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Brief reflection on individual freedom. Between public and private spheres

Abstract: My paper focuses primarily on Benjamin Constant's distinction between ancient and modern liberty, as well as Hannah Arendt's analysis of the private and public spheres provided in *The Human Condition.* Arendt observes that the distinction between the private and public spheres of life corresponds to the domestic and political realms, which were separated with the emergence of the ancient city-state. This distinction, however, becomes relative with the emergence of the social sphere, which is both private and public. The social sphere, a relatively new phenomenon, coincides with the rise of the modern era. In contrast, Constant had shown that the liberty of the ancient Greeks had to do with his active participation in the act of governance, whereas modern man links individual freedom, first and foremost, to the private sphere. But how do we understand these distinctions today? Is the contemporary individual truly free within the confines of their private sphere? Is it their involvement and presence in the public sphere that defines them as a free individual? Building on these points, I propose a discussion of individual freedom, analyzing to what extent certain conceptual frameworks, such as those presented above, still hold today.

Keywords: Benjamin Constant, Hannah Arendt, individual freedom, John Stuart Mill, liberty, private sphere, public sphere, Søren Kierkegaard.

This essay started out as a simple curiosity: I simply wanted to better understand what freedom consists of, particularly individual freedom. I found some substantial answers in the works of authors such as John Stuart Mill, Benjamin Constant, and Hannah Arendt. Building on these authors, I sought to examine to what extent certain interpretive frameworks – as launched and discussed by the forementioned authors – regarding the public sphere, the private sphere, and freedom still hold true today.

Mill's view on (individual) freedom

First, John Stuart Mill can rightfully be regarded as one of the founding thinkers of individual freedom. It is well known that in his essay *On Liberty,* he focuses on the nature and the limitations of power that can be enforced

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legitimately by society or by a certain authority against the individual. Mill traces, in a somewhat historical approach, the evolution of the political concept of freedom from antiquity to his own time. Mill analyses the tense relationship between rulers and the people and discusses the means of constraining the tyrannical and arbitrary power of political leaders. Freedom has been defined "almost from the remote ages", as a means of protection against the tyranny of political rulers, a check on their power over the community and the individual (Mill 2009, 4-5).

According to Mill, this tyrannical and arbitrary power of rulers can be limited in two ways: 1. by establishing political immunities, freedoms, or rights that guarantee individual liberty and which, once violated by the ruler, justify general resistance or revolt against him, and 2. through constitutional checks and balances, based on the consent of the community or of a body representing its interests, which may or may not approve/endorse the actions of the ruling power (Mill 2009, 6).

Subsequently, Mill introduces the idea of the delegation of power, whereby certain representatives are elected to serve the people. This new form of organization offers the possibility of revocation. In essence, Mill argues here that the power of rulers can be limited through voting – that is, through the political involvement of the individual (or/ and the masses, the other major social and political actor of modernity). In a well-known passage, Mill emphasizes that what is changing now, with the modern era, is that the will and interests of rulers are expected to be the same as those of the people. He notes in this respect that "The nation did not need to be protected against its own will" (Mill 2009, 7).

It is worth mentioning Mill's observation that the modern world is moving away from the timeless antagonism between ruler and people, since those who rule are now elected representatives serving the people. The power of rulers is equivalent to the power of the nation itself. In fact, rulers identify with the people, as they are, at least in theory, in the service of the people.

At this point, we can already identify the concept of the public sphere, in which the individual is engaged, either directly or through representation, in a sphere of action that extends beyond their private domain. In other words, individual freedom transcends the limiting framework of the private sphere. The individual can also establish or identify their freedom in a direct social relationship with others, within the public sphere of debate and political decision-making. Here, one can recognize the signs of modernity, with all its achievements in guaranteeing individual rights and freedoms.

