Freedom in the Age of Climate Change

Martin Ritter

Review of *Green Leviathan or the Poetics of Political Liberty: Navigating Freedom in the Age of Climate Change and Artificial Intelligence*, by Mark Coeckelbergh. New York: Routledge, 2021.

According to the latest report of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, human activity undoubtedly causes significant changes to the Earth's climate, especially global warming (IPCC 2022). Scientific models clearly show that we must completely stop emitting carbon dioxide and radically reduce the emissions of all other greenhouse gases. Cosmetic adjustments are not enough; we need a truly radical change, if not a revolution. Mark Coeckelbergh's newest book addresses exactly this problem: how to cope with climate change in the world permeated by technologies without giving up human freedom.

Coeckelbergh introduces his reader to the issues addressed by his book with a fictional story: a fighter for a green future, or, if you wish, an eco-terrorist, is released from a prison after serving twenty years and is delighted to find that his struggle was not in vain. His efforts contributed to saving both humankind and nature. But humans have paid dearly for this "salvation." The whole beautiful green world has become—with the help of smart technologies—one big prison because a climate catastrophe had to be prevented by directly controlling and manipulating human behavior. The liberated fighter for a sustainable future thus finds himself in a world of unfreedom. On the background of this possible scenario, Coeckelbergh scrutinizes the following question: what kind of politics do we need facing climate change and the possibilities of AI if our core value is human freedom? The author thematizes a large number of both theoretical and practical problems but his main thesis can be summarized as follows: To save freedom in the world of climate change and AI, we must first of all abandon or overcome a too narrow and only negative definition of freedom itself.

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The title of Coeckelbergh's book refers to a biblical sea monster made famous by Thomas Hobbes who claimed that human coexistence in its natural state is brutal and miserable. To prevent such suffering, we need a strong central government: Leviathan symbolizes this absolute authority. Is it not justified, Coeckelbergh asks, to claim that facing climate change we need such a global authority, a *green* Leviathan? If the very survival of humankind (and our planet) is at stake, isn't an authoritarian regime in order? The author brings convincing arguments against such an idea, yet he is fully aware that the problem cannot be simply dismissed: Even if the authoritarian regime is not desirable, are we not plunging into a situation where we will have no other choice because global warming will threaten to result in the Hobbesian war of all against all? One way of avoiding this situation without taking drastic measures is to subtly guide, or nudge, people to act more responsibly. This option has its supporters among theorists: instead of dictating, we can nudge people to do what needs to be done. But if we manipulate people without their knowing of it, are we not actually behaving authoritatively? Are we not circumventing their freedom? And who determines what is right, or what is the right behavior worthy of subconscious promotion?

According to the author, we need to overcome a merely negative or even negativist concept of human nature (supporting Hobbes's approach) and develop a more positive one including a more concrete concept of human freedom. Freedom must not be reduced to freedom *from* (external restrictions) but seen positively as freedom *to*, i.e., as a capability to do something: The truly valuable freedom lies in the possibility of fulfilling human needs and developing human capabilities. And, to make such freedom politically possible, we must understand social institutions not as a necessary evil (as is the case of Leviathan supposed to protect us from others). Instead, we need them as a means for strengthening our ability to fully develop ourselves. Our policy then may include limiting negative freedom, for example through taxation or trade regulations. The positive concept of freedom thus makes it possible to see that politics cannot aim at merely protecting individuals from each other—it should create conditions for realizing the (common) good as well. Therefore, Coeckelbergh argues, we need to transform our society by replacing a competitive organization with a cooperative, collaborative one. But we must achieve this change in a democratic way and without the utopia of an ideal society. Admittedly, the positive concept of freedom implies an idea of the good life and a certain concept of the shared good too. This good, however, can be defined neither naturally nor traditionally. In this context, the author refers to John Dewey according to whom we cannot do without the active participation of citizens in

solving social problems: democracy is, after all, "organized intelligence." This intelligence is based on imagination and experimentation, the purpose of which is democratic self-regulation, i.e., seeking and finding solutions to social problems that benefit everyone.

As should be clear from the aforesaid, the liberalism advocated by the author puts much emphasis on democracy and avoids both authoritarianism and paternalism: it trusts people in their ability to think and to imagine possible alternatives. It also avoids collectivism and identity politics: no collective identity takes precedence over individual freedom. Coeckelbergh "absolutely" respects human freedom but highlights its frameworks, both social and natural. Thanks to such a contextualization, we can see that individual freedom paradoxically cannot be an absolute value because if we separate it from its real contexts, then we run the risk of suppressing it.

