

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

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Collective self-determination in the form of democracy belongs to every modern description of the liberal script. Individual self-determination, however, is closer to its core and higher ranked in its definition. Yet, the idea of co-originality is still very useful for liberal theorizing. Individual and collective self-determination depend on the minimum presence of the other without being mutually reinforcing. Their relation represents one of the most important varieties of the liberal script.



Both individual self-determination and collective self-determination belong to the liberal script. Within the liberal script, the former refers to individual rights and individual freedom of all human beings, and the latter is, since the 1920s, usually translated as liberal democracy. On a general level, these two concepts are mutually reinforcing. In specific circumstances, though, they often create tensions. If these tensions are one-sidedly resolved in favor of individual self-determination, the ugly side of liberalism gets visible. Privileging negative freedom over positive freedom leads to a society in which the rights of the strong prevail; allowing property rights to beat collective interests, systematically leads to a dominance of capitalism over democracy; a one-sided emphasis on individual rights undermines sustainability and morality of equal worth. For all of these reasons, I have a solid normative and political preference for the idea of „equal footing“ of individual and collective self-determination as suggested in different ways by Christoph Möllers, Thomas Risse, and Yasmin Soysal in their contributions in this SCRIPTS Arguments session on Self-Determination (see Möllers 2022; Risse 2022; Soysal 2022).

Regarding the descriptive side, I maintain two objections to the “co-originality position”. First, the idea of co-originality, if translated as mutually reinforcing components, underplays the tension and potential conflict between these principles in specific cases. I would therefore describe those two components as a tension – not a contradiction! – that cannot be resolved one-sidedly without undermining the liberal script as a whole. We then talk about co-originality in the sense that one element depends on the (minimum) presence of the other, not in the sense that they co-produce each other. Moreover, within the liberal script, which is something else than good normative theory, the concept of individual self-determination is closer to its core than collective self-determination. In the remainder, I want to focus on the latter point.

In a sociological account of the liberal script, those components are considered as liberal that are regularly and convergently part of accounts by self-proclaimed liberals or those considered liberals by others. The question then is: do liberal speakers consider both – individual and collective self-determination – as part of the liberal script, and if so, how do liberal speakers relate the two concepts to each other? Regarding the first question, almost all 21st-century liberals consider both components part of the liberal script. Yet, when it comes to the relationship between individual and collective self-determination, the liberal grammar gives the former, in most instances, a prerogative. There are three arguments in support of this view:

First, the concept of co-originality is shared by many liberal speakers but not by all. As Stefan Gosepath points out in his contribution, individual freedom and autonomy as well as the morality of equal respect are a „pre-condition“ for public deliberation (Gosepath 2022). At the same time, the acceptance of individual freedom and autonomy as well as the morality of equal respect is an outcome of ideal-typical public deliberation. Whether this difference is considered a different status of the two components or can be captured with the concept of co-originality, is an open question of debate within the liberal camp. There are good reasons to place the most important liberal philosophers of our times – John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas – on two different sides of this debate. Hence, there is no sufficient convergence on whether only liberal self-determination or both liberal and collective self-determination is at the core of the liberal script.

Second, imagine a debate between someone who takes the (normative) position that individual rights are prior to democracy and another one who argues in favor of co-originality. It is more or less consensual that the first position in this debate would be labeled as „liberal“, while the second one would be called „republican“, „deliberative“, etc. No question, many of those who do not take the liberal position in this debate are nevertheless liberals, either self-described in other contexts or considered so by others. However, the labeling of positions in such a debate internal to the liberal scripts tells us something about the convergent core of liberalism.

As mentioned in the introduction: I am very close to the second position in this normative debate. Nevertheless, I maintain that a sociological understanding of the liberal script needs to rank individual self-determination higher than collective self-determination. This is very much in line with the warning of Tully Rector to not conflate the desirable with the descriptive (Rector 2021). Grasping a sociological account of the liberal script is different from identifying the best normative theory.

Third, in our papers to sketch the liberal script, we implicitly (Börzel/Zürn 2020) or explicitly (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021) argue that its „grammar“ (Michael Freeden) or justificatory logic puts the individual self-determination first. According to the liberal script, individual self-determination requires collective rules and protection. Still, only those collective rules co-determined by all affected individuals are compatible with individual self-determination. In this way, democracy is justified by individual self-determination. And this argument is shared by (almost) all liberal speakers.

Does it also work the other way around? Is it possible to argue that we need individual self-determination for a democracy to work or to produce them in the first place? Yes, it is. Christoph Möllers (Möllers 2022) points to John Stuart Mill as a prominent figure making such an argument. Nevertheless, it is an exceptional argument, at least not one that is very often made. Whereas Mill represents an important strand in liberal theory, this position is not shared by all liberals, at least not to the extent as the first one.

To conclude, democracy belongs to every modern description of the liberal script. There can be no question about that. But does it have the same role in the core of liberal grammar as individual self-determination? Here, I have my doubts. These doubts do not prevent me from adopting a normative

theory that emphasizes co-originality as put forward by Habermas. Nevertheless, I maintain that this position is not fully convergent among all liberals. The notion of individual self-determination, however, is.

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