

# BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM

## *Freedom, Sociability and Justice*

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This article brings into conversation three books recently published by ISRF Fellows that rethink classical liberal notions of individualism. These books weave a story of how community is fundamental to some of the most important values of the human condition that contribute to the flourishing of individual persons as free, sociable and equal based on the mutual reciprocity that each person owes to each other. The authors of these books take us beyond individualism to think of persons as both constituting and constituted by the communities in which they exist and live. In her book, *Being Sure of Each Other: An Essay on Social Rights and Freedoms*, Kimberley Brownlee argues forcefully that individuals need meaningful contact and relationships with other persons.<sup>1</sup> Without this their mental health and anchoring in the world suffer. In a similar vein, in his book *An African Path to Disability Justice: Community, Relationships and Obligations*, Oche Onazi promotes a relational conception of community that recognises individuals as equal persons, regardless of their individuated characteristics (gender, race, class, ability) as having mutually reciprocal duties towards each other.<sup>2</sup> This robust understanding of community underpins a conception of disability justice whereby obligations towards disabled persons are recognised and disabled persons are recognised as equal participants

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1. Kimberley Brownlee, *Being Sure of Each Other: An Essay on Social Rights and Freedoms* (Oxford 2020: Oxford University Press).

2. Oche Onazi, *An African Path to Disability Justice: Community, Relationships and Obligations* (Cham 2020: Springer).

## BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM

in and contributors to society. Rather than simply focus on the abstract value of equality, Onazi conceptualizes the issue of disability justice as embedded in a sense of community value in the same way that Brownlee sees the capacity to fulfil the need of human being to have social relations as community-based; for to be deprived of such relations is a deep injustice. Or, put in other terms, fulfilling the needs of human beings to have social relationships and to be regarded as equal persons depends on their being part of a community that engenders love, care, friendship and obligations to each other.

Neither of these conceptions of rights and justice are simply about individual entitlement: they are about how individuals relate to each other and fulfil each other's needs. The idea of community underpinning them is not the same as the organic notion of community as articulated in classical Graeco-Roman thought, where each person had a role to play in society in order to fulfil the needs of all. Rather, Brownlee and Onazi promote an understanding of community that nurtures individuals. They explore how such a supportive community contributes to the well-being of persons which in turn underpins the quality of their lives and capacities to pursue their various endeavours. Their understanding of how community is an integral part of human well-being contributes to an understanding of freedom that goes beyond individualism and considers that individuals have a duty to support each other.

In *Freedom: An Unruly History*, Annelien de Dijn also considers liberty as a political value that emerges not only as an individualistic conception of the self as free but also as a collective value in which individuals come together as a community to rule in common.<sup>3</sup> In her book, which covers the history of freedom over two millennia, De Dijn contrasts two understandings of liberty as a political value. The first promotes the freedom of individuals as self-interested beings for whom the state is an instrument that protects their individual sphere of liberty to pursue their own ends. Here freedom is understood in terms of non-interference from the state. The second understands liberty as a collective ideal in which individuals rule themselves since they are part of a self-governing and democratic political community. De

3. Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA 2020: Harvard University Press).

Dijn traces the dialectical opposition between these two conceptions throughout Western political history. She demonstrates that at certain moments in history, as the people acquired the liberty to take part in democratic self-rule through revolution or social reform, conservative elements opposed the radicalism of these movements and their calls for democracy, depicting these as having despotic tendencies.<sup>4</sup>

Today, according to De Dijn, the conservative conception that 'freedom should be identified with personal security and individual rights predominates' over the conception of liberty as self-rule and 'popular control over government, including the use of state power to enhance the collective well-being'.<sup>5</sup> Her study shows that throughout history the property-owning elites who desire the freedom to pursue their own interests without necessarily having any regard for the interests or well-being of others triumphed over democratic conceptions of liberty that saw it as a collective and egalitarian ideal that values all political voices. De Dijn's book chronicles how we got to this point. She is not the first philosopher to have attempted to tell this story. Indeed, the argument that there are two notions of freedom, a more active and participatory one that stands opposite a passive one where people want to be free to pursue their own lives without any interference from the state, runs throughout the history of Western political thought and activism. This history been variously presented and discussed by Benjamin Constant, Isaiah Berlin, John Pocock, and Quentin Skinner. Constant contrasts ancient and modern freedom, which Berlin reads in terms of positive and negative liberty. The ancient or positive conception of freedom refers to the view that a person is free only when they rule themselves and actively participate in a political community. Modern or negative freedom, by contrast, consists in non-interference by the state in private lives. Pocock and Skinner, for their part, lament the loss of the classical and neo-roman republican tradition that promotes the citizenry's active participation in the activity of ruling in a free state. They criticise modern individual negative freedom and rights for 'privatising' freedom and keeping the people outside of the realm of public deliberation and politics.

