

"Corona forces us to stay in our bubble"

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Mr. Van Parijs, we are currently experiencing a far-reaching encroachment on civil liberties in Europe. How much understanding do you have for this?

I fully understand that freedom must be restricted when a pandemic strikes. If individual freedom means a high probability of serious harm to society, there must be restrictions. That is why smoking is prohibited in cafés and restaurants, or why there are speed limits in the streets. However, restrictions such as those limiting the number of people I can receive at home are unprecedented – certainly in my lifetime and perhaps even in the history of our society. A second difference with smoking bans and speed limits is the size of the economic damage that the restrictions have caused. Thirdly, the social consequences are enormous. We must not touch each other, not shake hands, not cheer each other up by being close to each other. Instead, we should avoid social encounters. So, the consequences of the restrictions are exceptionally far-reaching.

With the restriction of being allowed to meet only a certain number of people, you are addressing a very important point. How comprehensible are these decisions? And how are they communicated? This in turn has a decisive influence on the extent to which people accept them. In Germany, decrees like the ban on tourists from high-risk areas have been overturned by the courts. Who actually decides on these far-reaching interventions in civil liberties? At the moment it is the executive, parliaments are left out. How long will this work out?

We are dealing with an emergency situation in which quick decisions are needed. This means that the executive branch plays a much more important role than under normal circumstances. Especially in federal countries like Germany and Belgium, there is an additional need for an effective coordination of measures between decentralized executives. But even in such exceptional situations there is — and must always be — an ex-post control by the parliaments and later on by the electorates. The executives can and must act now. But they must bear in mind that this action can and must also be validated democratically when the time comes.

What distinguishes countries like Germany and Belgium from right-wing populist or authoritarian states like Poland or Russia?

In exceptional situations there are hardly any differences as regards governmental action. But, of course, the long-term perspective is crucial. If there are free elections and free media, there is the possibility of sanctioning politics positively or negatively.

You were there when the Goethe-Institut's large *Project Freiraum* was launched three years ago. 42 institutes and their partners set off on a journey through Europe to find out what freedom means and what threatens it. The reason behind the project was, among other things, Europe's growing populism and the vote on Brexit. Could you have imagined then that three years later curfews would be imposed in some cities?

No. Nobody could have foreseen that. But, if you look at it from today's point of view, there are some parallels between the Brexit and what we see today: the restriction of mobility. You have free movement on the one hand, and on the other the freedom for communities to restrict this right in order to protect themselves. The driving force behind the successful Brexit campaign was the idea that the decisive factor of sovereignty is the decision of who is allowed to enter the country. *Take back control* was the keyword. This collective freedom collides with the right to free movement, one of the greatest achievements of European integration.

Another important point of the Freiraum project was the question of how we live together.

Yes, with a focus on living together in cities characterized by a very great diversity. Are women allowed to cover their faces, for example? In several countries doing so was criminalized. Now it has become compulsory for everyone. Are we allowed to show our bare legs or breasts? What is the appropriate behavior for men and women? Or take Charlie Hebdo and the freedom of speech. These were important issues. Should we limit the freedom to say what we want or the freedom to dress as we like when it offends other people's freedom not to hear or see what they do not want to hear or see? Of course, all this is now overshadowed by the pandemic.

After all, the right to sovereignty and the restriction of freedom of travel were major issues for many nation states in the first wave of the pandemic, when borders were closed again almost everywhere. Was Corona a stroke of luck for a project like Freiraum because it changed the setting like a bolt from the blue?

There is no doubt that what we are currently experiencing further intensifies Freiraum's core issue, i.e. whether or not the restrictions on our freedom are legitimate.

At the end of October, the big final *Freiraum Festival* will take place. Because of Covid-19, it has largely become a digital festival. Generally, digitization is one of the topics that Covid-19 has put on the agenda even more than before. Working from home has become a part of everyday life in many professions. Does that also mean more freedom? And if so, for whom?

There's no denying that the possibility of working from home means more freedom. When at home, you can do a few other things besides work. If you have to go to your office and take your child to school or to the doctor, it is difficult to organize. When at home, you can organize your time better. That is a gain in freedom. But the generalization of telework also raises two major relevant concerns. In some cases, there may be an increase in the monitoring of employees by their employers. And in all cases, the room for informal personal contact with fellow workers has been curtailed.

And then Corona has also divided the working world into winners and losers. Those for whom, despite the dangers you mention, working from home is an asset, and those who, as solo freelancers and artists, will soon be facing bankruptcy. Does Covid-19 increase the chances of introducing universal basic income, which you have been advocating for a long time?

That is one way of looking at the debate. The existence of universal basic income would make our economies and societies more resilient. For example, I was just told by my old friend Senator Eduardo Suplicy that the municipality of Sao Paulo is considering seriously the possibility of introducing a temporary universal basic income. I don't know whether that will be implemented, but I do know that these impulses exist in many places. Such schemes are supposed to be funded by increases in the public debt. Hence, they cannot be permanent. However, the crisis has made many people aware of the importance of lasting basic economic security for everyone. An unconditional income is the best way of providing such security. It would be particularly valuable for those whose earnings are very irregular, not least in the cultural sector.

