

ST.GALLEN SYMPOSIUM

“Freedom Revisited” at the 50th St. Gallen Symposium

In the face of populism, climate change and rapid technological disruption, liberalism – with individual freedom at its core – has come under attack. At the 50th St. Gallen Symposium, three generations will discuss the future of individual, economic, and political liberty in light of key challenges of our time. Which aspects of freedom are currently under attack and call for a strong *defence*? And where will we need to *recalibrate* our concept of freedom, or the balance we strike with other values, such as equality, sustainability, and security?

Freedom and its political contestants

The liberal model of politics, economy and society faces growing opposition. Domestically, liberal democracy is under pressure, including in the West. Indicators such as the Freedom of the World democracy index show a consistent deterioration of political rights and civil liberties around the globe. In the face of globalisation, populist forces offer a model of “democratic illiberalism”, which contests accepted understandings of human rights and civil freedoms, and opposes free trade, migration, and multilateral cooperation.

On the international stage, liberal multilateralism has increasingly fallen out of favour. Nationalist politicians reject delegation of authority to superordinate levels, while emerging powers challenge established institutions for not being representative of the new, multipolar global order. With non-democratic political systems growing ever more confident with exporting their model to other countries, the core qualities of a post-liberal global order are far from clear.

Freedom and environmental degradation

The existential threat to humanity posed by climate change and other ecological challenges fundamentally calls the idea of freedom into question – particularly in its individual and economic variants. Carbon emissions and overconsumption of natural resources by certain population segments limit the freedoms enjoyed by humans elsewhere and in the future. As climate change endangers their future, global youth is marching for change. They remind us that central to liberal thought is the idea that one’s own freedom ends where the freedom of others is constrained. As a result - and in light of scientific evidence and social mobilization - politicians and business leaders now face the question how to reconcile freedom with implementing the Paris Agreement and countering other ecological crises, like the massive reduction in biodiversity.

Freedom and rapid technological change

Contemporary capitalism is increasingly focused on expanding the proportion of social life that is open to data collection and data processing. Algorithms determine the bits of information, opinions, and goods that appear on our screens and we pay with our personal data for many digital products. Governments use digital technologies to survey, influence, and punish individual behaviour and organisations. While some are frightened by the presence and future of big data, others emphasize its unmatched potential. Digital technologies have dramatically expanded knowledge and communication available to billions of people, created numerous business opportunities, and enabled entrepreneurs and employees to work with greater flexibility and individual freedom. Big data’s ambivalence raises the question how related risks and opportunities can and should be shaped by core stakeholders in politics, business and society.

In providing a platform for open and diverse debates, the St. Gallen Symposium employs liberal ideas in a *substantive* as well as a *procedural* sense. Today, 50 years after the foundation of our initiative, we believe that it is crucial to rethink what these values mean to us and to you.