

What is the relation between collective and individual self-determination in the liberal script?

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Individual and collective self-determination are co-constitutive parts of the liberal script, or two sides of the same coin. Treating individual and collective self-determination as equally valid core propositions of the liberal script allows to both analyze the tensions between them and to group the varieties of the liberal script on a continuum between individual and collective-self-determination. Last not least, emphasizing co-constitutiveness allows for incorporating non-Western justifications for the liberal script.



I start from the observation that the relationship between individual and collective self-determination as core features of the liberal script remains rather unclear in the foundational documents of SCRIPTS. Let me quote two examples: First, Börzel/Zürn Working Paper 1 reads: “The liberal script consists of descriptive and prescriptive knowledge about the organization of society based on the core principle of individual self-determination” (Börzel/Zürn 2020: 11). This appears to imply that individual self-determination comes first (as a first order principle) and everything else is second order. On the same page, however, Börzel and Zürn write: “Individual self-determination is complemented by collective self-determination” (Börzel/Zürn 2020: 11). It crucially depends on how one interprets “complemented” in order to decide whether the second quote contradicts the first one. Second and in a similar vein, the Zürn/Gerschewski Working Paper calls “individual self-determination” a first layer principle of the liberal script (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 15-16), while “collective self-determination” is conceptualized as a “second layer feature” (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 17). Yet, Zürn and Gerschewski also argue that “[t]he key question for liberty as the first-layer

principle of liberalism thus is how far a person's freedom should be extended or protected, which in turn must be determined collectively" (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 15). In other words, the collective decides to what extent individual freedom (aka self-determination) needs to be protected and what its limits are. The rule appears to be clear: Individual freedom has its limits to the extent that it impinges upon or constrains the freedom of others.

This is not to put the authors on the spot, but to emphasize that SCRIPTS has yet come to grips in clarifying the relationship between individual and collective self-determination. We are probably in general agreement that both principles belong to the liberal script and its varieties. We seem to also agree that prioritizing one principle over the other in an absolute sense contradicts the liberal script: If individual freedom and self-determination always comes first in any social setting, human coexistence is impossible. If collective self-determination always trumps individual freedom, it amounts to what de Tocqueville called the "tyranny of the masses" (Tocqueville 1994 [1835/1840]).

We can distinguish, then, between two positions with regard to the core of the liberal script: One position starts with the individual and with individual freedom as well as self-determination as the core and adds collective self-determination as a second-layer proposition. The Zürn/Gerschewski paper articulates this position most clearly, and so does Gosepath's contribution to these think pieces. The social sciences have referred to it as "methodological individualism" whereby the social is theorized up from the intentional action and interaction of individual human beings.¹

A second position treats individuals and social collectives as co-constitutive. It is based on Giddens' theory of structuration and the mutual constitutiveness of (individual) agency and (social) structure (Giddens 1984). Co-constitutiveness means that we cannot even start describing the properties of an agent without reference to the social structure in which she is embedded. The same holds true for the social structures which are constantly produced, reproduced, and, thus, changed through social agency (for a classic elaboration see Wendt 1987). From this perspective, human beings are social beings. We cannot describe what it means to be an

¹ Note that this position should neither be confused with the rational choice paradigm nor with some sort of atomistic individualism. Both are extreme positions. For a clarification see the entry "methodological individualism" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Heath 2020).

individual without taking account of her embeddedness in social structures, groups, and communities. Social identities are exactly about that. At the same time, communities are produced and re-produced through the social interactions of individuals and their sense of belonging.

From this perspective, individual and collective self-determination (freedom) go together. They are two sides of the same coin. If individual freedom is constrained by the freedom of others, as the liberal script implies, such constraints can only be justified by a collective free will of a community in which the individual is embedded. The Habermasian logic of communicative action (Habermas 1981) relies on the co-constitutiveness of individual and collective self-determination. The same holds true for Forst's "right to justification" as a further elaboration of the Habermasian logic: "If we want to understand human practices, we must conceive of them as practices bound up with justifications; no matter what we think or do, we place upon our-selves (and others) the demand for reasons, whether they are made explicit or remain implicit..." (Forst 2011: 1). Justifications serve as the link between individual and collective self-determination. If my actions infringe upon the freedoms of others, I owe them justifications which can then be challenged and counter-challenged until we reach a consensus among free agents (in my understanding, this corresponds to Habermas' discourse ethics). At the same time, the community owes me justifications (hence my "right to justification") to the extent that it infringes upon my individual freedom – and so on.

Conceiving of individual and collective self-determination as co-constitutive core principles of the liberal script whereby each component cannot be reduced upon the other has significant implications. Let me discuss three.

First, co-constitutiveness allows to group the varieties of the liberal script according to how they negotiate the relationship between individual and collective self-determination (from neoliberalism – and its varieties – to democratic socialism – and its varieties, see Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 21-24). The same holds true for the inherent tensions in the liberal script that Zürn and Gerschewski have identified. Treating individual and collective self-determination as co-constitutive also allows for delineating more clearly the boundaries of the liberal script and for defining who is "in" and who is "out". Extreme versions of libertarianism which emphasize individual choices above everything else, would be clearly outside the boundaries of

the liberal script. So would be fascism as well as Marxism-Leninism as attempts to put the collective above any kind of individual freedom.

Second, co-constitutiveness opens up the liberal script to philosophical and religious justifications that have originated outside Europe and the United States. One significant criticism of the liberal script and its individualist justifications has always been that it does not travel beyond its origins in European philosophy because it is based on a particular understanding of the (atomistic) individual. Treating individual and collective self-determination as co-constitutive allows for a wide range of philosophical justifications of the liberal script (as long as one core component does not take precedence over the other).

Third, treating individual and collective freedom as two core principles of the liberal script that constitute each other matters for politics. In international human rights, for example, it has become common practice to distinguish between so-called individual human rights as enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and collective rights as embodied in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This has led to endless debates about how the two Covenants relate to each other and whether one should take precedence over the other. A more holistic understanding of individual and collective rights as two sides of the same coin would put this debate to rest.

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