

Reconceptualising Freedom in the 21st Century: Degrowth vs. Neoliberalism

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Abstract

The hegemonic role of neoliberal ideas in today's political-economic thought and practice has shaped the common way of thinking about freedom in Western society and more generally in the international community. This involves a negative, individualistic and market-centred interpretation of the concept. In contrast, visions of a degrowth society offer a radical alternative based on Cornelius Castoriadis' notion of autonomy. This paper outlines how this formulation of freedom can be conceptualised relative to the predominant neoliberal theory. We present an overview and contrast of both positions and then follow this up with an empirical study. More specifically, we probe the extent to which the degrowth movement actually follows the Castoriadian theory of freedom as opposed to the hegemonic neoliberal conception. Results are reported from a survey conducted at the 2018 Degrowth Conference in Malmö, Sweden. While survey participants were found to hold positions consistent with the Castoriadian theory, we also identify problematic and under-conceptualised aspects in their understanding of freedom. This points to the need for the degrowth movement to directly address its theoretical foundations, and elaborate on and strengthen its vision of freedom compatible with a future degrowth society.

Keywords: Political economy; freedom; Degrowth; neoliberalism; autonomy; social-ecological economic transformation; Castoriadis; Hayek; Friedman

JEL: A13, B5, O44, P1, P48, Q57

1. Introduction

While there has been a noticeable increase in publications about degrowth in recent years, the topic of freedom is seldom explicitly discussed. For example, while the term does appear at various points, there is no dedicated entry on the topic in the 51 chapters of the definitional handbook *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014). There is a chapter on 'autonomy', but the relationship to freedom is not explored and remains unclear. The lack of both a definition and a discussion of the potential role of freedom in a degrowth context leaves it open to a variety of contradictory interpretations, from Marxist and eco-feminist forms defined in terms of removing exploitation to the neoliberal focussed on preventing restrictions on individual choice in the market place. The tendency to define freedom purely negatively, as the absence of coercion, is in line with the political philosophy of liberalism that is hegemonic in Western society. Is there then a distinctive and alternative approach offered by degrowth thought as to what constitutes freedom?

Some explanation is required of why the concept, and its role in a possible social-ecological transformation, have been neglected in debates about and research on degrowth. Perhaps the divergence is too great between the everyday understanding of freedom in contemporary capitalist market societies and the implied constraints on 'free market' choice called for by the degrowth movement, under a 'voluntary, smooth and equitable transition to a regime of lower production and consumption' (Schneider, Kallis, and Martinez-Alier 2010: 511). Indeed, the prevalent negative, individualistic and consumerist interpretations of the concept of freedom seem to be incompatible with a democratic and redistributive downscaling of the biophysical size of the global economy, which is a necessary step on the path towards socially just and environmentally sustainable futures according to most degrowth advocates. While this might explain why there is a reluctance amongst degrowth advocates to talk about freedom, simply ignoring the concept leaves a gap in the argument for a degrowth society.

Freedom is an omnipresent issue and deeply intertwined with identity in (neo)liberalised Western democracies (Karaba 2016). Thus, any vision of an alternative social and economic system that seems to neglect or reduce freedom will likely be casually rejected without any due thought by the a considerable amount of Western, as well as Western influenced and aspiring, peoples.

There are two principal ways out of this deadlock. One would be to entirely and explicitly abandon the logic of seeking freedom and reject it as a guiding principle. There are indeed good reasons to support this position, not least due to the dangers connected to the (mis)use of the notion as a mere tool to justify any cause (Fiscella 2015). The other would be to critically analyse the predominant understanding of freedom in contemporary market societies and reformulate the concept for a degrowth society. This paper seeks to initiate and contribute towards undertaking the latter, thereby attempting to bridge the alleged divide between degrowth and freedom.

