individuals are free only when they become fully conscious of their own nature and are able to realize their own potential. This process of self-realization involves a dialectical progression in which individuals confront and overcome contradictions and conflicts within themselves and in the world around them. Hegel thus argues that individuals can become alienated from themselves and from society when they are unable to realize their own potential or when they are subject to external constraints. This alienation can lead to feelings of powerlessness and despair, which prevent individuals from achieving true freedom.

In the light of neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian scholarship, Ypi advocates an in-depth rethink of the meaning we ascribe to freedom and autonomy. Creating the conditions necessary for individuals to exercise their autonomy requires a more democratic and participatory political system that promotes the interests of all members of society. It also relies on the capacity of liberal democracies to fashion more actual and less formal social and economic equality. Herbert Marcuse

¹⁷ See *Deep Thought – In conversation with Lea Ypi*, Arte TV, February 2023, minutes 17—20: <https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/110190-002-A/deep-thought-au-fond-de-sa-pensee-lea-ypi/>

¹⁸ Ibid., mins. 22-23.

has similarly argued that capitalism and its emphasis on materialism and consumerism create one dimensional thinking, which makes it impossible for individuals to think and live in radically different ways.¹⁹ This worldview relies on a discrepancy between a lower self or lower will and a higher self or higher will (the authentic self that acts as it truly wants). Marcuse argues that capitalism creates a false consciousness with false wants and needs within the lower self that strives for materialism – thereby blocking our access to our higher true selves with our true wants and needs.

For example, the addict who longs for a drug acts in accordance with their lower self that wants harmful things. They are thus not free. To make them free, society should help them get rid of their addiction. Under a conception of freedom which relies on the assumption of a divided ‘soul’, the government is justified in enacting policies to discourage or ban drugs to ‘force people to be free’, as per Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s formula. It is an argument that is often invoked in public discourse by a more dialectical conception of freedom in order to justify more government intervention. The negative conception of freedom will oppose such intervention on the grounds of precedent: the government should not force behaviour on individuals by stating that freedom is what individuals would or should want as their higher selves. Isaiah Berlin similarly voices concern about the tendency towards authoritarian behaviour.

Crucially, Berlin further collapsed positive liberty into its ‘hard’ version, superimposing a higher will on a gentler positive liberty. Gentler positive liberty is focused on enabling individuals to make good choices for themselves by creating conditions that remove those elements of MacCallum’s ‘y’ that block the exercise of their own potential capacity (rather than ‘forcing them to be truly free’) and it is a central plank of the welfare state (historically a liberal idea). The emphasis is on self-development rather than self-realisation – which is not a liberal term. Also, any disagreements over what is common, scope for diversity and proper pluralism are essential to a liberal viewpoint.

Marxist theories of freedom would more generally argue that the dialectical method is too abstract to provide a path to achieving freedom in practice in conditions of economic and social inequality. Freedom here is not merely the absence of external constraints or interference, but also the ability to exercise control over one’s own life and destiny. Economic inequality and class domination are a form of oppression that undermines individual freedom. Genuine freedom can thus only come by striving to eliminate economic and social inequalities. Feminist theories of freedom will emphasize the role of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression in propping up social and economic inequality. As such, freedom cannot be realised unless women and minorities are given equal opportunities and equal access to power and resources.

Republican meanings of freedom strike out from the liberal dichotomy between negative and positive meanings of freedom, and are neither dialectical, teleological nor normative. Traditional republican understandings of freedom dwell on civic participation, active citizenship, engagement with the common good and self-government, because individuals are free only if they are able to participate in the political process and exercise control over the laws that govern them.

In Anglo-American scholarship, republican freedom is based on the two key principles of non-domination and civic participation. Non-domination refers to the absence of arbitrary power, which means that individuals are free from the arbitrary exercise of power by others – both private individuals and the state. Republican freedom emphasises the importance of limiting the power of the state to prevent the arbitrary exercise of power and protect the rights of individuals. Civic participation refers to the active engagement of citizens in the political process. This includes not

¹⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Beacon, 1964), chapter 1.

only voting but also participating in public debate, serving on juries, and engaging in other forms of civic engagement. Civic participation is thereby essential to the maintenance of republican freedom because it helps to ensure that power is distributed and that citizens have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

Like proponents of negative freedom, republicans emphasise the importance of the individual being able to map out their own life plans and execute them without interference. But republicans stress that this requires conditions of predictability and stability, i.e. the absence of arbitrary interference that creates constant uncertainty, anxiety and stress, making it impossible to live one's life as one wishes. Classic examples of the specificities of the Republican meaning of freedom are the slave and his benevolent master, or the 'gentle giant'. Suppose there is a slave who is treated well by their master: the master never beats the slave up and allows them to come and go as they wish. In a sense the slave is like their master, except for the fact that they are the property of their master. In a purely negative conception of freedom, the slave is free because there is no external interference. But republican meanings of freedom would object that the slave is not entirely free, because the slave's 'freedom' is entirely contingent upon the arbitrary will of the master, however benevolent the master. The latter may wake up the next day and decide to beat up their slave.²⁰

The roots of republican freedom run back to ancient Greece and Rome. In such societies freedom was not simply the absence of coercion or interference from others, but was tied to the notion of citizenship and participation in the political process. Civic virtue was central to this conception of freedom, and citizens were expected to play an active role in the affairs of the city-state. The idea was revived during the Renaissance, particularly in the work of Machiavelli and his emphasis on the importance of civic engagement and participation. The theory of civic virtue was further developed during the seventeenth century by English republicans such as James Harrington and John Milton, who highlighted the importance of a balanced constitution, civic engagement, and the common good. Jean-Jacques Rousseau also argued that freedom was tied to the notion of self-government and active participation in the political process, not merely the absence of coercion. He thought that individuals could only be free insofar as they were part of a community that shared a common purpose. Republican understandings of freedom also resonate in the more recent works of Arendt and Pettit.²¹

The Contested Future of Liberal Freedom

Republican freedom has important implications for contemporary political theory. Firstly, it challenges the individualistic conception of freedom that is central to what might be broadly but debatably defined as 'liberal' political theory. Republican freedom suggests that individuals are not simply free to pursue their own interests, but are also responsible for contributing to the common good. The republican understanding of freedom is more restrictive than negative freedom in some respects (the slave with the benevolent master is not free for republicans but free for negative freedom), but looser in others (it pushes back against arbitrary external interference, where classic negative freedom shuns any external interference).

