

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

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The liberal script, as it was elaborated by the United Nations and its treaties in the aftermath of World War II, saw the reconstitution and mutual reinforcement of individual and collective self-determination. With the neoliberal turn and its globalization since the 1990s, we observe a decisive decoupling of individual and collective self-determination and a predominance of individual agency (over the collective), which gives rise to paradoxical challenges characteristic of contemporary liberal societies.



1 SELF-DETERMINATION AS AGENCY¹

In citizenship theory, the self-determination question is often linked with the liberal and republican/communitarian perspectives of citizenship (Shafir 1998).² The liberal perspective starts from the conception of a free/autonomous individual and their rights and preferences, and a contractualist approach to political society. The republican-cum-communitarian citizenship prioritizes the collective; the exercise of popular will and common good overshadows individual rights and freedoms. The meanings and values located within the community provide visions of the common good and collective will. Broadly juxtaposed, these views then bring into contrast the universalist versus particularist, and passive versus active, construction of the citizen, as well as thin and thick conceptions of citizenship.

¹ My comments partly reflect an exchange with Mattias Kumm, WZB, with whom I am currently preparing a project on the “future of liberal citizenship”.

² Although stemming from divergent normative foundations, these two perspectives are still soundly located within the liberal script, albeit interpreting and prioritizing values associated with the question of politics differently.

Although they serve a heuristic purpose in normative theory, such ideal constructions are not helpful in the empirical world. A more productive approach, I suggest, would be to define self-determination in the liberal script as a matter of actor agency: individual and collective actors' rights and capacities as equal agents to determine freely who they are, how they want to organize their social and public affairs, and who they want to form meaningful collectives with. Empirically, individual and collective agency can both be located on a spectrum between the universalistic and the particularistic, and they both can be defined thinly or thickly.

2 A TEMPORAL VIEW

Normative theories of citizenship reflect on the relationship between individual and collective self-determination as an intrinsic tension. Yet, the relationship between the individual and collective changed as the script of citizenship itself changed. That is, citizens' equal status as agents, the specific interpretation and concretization of citizenship, has varied across time and space; so has the relationship between the agency of individual and collective actors. Significantly, in the post-war transformations of the liberal script, individual and collective self-determination have acquired increasingly diverging foundations. The equal agency of the individual stems from and is defined on the basis of their human personhood, even when their rights and status are located within a nation-state. Collective agency, on the other hand, progressively refers to a multiplicity of things and is claimed based on different collectives: ethnic, linguistic, religious, sexual, gender-based, and issue-oriented groupings, as well as the nation – the commonly used reference category in legal and normative discussions on self-determination.

As enshrined in the United Nations (UN) organization and treaties in the aftermath of World War II (WWII), the collective was indeed understood as the equal agency of nations and nation-states. In the brief couple of decades that followed, individual and collective agency happily co-existed, reinforcing each other. The script of *national liberal citizenship* embedded the agency and rights of individuals within collective structures such as the national economy, national welfare, and national community. Citizenship was envisaged as a means of national development. Mass decolonizations of the 1950s and 1960s further reinforced the script and the relationship – individual agency, emancipation, and freedom could only be ensured by the collective agency and self-determination of the nation.

From the 1960s on, a number of developments led to the recalibration of agency in liberal citizenship, shifting the focus to the individual. The social movements of the 1960s, with their critical focus on selfhood, self-realization, and freedom laid the cultural ground for expanded notions of the individual and their rights. The intervention of elites from decolonizing nations put the ideas of the universality of human rights into motion at the international level, beyond the steer of the United States and the Soviet Union (Jensen 2016). The world-wide intensification of human rights instruments in the next couple of decades, codified in the UN Human Rights Conventions and in regional human rights systems, consequently advanced the universalistic conceptualizations of individual agency and its decoupling from national constellations.

The neoliberal cultural turn and its globalization since the 1990s marked even a more radical change, by disembedding individual agency not only from the national collective but even from a particular societal structure (Lerch 2022). In the *neoliberal script of citizenship*, individuals are endowed not only with rights but also expanded capabilities and choices. On the one hand, the period saw the extension of universalistic rights based on ever broader and diverse belongings of individuals. On the other, neoliberal reforms and policies re-envisioned the social, in which individuals are now expected to perform their agency and act on their choices (including diverse identities) in ever-expanding domains both locally and globally (Soysal 2012; Fourcade 2021). While national self-determination remains as a strong international norm, collective agency is no longer simply delimited on the basis of the nation. The primacy of the nation declines in relation to the ascent of the universal individual and their legitimated choice of identity collectives.

This thick understanding of individual agency has been endorsed and legitimated widely with the backing of professional expertise and non- and intergovernmental organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the European Union (EU). Standardized models and recipes for the agentic individual are widespread in (social) sciences and education; school children the world over are taught how to enact them as future citizens (Soysal/Wong 2007; Lerch et al. 2016).

3 CONTRADICTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND CHALLENGES TO THE LIBERAL SCRIPT

The rise of individual agency abstracted from a national collective produces a number of challenges and has paradoxical implications for the core principles and aspirations of the liberal script.