De Dijn highlights that Constant reconceptualised modern freedom

4. *Ibid.*, 306.

5. *Ibid.*, 345.

in opposition to ancient freedom and disrupted the idea that modern individual freedom was a legacy of the ancient conception of liberty.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the idea that individuals are free when they are not hindered by any obstacles and that they operate to maximise their own self-interest dates back to Thomas Hobbes and other contract theorists. In opposition to Hobbes's absolutist conception of sovereignty, Montesquieu devised a constitutional system whereby the separation of executive from legislative power ensured that the sovereign state was neither absolute nor arbitrary. This created the conditions for individual liberty. Crucially, the conception of modern freedom is tied not only to the conception of human beings as self-interested beings, but also to the free market where people are free to exchange goods and to maximise their benefits. This twin focus on the maximisation of self-interest and the free-market economy engenders an individualism that lacks a perspective on community and the well-being of others.

A large part of De Dijn's book examines the Atlantic Revolutions and asks why the promises of full egalitarian liberty were not realised after the American, French and Haitian Revolutions. This leads to a study of the counter-revolutionary thinking that considered democratic rule tyrannical and in need of moderation. Thus she contends that the conception of freedom from state interference was pushed as a more important and substantive freedom than that of the liberty to participate in legislative processes. According to this line of argument, giving the people legislative power was precarious or even dangerous, as the people could be despotic or totalitarian in their rule. Therefore legislative power was shared between two chambers—the upper chamber of the landed social classes who could propose legislation and the lower chamber of popular representatives who could reject legislative proposals. Additionally, the judiciary was made independent. These measures were meant to temper the tyranny of the majority. In other words, the radical egalitarian and democratic elements of the 'cult of freedom' were made subject to elite control through these mechanisms.

This is a compelling argument: the negative conception of freedom from state interference is bereft of the positive element to share in

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6. See *ibid.*, 10.

the control of public affairs. However, I do not think that this dualistic conception of the idea of liberty, which distinguishes between two 'types' of liberty, is entirely convincing, as I do not think these two 'types' are necessarily antithetical nor that one wins out over another. The notion of being free from arbitrary state power is important. In Rome, the Tribunes of the people were established to stop magistrates from arbitrarily punishing common people, which led to the development of due process. In our time, Black Lives Matter is a movement about protecting Black lives from the arbitrary abuse of police power. The right to be protected from such interference in one's home, or from being stopped and searched due to the colour of one's skin, is very important. We need only look to the abuse of power that cost the lives of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd to understand this. Moreover, the enjoyment of this freedom does not necessarily mean that one should forego the liberty to participate in ruling. One needs both.

There is a long tradition of thinking that incorporates on an unequal basis these two types of freedom in the mixed republican constitution. The people are granted the freedom to live in security from arbitrary power and the landed nobility enjoy the authority to rule and make laws that have jurisdiction over their private property. In most republican theories, and in the Roman context in particular, this was seen through the lens of virtue: the nobility had virtue. The people had representatives who could participate in making legislation only through their negative power to veto propositions made by the Senate. That is to say that republics included both types of freedom but distributed these unequally across social classes. It was feared that the power of the people would become despotic; the establishment or wealthy propertied social classes did not want to give up their authority. Hence they limited the popular voice by not allowing the people full participation in proposing laws, and instead granting them the political liberty to oppose legislative proposals and to live in security to pursue their private interests. It is also crucial to note here that the revolutionary thrust for radical democracy of the 18th century, which pushed the boundaries to include more people in political processes, was tempered by more conservative thinking that only partially incorporated a small portion of the people and that portion excluded women, people of colour, the working classes, and slaves.

What is refreshing about De Dijn's book is that she includes some of these marginal voices to illustrate the re-emergence of the 'cult of freedom'. Notably in her discussion of the Atlantic Revolutions she pays attention to the Haitian Revolution of Black slaves against their white European masters. This history is of course more complicated, as not all French revolutionaries were radical and not all accepted Haitian independence. Many bourgeois revolutionaries profited from the slave trade and did not want to give it up. Nonetheless, De Dijn presents the voices of revolutionary women, notably Olympe de Gouges, who composed a Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens (*Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, 1791), and Black rights activists such as Frederick Douglass. These voices challenge the system from the perspective of the oppressed. They contest both the conservative and democratic positionalities of the men who usually have both space and voice in politics and the production of knowledge. This is an area that needs expansion in our studies of the history of ideas and in our historical and genealogical analyses of concepts. Studies of freedom as emancipation, told from the perspective of the powerless rather than the privileged, would greatly enhance our understanding of both what it means to be free and how political, educational, and economic institutions organise difference and operate to exclude. These sources of knowledge challenge mainstream ways of understanding freedom and political institutions. They develop normative ideas on how to create structures that would work to deliver the liberty to participate in ruling institutions and in making laws on a more meaningful level, rather than simply conform to existing institutions and embed inequality structurally. It is important that we as scholars listen to the activists and theorists who write about their experiences of oppression and struggles against slavery, imperialism, patriarchy, and socio-economic exploitation. Their voices are central to an understanding of liberty in all its iterations.