Since freedom is not purely individual but always relational, conditioned by social and natural contexts, it is not surprising that the author brings into play the now popular notion of the Anthropocene connecting it, resourcefully, with the metaphor of an invisible hand made famous by Adam Smith and advocated by the proponents of laissez-fair economics. The Anthropocene concept is paradoxical as it ascribes enormous power to humankind, yet at the same time humans seem somehow powerless: as if they could not influence what they cause, as if the situation was beyond their control. And, as the author rightly underlines, the notion of the Anthropocene is not only paradoxical. It can be politically dangerous as the destructive power lies not in the invisible hands of humankind as such but in specific hands that should not remain invisible. In the context of the Anthropocene (and probably in the economical one as well), we therefore should abandon the metaphor of the invisible hand and use AI to see clearly who harms our environment and who is most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Yet whether we do it or not, the awareness of climate change and its determinants creates conditions for a new type of a class struggle: that between climate capitalists and a climate proletariat. The author considers possible scenarios of a future development, including the question of whether a potential climate revolution would result in a democratic or authoritarian system, and concludes that if we want to avoid catastrophe, we must gradually make democratic changes: climate capitalism must be transformed via effective regulation. And this change must be achieved at a global level.

When thinking about the needed political changes, we should also consider whether non-human entities, especially animals, are not part of a political com-

munity. Non-human living beings may not be political actors, but their needs and interests, or simply their lives, undoubtedly are affected by human (political) decisions. Following Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, Coeckelbergh identifies the political body of today not with a united humankind but rather with a living multiplicity connected by mutual relations of conditioning and dependence. The sphere of politics then includes not only human beings (based on their innate intrinsic value) but also other living organisms and inanimate "things" and processes as well. Indeed, we should put the emphasis on processes: our politics should not be about structures established once-and-for-all. Instead, it should be politics of becoming, which means politics nurturing a collective that is more akin to a relational network or even, as Haraway provocatively suggests, a compost. This compost, however, is nothing natural: as men and women are not only human but also natural, nature is not only natural but also artificial or artistic, that is, creative. It is not always the same but constantly heading toward something new. Facing climate change, we thus need to rethink not only the meaning of human freedom but also of nature, of which we are (one of many) part. Politics corresponding to such nature must then resemble poetics due to its emphasis on co-creation.

Subtitled "Navigating Freedom in an Era of Climate Change and Artificial Intelligence," Coeckelbergh's book offers a vision of a free society (and a society of freedom) that is no matter-of-course but must be sustained and reshaped if we are to avoid the Scylla of authoritarianism and Charybdis of radical libertarianism. To defend and maintain freedom, it is not enough to reject authoritarianism (whether of the right or the left) holding to negative freedom, i.e., freedom from external constraints. As Coeckelbergh nicely puts it, we must stretch our notion of freedom before others break it. We are already witnessing various forms of populism, and even green paternalism is no satisfactory solution. It is for this reason that we need to offer a more positive concept of freedom: freedom that cannot be realized without caring of our common environment, which means shaping the world using existing technologies and infrastructures in developing a political collective. As far as AI is concerned, it can undoubtedly be used (in the currently prevalent way) to deepen the existing crisis. However, since AI also shows us the strong interconnectedness of everything, it can also be used for global communication and coordination: it can contribute to expanding our capability to shape a political 'body' whose different parts can then realize their relational—and positive—freedom.

Coeckelbergh's book does not give specific instructions on what to do in the current climate crisis. But it is extremely valuable precisely due to its particular perspective: that of liberalism, which offers a possible way out of the crisis just

and only if we overcome a too narrow concept of freedom. Such a perspective is particularly relevant in the epoch so fond of emphasizing freedom without being able to give it a concrete and convincing meaning. The question remains, however, whether the general measures the author sees as necessary can be realized. Is it (geo)politically possible to establish strong and democratically functioning institutions with a global reach? Or, regarding the role of education: are we capable of changing our education system so that people become more able to understand what is happening to the world and in it? Yes, the author's ideas may seem unrealistic, yet they show very realistically the situation we are in and the possible lines of a future development. If we are to prevent impending disaster, everyone surely must start with him- or herself. At the same time, however, they should not stop there. It is not enough to change individual behavior because the change at stake must be truly political: a change in collective behavior that is not possible without changing our political institutions, our "system." Our task is nothing less.

Acknowledgment

Reference

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