Constant and the idealized liberty of the ancients

We will now turn our attention to an essay by Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns*, which adds a nuanced

perspective to this discussion of liberty in the private and public spheres. In his essay, Constant notes that, for modern man, namely for an Englishman, a Frenchman and a citizen of the United States of America the word "liberty" stands for: the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death or maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or mode individuals (Constant 1988, 310). As one can notice, modern freedom is defined in similar terms to those used by Mill: the fundamental freedoms – freedom of thought, opinion, and feeling, and freedom of association.

In comparison, the liberty of the ancients:

> "consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgements […] But if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community. (Constant 1988, 311)

In a concluding paragraph, Constant contrasts the two different perspectives on the meaning of individual freedom:

> Thus, among the ancients the individual, almost always sovereign in public affairs, was a slave in all his privite relations. As a citizen, he decided on peace and war; as a privite individual, he was constrained, watched and repressed in all his movements [...] Among the moderns, on the contrary, the individual, independent in his private life, is, even in the freest of states, sovereign only in appearance. His sovereignty is restricted and almost suspended. (Constant 1988, 311-312)

One might say that Mill and Constant are somewhat at odds with one another. On the one hand, Mill suggests that modern man finds his freedom – the guarantee of that freedom and the rights that flow from it – precisely through his entry into the public sphere, via the idea of representation, which eliminates the ancient antagonism between rulers and the people. On the other hand, Constant argues that modern man can only be free within his private sphere. He writes that: "we can no longer enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power. Our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence" (Constant 1988, 316).

In essence, Constant identifies an error in the democratic ideal proposed by the "Enlightenment ideology" that preceded the French Revolution. Thus, thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau or the Abbe de Mably mistakenly identify the ancient model as the standard of democracy for the Modern Age. However, according to Constant, this direct reference to an ancient model can only lead to certain forms of tyranny. Therefore, while the ancient Athenian understood individual freedom as direct and active participation in the act of governance, the modern individual understands

freedom, first and foremost, as a prerogative of the private sphere. Hence, there is an essential distinction between the ancient Athenian, who understood freedom as participation in collective power, and the modern individual, who understands freedom as private independence, guaranteed by institutions within a framework of representative government. The ancient model of the individual's direct involvement in "the affairs of the city" cannot be applied to modern societies without risking the excessive involvement of the masses in the political sphere. In this regard, Constant notes: "Individual independence is the first need of the moderns: consequently one must never require from them any sacrifices to establish political liberty" (Constant 1988, 321).

The ancient ideal of political freedom, which restricted individual rights in the pursuit of the common good, can no longer be upheld in the modern era, where individual freedom and its protection are the central concerns. If applied in the modern era, any form of ancient democracy leads to tyranny, either on the part of the state or on the part of others. In the modern era, the others stand for the masses, where the masses represent a complex and even dangerous political figure.[1]

The ancients sacrificed a lesser good – their individual independence – in order to attain a greater good – their political rights (Constant 1988, 317). If modern individuals were to do the same, it is not certain that the same balance would be maintained. On the contrary, the sacrifice of individual freedoms and private space has historically led to, or has typically been a sign of, the emergence of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Thus, while the ancients sought to share the social power among all citizens (understanding this as freedom), modern people seek the security of their private property or pleasures, in Constant terms. The modern man's freedom means first and foremost "the enjoyment of security in private pleasures" which would be guaranteed by institutions (Constant 1988, 317).

In fact, both Mill and Constant recognize the protection of private space (the true framework of modern individual freedom) as the central issue in the struggle for freedom. It is precisely for this reason that modern man engages, directly or indirectly, in the public sphere. This is also the deeper meaning of Constant's idea mentioned above, that: "Individual independence is the first need of the moderns: consequently one must never require from them any sacrifices to establish political liberty" (Constant 1988, 321).

We can thus see that the ancient ideal of freedom differs fundamentally from the way modern people understand freedom. This is because the very foundation of modern freedom – namely, the guarantee of individual rights and freedoms (which essentially defines the modern private sphere) – was hindered by the institutions of the ancient republics.

