

AUG 7, 2022

# Freedom(s)

This is *The Weekly Letter* for August 7, 2022. [About this newsletter](#)

No 'Big Story' section in this issue—I focused this week on the following opinion piece.

## My View

There is no idea more American than freedom. But our views on freedom (or liberty; I'll use the two terms interchangeably) have become as polarized as the country itself, with the right adopting a hyper-individualist view of freedom and the left moving away from emphasizing freedom or leaving the concept underdeveloped. Here, I'll discuss two views of freedom which I'll refer to, admittedly imprecisely, as right-wing and left-wing.

### Right-wing freedom

The view of freedom favored by the American right increasingly allows almost no legitimate government restrictions on individual behavior, even when individual behavior risks being deeply harmful to others. For example, anti-Covid measures designed to protect others from illness and death such as mask and vaccine mandates are viewed from the right as unacceptable infringements on individual liberties. What view of freedom is employed to justify this position?

The philosopher Philip Pettit has developed a typology of views of freedom (full transparency: I haven't read Pettit's work directly, and I am relying on the account of his work provided in Augustin Fragnière's essay, which is discussed below), and in his scheme the view of freedom held by the right-wing seems to be an extreme version of *liberty as non-interference*. Liberty as non-interference considers intentional, human-created restrictions of options to be restrictions on freedom. Although the right has recently taken this perspective to an extreme, liberty as non-interference is similar to the mainstream American view of freedom.

The American flavor of liberty emphasizes the freedom of individuals from government interference. In contrast, it is accepted that the *practical* ability of individuals to live freely may be quite constrained, by economic factors for example. Nevertheless, freedom from government interference has proven to be a powerful ideal. And given this view, it is easy to see why government regulations and restrictions can be considered illegitimate regardless of the justifications given for them.

The problem is that absolute opposition to government action allows people to curtail the rights of others, including the right to liberty itself.

From the Enlightenment onward, Western political thought has tended to focus on the right of people to be free from government overreach, but it has struggled with the question of how to organize society in a way that enables people to be free from harm and oppression. However, the individualist bent of the contemporary right-wing view of freedom is more extreme than most historical Western views. For example, although the philosopher John Stuart Mill's classic text *On Liberty* is primarily devoted to the defense of individual freedom, Mill recognizes that government should prevent citizens from inflicting certain types of harm on others:

"the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest. This conduct consists, first, in not injuring the interests of one another; or rather certain interests, which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as rights..." (p. 69 of [this PDF](#)).

Another factor in the right-wing idea of freedom is race, as *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie argued in a column [from 2020](#) and another [from last year](#). Bouie writes:

"Freedom from domination and control is one aspect of the meaning of whiteness. The other aspect, in a kind of ideological inversion, is the right to control the presence and the lives of nonwhites. To be white in antebellum America, for instance, was to be able to enslave Africans and expropriate native land." (2020)

Bouie writes that a particular conception of freedom—*white freedom*—"took its shape under conditions of explicit racial hierarchy, where colonialism and chattel slavery made clear who was free and who was not. For the men who dominated, this informed their view of what freedom was." The expansion of voting rights in the U.S. and the rise of the liberal democratic ideal in Europe only reinforced a racial view of freedom, as democratic rights for white men became universal while people of color were denied rights. (2021)

Along with the principle of government non-interference, we can add to the right-wing view of freedom the principle of the right to dominate others—especially the right of white people to dominate people of color. The two principles are at work in right-wing opposition, in the name of freedom, to government action aimed at ending racial and other forms of social oppression.

### Left-wing freedom

What is a viable alternative, left-wing, view of freedom? In the [essay](#), "Ecological Limits and the Meaning of Freedom: A Defense of Liberty as Non-Domination," Augustin Fragnière selects another option from Pettit's taxonomy, *liberty as non-domination*, as a view of liberty that is compatible with government restrictions aimed at protecting the environment. Liberty as non-domination belongs to the broader perspective of *agency-freedom*, which focuses on the status of the individual as free rather than enslaved or in a state of vulnerability to *arbitrary* interference. In this view, an individual is free if they are free in relation to others. Returning to liberty as non-domination specifically, Fragnière writes,

"According to this school of thought, what counts when it comes to liberty is not the absence of interference in itself, but the absence of domination. Here, being dominated means being vulnerable to the unchecked power of interference of others... Accordingly, being free amounts to being protected from the arbitrary power of others."

Liberty as non-domination is not totally different from liberty as non-interference; arbitrary interference is considered harmful, and options remain important as a secondary consideration. But this perspective allows government to take certain restrictive actions without those actions being considered infringements on liberty. This perspective also shares the first dimension of white freedom—freedom *from* domination and control—but, crucially, does not entail a right *to* dominate and control.

I think that liberty as non-domination can help draw out a broader, left-wing conception of freedom. If left-wing politics is a liberation project, then it makes sense to say that the goal of the left is to achieve *liberation from domination*. The status of being liberated from domination is one way to understand what the left means by freedom. And if the goal is to eliminate domination, then it makes sense for society to restrict the options that entail domination.