De Dijn begins to do this in her book. Her study is about Western understandings of liberty, yet these Western conceptions cannot be separated from the wider contexts in which many of these ideas developed and were constructed. Even the ancient Greek conception of the free state had been constructed through its opposition to the idea of Persian despotism. Likewise, the modern languages of liberty

and natural rights emerged in the moment of European colonial expansion and empire. To be sure, many contend that modernity was constituted by this context and by the European other.<sup>7</sup> By the same token, many anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist thinkers were situated in the West, yet they have not been considered as integral to Western thinking. In these broader intellectual contexts, the idea of freedom as self-rule goes beyond its conceptualisation within a binary of ancient versus modern, positive versus negative liberty, or revolution versus counter-revolution. The dialectic that De Dijn traces across time between the despotic tendencies of radical revolutionary democratic liberty and conservative counter-revolutionary individual freedom is paralleled in the opposition of anti-colonialist nationalist movements to Western imperialism. Anti-colonialists sought to liberate themselves not only from domination by imperial power but also from its ideological hegemony, which valued individual freedom from state interference, the free market, and ultimately the maximisation of self-interest that permitted the exploitation of others.

Indeed, most 20th-century anti-colonial movements called for solidarity and unity against imperial domination. In their resistance, they nurtured a robust sense of community and aimed at achieving collective self-rule. For instance, in my reading of Indian anti-colonial thought, I discern a tripartite understanding of self-rule that plays out at three levels: first, at the physical and material level with respect to the body and freedom from physical oppression and need; second, at the psychological or spiritual level with respect to the freedom of the mind and freedom from dependence on another person's will or command; and third, at the political level with respect to the rule of a collective body over itself through popularly sanctioned institutions and government. This tripartite conception of self-rule can also be read in terms of three intertwined aspects of liberty: the freedom of the body and movement; the freedom of the will; and the capacity for both individual and collective self-determination which would entail constituting a political community that ought to organize its political and social institutions to produce freedom and equality for

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7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton 2000: Princeton University Press); Gur-minder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (London 2012: Palgrave Macmillan).

## BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM

all regardless of class, gender, race, or ability. This conception further reflects the freedom to be part of a greater community that supports its members to work together towards common goals.

It is in these rich anti-colonial traditions that we encounter the same theoretical problem that drives each of the three books I have engaged with here. That is to say, the problem of moving beyond a one-dimensional individualistic understanding of freedom that neglects the fundamental sociality of human beings as well as the fact that they live in communities that have the capacity to incorporate all individual people. What unites these three books is that more than merely raising the problem, they all gesture in the direction of a solution too. De Dijn laments that the conservative conception of freedom won out over the radical democratic notion of a more substantive freedom; yet her study shows that there has been and continues to be a relentless desire of peoples to be free to determine their own institutions and existence as communities that search for equality and that wish to overthrow systems of domination. However, the notion of community that this conception rests upon remains abstract and tends to be constructed according to the ends of society. It is here that Brownlee and Onazi make a crucial contribution by fleshing out more substantive theories based not simply on the value of human life, but on what makes a life worth living, so to speak, and in so doing they promote a combination of the freedoms to live in security, to be part of a political community that nurtures and cares for its members such that they have a basis from which to be active participants in social and political life. The basis of Brownlee's and Onazi's respective conceptions of individuals as social beings who cannot survive without others and who need loving relations puts issues of care at the centre of political community and shows these to be public goods in which we all have profound interests.

Together these three books move us beyond thinking of freedom, society, and justice in purely individualistic terms but push us to think in terms of freedom as a shared and relational value that entails sociability, solidarity, and justice. In our current moment of global existential crises, we must think beyond individual self-interest as we did in the recent worldwide lockdowns and as we wear masks to protect others from spreading the coronavirus. This not only demonstrated

through solidarity but also through caring for each other and for humanity. If we want to combat climate change, it is clear that we must work together and move beyond individual freedom to recognise our collective interests and values in maintaining a healthy environment and protecting the earth and all life-forms. This will require change in how we conceptualise ourselves as individual and collective beings that co-exist with other life-forms in a shared habitat that we can no longer afford to exploit to support a materialist life-style and individualist conception of the good life. Moreover, it is in the effort to rethink each of these elements that books like De Dijn's, Brownlee's, and Onazi's are not just interesting contributions but absolutely vital resources.