Arendt and the autonomy of freedom

I now turn to Hannah Arendt and her 1958 book, *The Human Condition*. First, Arendt makes a direct reference to Aristotle, for whom freedom ruled out all ways of life devoted to mere survival, especially if this entailed submission to another's will, which limited movement and the freedom to choose one's activities (Arendt 1998, 12).

For Aristotle, there were only three ways of life (*bioi*) that could be identified as free – specifically, those related to the pursuit of the "beautiful", which falls into neither the category of necessity nor that of utility. Freedom thus encompasses three ways of life: a life devoted to immediate bodily pleasures, where the beautiful is consumed as it is given, a life devoted to the matters of the *polis*, where excellence produces beautiful deeds, and the life of the philosopher, devoted to inquiry into and contemplation of the eternal. The beauty of the eternal things is everlasting, and it cannot be altered by human intervention or his consumption of them (Arendt 1998, 13).

Kierkegaard interlude

Without delving into the intricacies of Kierkegaard's philosophy, it is worth noting the connection between the three ways of living freely that Arendt identifies in Aristotle and the Danish philosopher's theory of the three stages of existence. In a general sense, Kierkegaard is relevant to any discussion of modern freedom, particularly individual freedom, as the individual is a central concept in his thought.

For Kierkegaard, existence and its three main stages – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – are not aspects of a given reality. Existence is a space of the individual's becoming. Understood in this way, existence is not a necessary, obligatory, or inevitable process, but rather presents itself to the individual as a multitude of possibilities – in essence, as a space of freedom. As mentioned, the central focus of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the individual and the understanding of his concrete existence, outside the metaphysical and abstract interpretive frameworks proposed by many earlier philosophical systems. Each of the three stages of existence presents us with a certain conception of life and the world.

Kierkegaard approaches this theory in several ways, but perhaps the most authentic and compelling way is through the introduction of concrete individual characters, each representative of a particular stage. Kierkegaard analyzes the possibilities and limits of their freedom by portraying them in concrete existential situations specific to each stage. The aesthetic, ethical, and religious men are all in search of freedom. However, each pursues and understands freedom differently.

Essentially, the aesthetic life is a way of living guided by the principle of immediate pleasure. Thus, Don Juan serves as an example of the ethical stage of existence. For him, the pursuit of "the beautiful" or goodness is not an end in itself, but rather a means of fulfilling his own desire. The freedom of an aesthetic character such as Don Juan lies precisely in avoiding making definitive choices, which would interrupt his continuous pursuit of immediate pleasure. In contrast to this view of life stands the proponent of the ethical stage of existence. Thus, for Judge William, freedom consists precisely in making a decision, in choosing. In an edifying passage, William makes the following observation: "My either/or does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil, it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil/ or excludes them. Here the question is under what determinants one would contemplate the whole of existence and would himself live. […] For the aesthetical is not the evil but neutrality, and that is the reason why I affirmed that it is the ethical which constitutes the choice. It is, therefore, not so much a question of choosing between willing the good *or* the evil, as of choosing to will" (Kierkegaard 1944, 143).

Finally, for Kierkegaard (who is essentially a religious thinker) the religious stage of existence sits between faith and paradox. We have seen that Aristotle reserves this third way of life (*bioi*) for the philosopher, devoted to the inquiry into and contemplation of the eternal. For the philosopher, the beauty of the eternal things is everlasting and cannot be altered by human intervention or his consumption of them (Arendt 1998, 13).

Kierkegaard places biblical figures such as Abraham or Job within this final stage of existence, who comprehend and contemplate the (godly) eternal by making decisions that transcend reason and human norms. Abraham does not refuse God's command, which asks him to sacrifice his son; Job persists in faith, even though he is faced with devastating suffering and loss. Thus, in this final stage of existence, freedom presents itself as a religious act, yet a profoundly individual one, which sets aside both the laws of the world (rationality, customs and traditions) and the laws of human nature (which encompass all those emotions by which, at least for the individual in the aesthetic stage, guides his life).