Would people also give back to society a part of the gain they would receive as a result?

The link between what people receive and what society receives in return has always been an important point in the debate about universal basic income. Many opponents of basic income, whether politically left or right, are against it because they say: "You can't get something for nothing". What can be answered? Firstly, a basic income is only a modest basis. Work remains rewarded on top of it. Secondly, the unconditional nature of this modest basis is essential to give bargaining power to those who have lousy jobs and thereby enable them to get a fairer payment. Thirdly, when you receive a gift, it puts you in the mood to return the favor. And finally, receiving a universal basic income does not relieve anyone from the moral obligation to contribute something to society themselves. Whether with or without a basic income, the esteem you enjoy will depend on your doing things that are useful for others than yourself.

The Freiraum Festival at the end of October has the motto *The day after*. What is your idea of how things will look like after the crisis. For you personally, but also for life in cities? Will people be able to make use of freedom and live there as they did before the pandemic?

It is extremely important that people should meet — and preferably without masks! — across all ethnic and language barriers. Cities are the places where this happens. They have all suffered greatly from the measures taken to counter the pandemic. But they can and must recover and reinvent themselves as soon as possible. More than ever, we shall have to look at our public places not only as spaces of sustainable mobility, but also of enjoyable immobility. And more than ever, we must value and promote multilingualism. The pandemic forced us to stay in our mostly monolingual bubbles. For language learning, this is a catastrophe. In our linguistically diverse societies, it is important both to show respect for the many native languages and associated cultures and to learn the language or languages that will enable us to communicate with each other. Digital tools can help, but the sooner our cities can become again the thriving sites of lively interaction, the better.

You were supposed to address the opening session of the final Freiraum event at Bozar, in Brussels. This had to be cancelled at the last minute because of the sanitary measures. What would you have said?

I would certainly have discussed the challenge of freedom in a multicultural context, which was at the core of Freiraum's initial motivation. But I would also have discussed the tension between freedom and solidarity highlighted by the responses to the pandemic. In a TV interview broadcast on the 14th of October, President Emmanuel Macron said: "We are in the process of learning again to be fully a nation. We gradually got used to being a society of free individuals. We are a nation of solidary citizens." This suggests that it is impossible to be at the same time a free individual and a solidary citizen. In principle, the combination needs not be unproblematic: a free individual can use his freedom to show solidarity with his compatriots. But the tradeoff shows up as soon as the level or type of solidarity that is deemed to be required is not forthcoming spontaneously and therefore needs to be enforced.

Does this often happen?

This can easily happen when the acts requested for the sake of solidarity have a significant impact in the aggregate but a negligible impact taken one by one, for example wearing a mask when going out or restricting Christmas parties to a single guest. This can be the case even more easily if even the aggregate impact on one's own demographic group is negligible, for example when healthy young people are asked to tone down drastically their social life so as to reduce the chance of contamination for vulnerable elderly people. In such circumstances, one can try to reconcile freedom and solidarity through combining a persuasive explanation of why the measures make scientific sense and an emotional appeal to a common, usually national, identity. But when this proves insufficient, coercion is needed: solidarity demands that freedom be restricted.

In that case, in Macron's terms, the freedom of individuals must give way to solidarity between citizens.

This is a matter of degree. How liberticidal the solidarity-driven measures are depends on how narrowly they shrink the space of permissible movement and interaction and on how many interventions — such as tests and vaccinations — they require people to undergo. It also depends on how frequently, rigidly and intrusively compliance is being checked and on how severely non-compliance is being punished.

Should we be worried?

Yes if spontaneous compliance is poor because many people fail to understand the reasons for the measures taken or do not manage to identify with the beneficiaries of the solidarity they are asked to show. But in this domain like in so many others, we need rules, formal or informal, even simply to coordinate the behaviour of many individuals. And if these rules are efficient and fair and perceived as such, complying with them will not clash with our freedom but coincide with how we wish to use it. A free society is not a society without rules, but a society with good rules.

Philippe Van Parijs is a guest professor at the Universities of Louvain and Leuven and a Robert Schuman Fellow at the European University Institute (Florence). He was the founding director of Louvain's Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics from 1991 to 2016, and a regular visiting professor at Harvard University from 2004 to 2008 and at the University of Oxford from 2011 to 2015. He is a member of Belgium's Royal Academy of Sciences and a Fellow of the British Academy. He was awarded the Francqui Prize in 2001 and the Arkprijs voor het Vrije Woord in 2011. He is one of the founders of the Basic Income Earth Network and chairs its Advisory Board.

Uwe Rada is a journalist working for the German daily newspaper TAZ – tageszeitung. He has been following the Freiraum project since its beginning as a freelance editor.

Philippe Van Parijs had been invited to open the local Freiraum Festival in Brussels with a keynote on "Real freedom for all in the corona era" on 30 October 2020 at BOZAR-Centre for Fine Arts. The local physical festival had to be cancelled due to the covid 19-pandemic. Partners of the Brussels event were: BOZAR, Beursschouwburg, ARD Liaison office in Brussels and Die Zeit