

## Freedom is a bridge, not a highway

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SPECIAL EDITION

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It is generally understood that the absence of freedom is captivity. Just like the absence of light is darkness, the non-existence of good is bad, and the termination of order is chaos. We tend to associate freedom with light, good, and order and generally believe that captivity is synonymous with the dark, the bad, and the chaotic. We tend to confuse liberty with freedom. Johannes Fabian (1998: 20) argued that freedom is not merely 'free will plus the absence of dominations and constraint but the potential to transform one's thoughts, emotions and experiences into creations that can be communicated and shared'. This definition of freedom appeals to me, because it presents freedom as something temporary, transitional, and maybe even transactional (Seale-Collazo 2012: 184–185). As such, it requires a certain brevity with which causes associated with freedom (structure, hierarchy, access, and order) should advance. By contrast, liberty is a social arrangement which dictates what freedoms an individual may practice (and which they may not).

From the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, Dr Timothy Stacey writes on environmental politics and how action towards collective liberation requires the individual to live a life of self-imposed limits (Stacey 2023: 2). He distinguishes between freedom that advances the liberties of the individual and freedom that advances the liberties of a collective group as 'fossil freedom' and 'faithful freedom' (Stacey 2023: 2, 4). The foundation of fossil freedom is liberal governance: a way of living and thinking that challenges mainstream boundaries. Stacey points out that this model of freedom is not sustainable, because, ultimately, it does not change the collective outcome. In contrast, faithful freedom is 'people transforming themselves and their communities to live in greater harmony with

the more-human world' (Stacey 2023: 5). The concept of faithful freedom is by no means a foreign social practice. Here in Africa, we call it *Ubuntu*.

In the euphoric period after democratisation, South Africa experienced a period of 'ostensible race-blindness and sentimental multiculturalism' that eventually turned into Afrocentrism (Travernaro-Haidarian 2019: 10). During the transition of government, rainbowism ruled the land. It was a period during which domestic issues of racial and political inequality were glossed over in favour of the new ideal of a liberated and united nation rooted in the principles of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* encourages individuals and groups (like the family unit) to collaborate with other small groups and for a collective, cohesive community that operates under a shared identity and agency. The challenge with concepts like *Ubuntu* is that it is affected by personal interest (fossil freedom). Inherent social constructs make it difficult to unify people under a certain objective unless said objective benefits everyone involved. The beauty of freedom is that you can choose to contribute to the outcome thereof or not. If you are not satisfied with the outcome you can develop an alternative. Stacey suggests that the trouble with this reasoning is that we have become convinced that there are no alternatives, saying:

'An alternative future demands an alternative economic system. But the question is, amidst the tides of capitalist globalization and the daily grind we are forced to pursue in its service, how do we even begin to imagine these alternatives? This is where rituals come in.' (Stacey 2023: 3)

The French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1961: vii) observed that rituals take place in three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation is the departure of the old self—the being that we deem no longer functional for a model of living. We should consider circumstance as the catalyst for separation. In the transitional stage, we enter a liminal phase. The period in which neither the old nor the new exists, and finally, an emergence of the new self. These days I consider freedom to be a liminal phase; a bridge between states of being rather than a destination itself. Liminal, from Latin *limen* (meaning 'threshold') refers to a social situation in which the boundaries within which an individual or group operates, are removed (Seale-Collazo 2012:181). Transit zones like parking garages, stations, and bridges may be considered 'spaces of suspension, impermanence or liminality; they mediate between one's arrival and departure but are not, strictly speaking, destinations in their own right' (Sey 2011: 66; Sonnekus 2022: 98–99).

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) released a report based on the 2022 census that stated that there is an estimate of 14 million young people in South Africa who have not registered to vote in the 2024 national elections (Hussain 2023). There are countless hypotheses swirling regarding this demographic of unregistered voters: a lot of ‘what ifs’ and ‘why nots’. What I find even more striking, though, is the enormous deficit between the total number of male and female voters. Of all those registered with the IEC, 55.28 per cent are female, compared to the 44.72 per cent of male registered voters (IEC 2023). With a population of sixty-two million people, there are certainly other alternatives to issues such as loadshedding, water restrictions, crumbling public infrastructure, unrighteous public and private leadership, and incompetent educational institutions.

It becomes easy to blame those who championed freedom for a disordered country when we believe that it has nothing to do with us, but freedom has everything to do with us. It is the air we are suspended in between the moment we launch ourselves from the ground and the moment we land safely on the other side. Liberty *through* freedom. That being said, having unrestrained freedom is not good either. We require boundaries in order to function. Being suspended in mid-air forever gets you nowhere. Freedom is mid-air. Whatever lies on either side, is solid ground. This is the terrain we advance or regress on.

I think we forget that freedom in the 21st century looks very different from the freedom our parents and grandparents dreamed of. In this interdisciplinary edition of *Alternate Horizons*, the authors have approached the theme of contemporary South African freedoms through a variety of lenses. What emerges is a kaleidoscope, produced by the collective, for the consideration of the individual. I hope that you are confronted by what you read. If not, I challenge you to seek an alternative outcome. This is the privilege that freedom affords us: that we may go further.

Sincerely,

Nina du Preez (guest editor)

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