Going back to Arendt, we can therefore speak of freedom only when one lives an autonomous way of life, one that is independent of basic human needs and demands. This is why the Greeks understood the life of the *polis* as a freely chosen form of political organization, "and by no means just any form of action necessary to keep men together in an orderly fashion" (Arendt 1998, 13). Thus, the capacity to form political associations (which belongs to the public sphere) is entirely different from natural association, dictated by biological needs (which belong to the private sphere of the family and the household). Within the ancient framework, the realm

of the *polis* designated the sphere of freedom, and for the Greek philosophers it was self-evident that freedom lies exclusively within the political realm. Arendt states that it was necessity that ruled over all activities performed in the private realm of the household. The private sphere was dominated by force and violence. People were entitled to use violence towards others because "violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of world" (Arendt 1998, 31). The *polis* was the center of equality, whereas the private environment of the household was the center of inequality. For instance, slaves were an inherent part of the household. The concepts of leadership and submission, of governance and power, understood in modern terms, as well as the order and hierarchy that accompany them, belonged rather to this unequal, pre-political private sphere. Thus, to be free meant not being subject to the necessities of life or to someone's orders, but also not finding oneself in the position of commanding. To be free "meant neither to rule nor to be ruled" (Arendt 1998, 32). That is what it meant to be free, in the ancient paradigm of the Greek *polis*. The realm of freedom was equality, but not legal equality, as understood in modern times, rather the equality that kept one removed from the inequality present in the private sphere of the household.

Thus, unlike modern man, for whom private sphere designates the realm of intimacy, for the ancient man, to live only a private life meant, quite literally, a state of deprivation, namely the deprivation of the possibility of entering the public sphere (and therefore, from the full experience of freedom). Arendt emphasizes that with the advent of modern times, this meaning of privacy has been largely lost or forgotten, mainly due to the enrichment of the private sphere through the development of the culture of individualism.[2]

Arendt further argues that in the modern world, the two realms (private and public) are no longer so distinct but constantly overlap (Arendt 1998, 33). This overlap generates a modern phenomenon: the rise of the social. The rise of the social – in fact, the creation of society in its modern sense – brings domestic activities (which are also economic, as Arendt emphasizes) into the public sphere. "Housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a 'collective' concern" (Arendt 1998, 33).

With modernity, the private sphere expands, which does not mean that the private has replaced the public sphere, but only that the latter has retreated. The emergence of the private sphere has brought to light concerns otherwise considered irrelevant to the public sphere. Arendt calls this the "modern enchantment with 'small things'" (Arendt 1998, 52). This phenomenon can have a widespread effect and become infectious, to the point where an entire society may adopt it and embrace it as a way of life. The grandeur of lofty ideals has been replaced by the charm of the

insignificant, of the little things which, admittedly, can also give meaning to life. In other words, the triviality of the private sphere gains significance simply by being displayed in the public sphere.[3]

Arendt argues that the Greek polis and the res publica were, first and foremost, safeguards against the futility of individual life. The public sphere was the space where certain values and beliefs were perpetuated, to which the individual adhered and through which he or she emerged from the anonymity of the mundane daily life of the private sphere (Arendt 1998, 56). In our modern times, by contrast, the private sphere and all its specific features are validated and valued precisely by being brought into the public sphere.

The emergence of modern society has changed the perception of the private sphere, without necessarily transforming its nature. Modern society has become the environment in which the life process itself is publicly managed (Arendt 1998, 46). People have gathered, equally in the public sphere, around the activities necessary for sustaining life. In this regard, Arendt offers an interesting definition of society: "Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public" (Arendt 1998, 46).

Activities such as labour have moved into the public sphere. In other words, they have been accorded greater importance – a social significance – which has resulted in interdependence among people. The problem, however, arises precisely with this interdependence. More specifically, we may ask whether the interdependence present in the public sphere among people is a reality that supports individual freedom or whether it merely pushes the individual into a process of leveling and conformity in order "to make them behave" (Arendt 1998, 40). Arendt associates the rise of the social with the emergence of mass society. Mass society brings with it modern equality, which is based on the conformity inherent in a society that "expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalize' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement" (Arendt 1998, 40). Modern reality is completely different from ancient reality. In that era, courage and individuality were the qualities that made one worthy of political equality, not conformity or modern egalitarian leveling. Thus, as Arendt writes, it was precisely the public sphere that was reserved for individuality – the place where one could show who one truly was and why one was irreplaceable. In the modern framework, it is the private sphere that is the domain of individuality.