The left also tends to believe that freedom requires certain *positive* features in addition to the *negative* feature of being free from arbitrary interference. Perhaps most prominently, the left has argued that freedom requires economic security. This component makes freedom more possible in practice, a consideration downplayed by the right-wing view of freedom.

In brief, a left-wing view of freedom would take certain options off the table if those options would cause harm or a serious risk of harm but insist upon freedom from domination and positive features such as economic security.

In the recent past, progressives and leftists have generally not focused on their ideal of freedom. However, at least on the center-left, there has been an uptick in use of the language of freedom in response to GOP attacks on voting rights and, especially, the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. As former White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer put it, "Republicans view freedom as almost entirely about your ability to buy an assault rifle. Democrats think it means you should have the ability to make decisions about your own body, who you marry and what books you read, and I think we have the high ground in that debate." ([Washington Post](#))

However, achieving the left-wing project of liberation from domination requires more than opposing recent right-wing attacks on freedom. The left needs to expand and deepen its vision of social and economic freedom.

I believe there can be a corresponding radicalization of the left-wing view of freedom with regard to the environment. I agree with Fragnière that liberty as non-domination is compatible with policies that promote environmental sustainability. But Fragnière seems to view environmental sustainability as a competing good that has to be reconciled with human freedom. What if we instead applied the lens of freedom to environmental issues?

Our political and economic systems—driven historically and, to a large extent, currently, by Western countries—have created a world where habitats have been destroyed; Earth's resources have been extracted to fuel economic growth; [one million](#) animal and plant species are at risk of extinction; and fossil fuel companies have created a climate emergency that is disproportionately affecting people who are already marginalized. Is this not a system of domination? Environmental destruction is clearly crushing the freedom of the people who are most impacted by it. And while all aspects of what is meant by the word *freedom* may not apply to non-human beings, this destruction has certainly caused mass death among animals and plants and impeded the normal lives of many who survived. If the left-wing view of freedom precludes the right to domination, then this view must take a stand against environmental destruction as well as social and economic domination.

The prohibition against dominating others can be viewed as pragmatic: if I can't dominate others, then I am assured that others can't dominate me. But perhaps there is a deeper justification. Maybe this view recognizes that we are all in this together, even as we live individual lives. The right-wing view of freedom comes close to imagining freedom as a zero-sum game: I have to use my freedom to dominate you or else you will use your freedom to dominate me. The left-wing view says the opposite: My freedom depends upon yours.

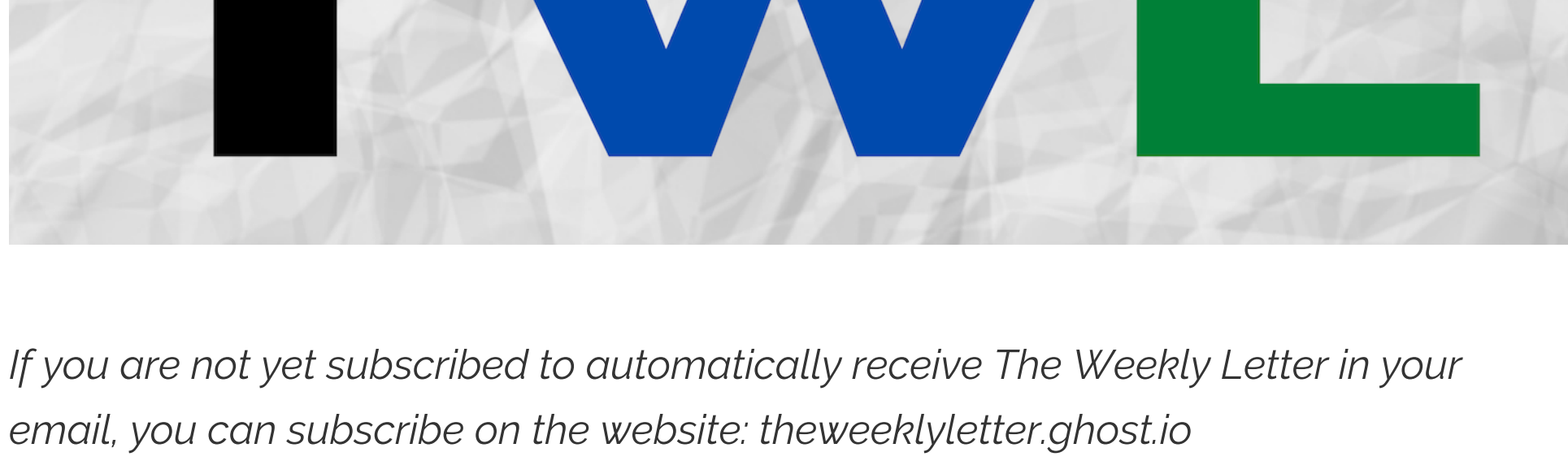
## Opinion

**Nkululeko Majozi:** The world is now taking notice of [food insecurity](#), but it has long been an issue for Africa. [Video] (AL Jazeera, 8/2)

**Sarah Smarsh:** The importance of [Kansas' vote](#) to protect abortion rights. (NY Times, 8/3)

**Khalil al-Anani:** The role of [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) in the evolution of jihadist ideas. (Middle East Eye, 8/4)

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