Republican freedom does not tend to take issue if a government interferes in the lives of individuals through laws which are publicly known to everyone, apply to everyone equally, and that are the

²⁰ The 'gentle giant' example supposes a benevolent giant living next to a village. The giant does not harm the people of village, but has the ability to do so whenever he wishes. In the republican meaning of freedom, the village is not truly free because it lives at the mercy of the giant.

²¹ Pettit, Philip, 'Republican freedom: three axioms, four theorems' in C. Laborde and J. Maynor (eds.), *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Blackwell 2008).

result of a decision-making process in which all have been able to participate. Hence it is more concerned with the arbitrary nature of state power than with the importance of limiting it wholesale. Deliberation and public reason are both conceived of as means of resolving political conflicts and promoting the common good – which can be more difficult to achieve in large, diverse societies, and may exclude marginalised groups who lack access to political power. Indeed one might argue that the republican notion of freedom is too narrow to encompass arbitrary oppression which does not emanate from the state, but also from groups and individuals.

There also exists a range of more fundamental critiques of liberal conceptions of freedom. Uncovering them requires reaching further afield outside ‘the West’, or further back to periods of history which held significantly different assumptions about freedom and sovereignty. In political and international political theory, Hobbes’s ontology, concept of the state of nature and theory of the contract have formed an altogether solid basis. They are still widely applied to ideas of political community, state sovereignty and interstate relations. A radical, early modern variant can be found in Benedict Spinoza’s iconoclastic critique of individual agency, autonomy and free will. His philosophy charts an overall path from individual natures to political communities which is irreducible to Hobbesian paradigms, as well as to much European modern thinking.

The normative emphasis places by Hobbes and Spinoza on different political forms (roughly speaking – monarchy for the former, democracy for latter) is testimony to how they conceive of the institutionalisation of political power. Hobbesian theory seeks a universal mechanism that keeps motion automatic, with a view to avoiding change in a way that is inconsistent with his own assumption that everything is but matter in motion. Hobbes’s ‘monarchy’ embodies the universal solution to the political problem of order: it represents the best political ‘form’. Conversely, Spinoza’s philosophy alights upon a mechanism of motion that amplifies change, in accordance with his metaphysics of substance as becoming. It follows that Spinoza’s democracy can be conceived as a political ‘form’ or ‘institution’ only insofar as it is an open process of institutionalisation. It expresses in effect the refusal of any universal and definitive solution to the problem of political order.

In short, Spinoza only defines individual autonomy through an open process of fashioning collective freedom. He argues that freedom is not the absence of external constraints, but the ability to understand and acknowledge individual and collective determinisms. By using reason to understand their own nature and the nature of the world around them, human individuals are liable to overcome passive, irrational fears and desires that prevent them from acting in accordance with their own individual and collective nature. In a universe where everything is caused by prior events, including human actions, living beings are determined by a combination of their physical and rational dispositions, which constitute their individual and collective nature – or *ingenium*. Freedom is the ability to act in accordance with one’s own individual and collective *ingenia*, insofar as human beings understand it. It is not the absence of external constraints, quite the contrary: it arises with what Spinoza terms the union of the intellect with God, which allows individuals and communities to produce effects which are related to their own nature.

Hence Spinoza’s political philosophy largely sidesteps the distinction between the state of nature and the social contract, but also between individual and collective freedoms. In doing so, it provides a radically immanent genealogy of political institutionalisation which exists outside liberal conceptions of freedom and the modern diktat of the individual. Drawing upon it *contra* Hobbes in the study of freedom would yield a different type of political materialism which rejects individualism in favour of collective empowerment. It is liable to open up pockets of collective agency within the very ecological and technological forces disrupting human societies.

Discussing – and contesting – ‘liberal’ meanings of freedom cannot indeed be limited to abstract academic disputations. It also contributes to challenging the assumptions that modern ideas of freedom are built upon in both the public and private realms. It helps understand, for example, the power that large corporations and technology giants have developed over civil societies, and their ability to interfere arbitrarily in people’s lives. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg make decisions for Twitter (aka X), Amazon and Facebook wholly at their own behest. They have an impact on the social fabric itself and can contribute to making it less free.

Political ecological thinking and post-human politics have also reframed the issue of freedom, growth and abundance from the bottom up. Decorrelating freedom from abundance, in the face of virtually all European political and industrial modernity, has wide-ranging consequences for every aspect of human life.²² In an era that is only slowly acknowledging the inevitability of sobriety, the limits of the Earth system have de facto redrawn the boundaries of the idea of freedom itself, to an extent which human societies have not yet fully fathomed. ‘Liberal’ theories of freedom are grappling with these shifts in modern consciousness. Yet many alternatives to the broadly defined liberal concept of freedom, both within and outside ‘the West’, simply do not subscribe to the idea that the individual is the philosophical beginning and end of all things. They are liable to contest the very notion that human history works towards a progressive emancipation of individuals in, of and for themselves – or indeed that it should do so.

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²² See Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (Polity, 2022).