The negative impact of mass society, however, is twofold. It affects both the public realm, by depriving people of their own place in the world where they can be seen, heard and thus acknowledged by others, and the private realm, as people are also deprived of the security of their home within the

limited reality of family life, where they once felt sheltered from the world (Arendt 1998, 59).

Arendt points out that with the modern era, we are witnessing a complete erasure of the distinction between the two realms, public and private. We witnessed "the submersion of both in the sphere of the social" (Arendt 1998, 69). The public sphere has become a function of the private sphere, and the private sphere has become the only remaining common concern (Arendt 1998, 69). This means that interests pertaining to the private sphere remain the sole motivation for individuals to engage in the public sphere. Thus, the only remaining common concern is, in fact, the pursuit of interests specific to the private sphere (those of accumulation, well-being, and security, among others). In other words, the involvement of the modern individual in the public sphere is no longer motivated so much by certain higher ideals (social welfare, the building of a functional society, etc.) but only by matters related to the private sphere (which generally involve a certain individualism, not to call it selfishness).

The modern age presents us with a reality in which the only thing people still have in common – in terms of their interests – are their private pursuits. Arendt states that modern "society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public" (1998, 46). Every activity performed in public is recognized and endorsed by others. Arend talks about excellence. Excellence could only be attained in public and it needs the presence of the others; something that can never be mached in privacy, where no one can really recognize excellence. "For excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public, constituted by one's peers, it cannot be the casual, familiar presence of one's equals or inferiors" (Arendt 1998, 49). Therefore, modern man has come to believe that he can achieve excellence by performing activities and sharing interests that belong to the private sphere in front of others. From others watching you cooking live on a TV show to owning and driving an expensive car downtown modern man validates his existence and personal choices through society.

However, does this make for a functional society? Especially when one encounters alienating phenomena such as present day demonization of empathy, community and solidarity.[4]

Concluding remarks

The public/ social sphere should refer to that shared space where everyone can express their individuality while also accepting the plurality inherent in the existence of the Other. The meaning of the public sphere does not lie in the common identity of all of us who inhabit the world, but

in the fact that, despite our differences and diversity, we are, or should be, concerned with the same things: general well-being, maintaining peace, guaranteeing certain individual rights and freedoms, perhaps even some more socialist aspects, such as a guaranteed minimum income, education, healthcare, housing, etc. If the relevance of these issues is no longer recognized, then factors such as collective identity (which can be defined by many things, such as nationality, ethnicity, etc.) – and even less so the conformism characteristic of a mass society – cannot prevent the destruction of the public sphere, understood in this sense of community. I would highlight here just two phenomena, which are, in fact, very relevant and present, that can give rise to the reality mentioned above:

1. The deep isolation of modern man – not the monastic kind of isolation, but the kind fostered, for example, by social media (where no one gets along with anyone else) yet which offers the illusion of an absolutely safe zone within one's private space ("I am here; everyone else is somewhere out there").

2. The second phenomenon is generated by one of the fundamental elements of mass society: standardization/uniformity. People can, for example, be swept up in mass hysteria (the reasons are diverse) and behave like a tribe, copying and amplifying the perspective of the person next to them, of the other, or of a leader. Standardization/ conformity based on rather emotional, irrational criteria is a very prevalent phenomenon these days. The mechanisms of imitation and amplification are immediate, and social contagion is almost instantaneous.

I believe that these two phenomena undermine the concept of the public sphere, understood as a community that shares certain values and serves as the foundation for guaranteeing individual freedom.