RE-DEFINED BORDERS

In the context of liberal citizenship, the tension between individual and collective self-determination regarding the “borders regime” has been noted widely (see Drewski/Gerhard 2020). Freedom of movement is an essential component of individual self-determination and agency, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So is the right to a nationality. However, these rights are not matched by states’ obligations to grant entry or extend nationality in the Declaration. The principle of territorial sovereignty, an expression of collective agency, holds that states control their borders. The subsequent rise and spread of the “cosmopolitan norms and standards of justice”, in relation to asylum seekers and refugees for example, “trumps” state prerogatives over borders, however, even then sovereign states remain the authority to enforce such standards (Benhabib 2004).

Since the turn of the 21st century, driven by populist agendas, and linked with socioeconomic problems and security issues, the politics of immigration and border controls have become contentious and conflictual. Though highly contentious, such politics are not completely concomitant with the trends in migration flows and state policies. Challenging common assumptions, de Haas et al. (2018) show that, although slowed down after the 1990s (“decelerated liberalization”), the cross-national trend in migration policies from post-WWII until now has been a robust liberalization.³ The liberalization of migration policy, to a large extent, reflects the elimination of the inherently discriminatory criteria for admission based on race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, in line with the broader, established liberal norms and standards. Selecting migrants based on religion or race, as pursued by the Trump administration, is a clear violation of the liberal script even when evoked for national security purposes, and indeed it prompted broad condemnation worldwide. Yet, other migrant selection criteria such

3 The border control and surveillance measures, compared to entry regulations, show a more restrictive trend since the 1990s (de Haas et al. 2018).

as skills, merits, and means are widely employed today, as exemplified in the point-based migration and “citizenship by investment” schemes. While these migration schemes are in line with the neoliberal citizenship script, and thus not necessarily considered illiberal, they still challenge deeply the liberal principle of *equal* human agency.

NEW MORAL BOUNDARIES

The neoliberal transformation of citizenship empowers the individual with agentic qualities and expanded capabilities. At the same time, it generates expectations of virtuous and responsible citizens; individuals are expected to work toward not only self-realization but also social well-being. Historically, the national collective, and its shared customs and values, provided the set of virtues that defined the good/responsible citizen; these are now increasingly standardized metrics of performance and capability, not connected with particularistic national projects. The advance of digital technologies, enabling the datafication, classification, and ordering of human activity and experience in ever-expanding life domains, provide the infrastructure for setting the new standards of the good citizen. Such technologies and instruments, which have appeal both inside and outside liberal societies, and public and private sectors, are utilized in propelling, measuring, and surveilling the performance of the good and virtuous individual, according to generalized skills and merits and assumed universalistic measurements (Mau 2019; Orgad/Reijers 2020).

These developments, on the one hand, indicate that citizenship increasingly implicates the individual in relationships, involving multiple dimensions of rights and obligations, not only with the state but with other institutions: corporations, bioscience, medicine, religion, the ecosystem, and even the cosmos (Fourcade 2021). The definition of the good, virtuous citizen is no longer the monopoly of the national state and the realm of civic commitment multiplied. On the other hand, despite starting from universalistic notions of the individual and standards, the new practices nevertheless invite moral boundaries and divisions (those who can demonstrate and exercise their agency are worthy and virtuous individuals), which challenge the egalitarian aspirations of the liberal script.

MULTIPLICITY OF COLLECTIVE AGENCY

The expansion of individual agency anticipates rational and purposeful individuals authorized to act on their identities and claims, requiring ever-expanding organization around them (Meyer/Jepperson 2000; Frank/Meyer 2002). A couple of observations are in order. Firstly, as noted by the world society scholars (Lerch et al. 2022), the universalistic conception of the individual is not necessarily matched with a defined global human society and its organization. Schoolbooks and curricula emphasize active, global citizens, but a global collectivity based on conventional identity building (history, language, common cultural markers) remains a vague notion. Secondly, while collective actorhood and claims for equal agency have proliferated as a factor of individual choice and rights, the nation-state remains the main political organization where such claims can be expressed and realized. This generates much competition and conflict about which collectives can claim legitimacy for agency and how they envision the collective good. The very process of claiming legitimacy requires the substance and boundaries of collectives to be particularized. The universalistic individual meets, paradoxically, the particularistic collective.

Identity claims around ethnicity and religion and their challenges to the liberal script have been commonly discussed, but the tension is displayed in all social institutions. Claims regarding sexuality and family generate conflicts on what constitutes gender and what constitutes the “natural” (Cupac/Ebeturk 2020). They interact with science and academic freedom, on and off campus. The 2021 UK census gender question generated controversy, organized protests, and a legal case: feminists and women’s groups (as well as epidemiologists and statisticians) insisted on the inclusion of a question on sex at birth, and transgender groups insisted on self-identification as free agents (The Economist 2021). Recently, a number of UK universities have been shaken by academic freedom and hate speech rows, involving “gender-critical” feminist academics and the transgender community (British Broadcasting Corporation 2021; Adams 2021).

The liberal script is based on strong expectations that competing visions of the common good and the world should conform with the principle of individual rights and freedoms. These examples testify to the increasingly complex and difficult relationship between the agency and self-determination

of the individual and the collective. What consequences they will have for the future of the liberal script is far from clear.

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