In this respect, Arendt asserts that people become entirely private, in a twofold sense: "they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience" (Arendt 1998, 58). A captivity of subjectivity occurs, both through the isolation brought about by private space and through the multiplication of one's own experience that takes place in a mass society. The end of the common world, of public space understood in the ancient sense of community (which also gave the individual a sense of freedom), occurs when everything is reduced to a single aspect and when it is presented from only one perspective (Arendt 1998, 58). Extreme political ideologies offer fertile ground for precisely this collapse, as the conduct and worldview of one figure are repeated, amplified, and imposed as a model for all others.

This leads to a central question: where can individual freedom still be located today? Is it to be found in the private sphere, the space of modern individuality (which, however, comes with, or has fostered, an environment of selfishness, egocentrism, and self-satisfied isolation, detached from social

responsibility), or it is still to be found in the public sphere, a space, however, of consumerism, of curiosity, which is neither commited responsibility, nor total indifference, as Baudrillard puts it (Baudrillard 1998, 34); a space of the masses that copy, multiply, and level.

So, it seems to me that this is where we stand today, faced with two paths that are, in a certain sense, obstructed: that of the private sphere of individualism, which defines modernity, but comes with the problems we have identified above, or that of the public sphere. But this sphere seems to be hijacked by mass society, which comes with other kinds of problems, such as mass hysteria, consumerism, and the effects of moral alienation. So, where and how can the individual still be free?

Certainly, the definition of individual freedom can no longer fully rely on the ancient model. It is quite clear that in modern times, freedom must take into account the individual's private sphere, which must be defended and guaranteed. At the same time, however, there must be a conception of freedom that takes into account the public sphere of action and collective involvement in actions that transcend personal interests. But this sense of (collective) freedom must be distinguished from the conformist view of social inclusion, which reduces the individual to a mere numerical value within a uniform mass, "which tends to 'normalise' its members, to make them behave" (Arendt 1998, 40) and distances the individual from personal responsibility.

Here we might consider actions such as those carried out by NGOs – charitable efforts or committed advocacy for certain causes – which are independent of all the factors mentioned above (selfishness, the modern culture of individualism, etc., that is, the values of the private sphere – namely conformity, homogenization, and polarization – which we see shaping the current public sphere).

Without seeking to provide answers, but drawing on the insights offered by the authors discussed above, I believe it is important, in a style that is more or less in the vein of Coolingwood, to identify, first and foremost, appropriate questions rather than answers that claim to be solutions.

Thus, I believe the broader stake in what I have brought up here is to determine how we want to define and understand society. For this, I think it would be useful to go back to some basic questions, such as: what do we want society to be, and what role should it play for the individual? What kind of freedom do we want to have or promote in this modern social sphere?

Notes

[1] I have discussed this topic in another article Bârliba (2023).

[2] This phenomenon of modern individualism is a topic in its own right, which I will not explore here, but which has arguably contributed to the shaping of the modern world. Mill,

Tocqueville, and contemporary authors such as Charles Taylor have written about it. Tocqueville, for example, emphasizes that modern individualism emerges as a (conservative) reaction by the elites to changing circumstances. Once the bonds of class, caste, guild, and family (in the broad sense) have weakened, the elites are effectively invited to refrain from public involvement and to pursue exclusively their own interests, under the banner of a fierce individualism. More on this topic in Bârliba (2023).

[3] I've also discussed this elsewhere (Bârliba 2020) – specifically, about the idea of self-validation and self-definition through the public sharing of personal experiences and details of private life. There are many examples, ranging from blogs and YouTube channels offering advice on cooking and raising children –provided by ordinary people, not experts – to financial and social advice of all kinds from those who validate themselves through the title of "influencer".

[4] Some contemporary authors speak of empathy as the death of Western civilization. Paul Bloom (2016) argues that empathy is not the most appropriate criterion for moral decision making and that it should not be regarded as a precondition for our moral judgments. In fact, Jesse Prinz (2011) argues that, instead of empathy, moral judgments involve emotions such as anger, disgust, guilt, and admiration.

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