The endeavour builds on the assumption that the hegemonic role of neoliberal ideas in moulding economic, political and social structures and relations has, by definition, strongly affected common ideas as to what it means to be free. Neoliberalisation processes have, beginning in the late 1970s, shaped the ‘ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it is now part of the common-sense way we interpret, live in and understand the world’ (Harvey 2007: 22; Hay 2004). We start (Section 2.1) by investigating how this understanding of freedom was introduced by the works of Friedrich von Hayek (1899-1992) and Milton Friedman (1912-2006)¹. An alternative and largely unrecognised formulation of freedom is then presented (Section 2.2). This is based on the political theory of philosopher, economist and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). His work can be considered

¹ Both played a decisive role in the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), which Mirowski & Plehwe (2009: 428-429) reveal as the institutional face of the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ which has ‘conscientiously developed the neoliberal identity for more than sixty years’. Hayek was a founder and its first president (1948-1960), while Friedman chaired it between 1970 and 1972.

a major theoretical reference for many authors associated with the degrowth movement (Asara, Profumi, and Kallis 2013). Having established these two opposing viewpoints on freedom, an empirical investigation is reported (Section 3). A structured questionnaire was undertaken at the 2018 Degrowth Conference in Malmö in order to test for the presence and strength of belief in the two types of freedom amongst those associating themselves with the degrowth movement. The findings are then discussed and interpreted (Section 4). This provides an exploratory analysis of the extent to which the degrowth movement actually follows a radical alternative notion of freedom, as opposed to the hegemonic neoliberal conception.

2. Conceptualising Freedom: Two Opposing Positions

2.1 The Neoliberal Theory

While heterogeneity exists, the neoliberal understanding of freedom remains crucially related to the work and theories of Hayek and Friedman as the two most influential personalities. Hayek, who stands in a tradition close to classic liberalism, provides the most elaborate and meticulous theory of freedom within the neoliberal spectrum. His deliberations inspired neoliberal scholars and prepared the ground for neoliberal policy (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). However, from the 1980s onwards, the second generation of the Chicago School dominated debates on the organisation of a neoliberal economy and society. Friedman then came to the fore as its most prominent exponent, combining monetarist macroeconomic beliefs with a concept of economic liberty. The ideas developed in Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* (2011 [1960]) combined with Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (2002 [1962]) can be taken as providing the foundations for the predominant neoliberal understanding of freedom.

Central to both Hayek's and Friedman's concept of freedom is a strong methodological individualism. Freedom is attributed only to an ontologically distinct self whose private sphere is to be protected against the coercive intrusion of the external world (i.e., society); that is the 'outside' as other, and in particular the other as constituted by other individuals and the State. Hayek (2011 [1960]: 58) and Friedman (2002 [1962]: 12) conceptualise social relations and collectives as, first and foremost, potential sources of coercion. Hayek (2011 [1960]: 71) defines coercion as the intentional imposition of another person's will on one's own. Freedom, as its analytical opposite, also takes the form of a relation. It describes a 'state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or others' (ibid: 58).

This narrow negative definition, as the absence of—or 'freedom from' (Berlin 2007 [1969])—external coercion, implies that social processes and their effects have no bearing on the extent to which a person is free. Freedom is then divorced from the operational outcomes of 'markets' as instituted processes, despite their consequences for such things as the distribution of wealth/poverty and working conditions. Although such social processes and their results might heavily restrain individual choice, they cannot, under this approach, be considered coercive, as long as they are not intended as such by any human agent.² If the whole of social life is organised through competitive, market-like structures, then everybody is assumed to be free to act in accordance with their own wishes and capacities and, thus, to be self-responsible. Over an unspecified time, such a society is supposed to produce an outcome that gives each person what they 'deserve' (i.e., meritocracy). By implication, centralised attempts to take action against structural constraints (related to, for instance, class, gender or wealth) are deprived of their legitimacy. They are rejected *a priori* as illegitimate encroachment by the State and, hence, as a threat to the paramount value of individual liberty.

² For a critical assessment of this well-entrenched and influential (neo)liberal line of argument see Haworth (1991).

The primary realm of neoliberal freedom is the economy. Both Hayek and Friedman are deeply convinced that economic liberty represents not only the single most important embodiment of freedom, but also an indispensable condition for all other forms. For example, in the context of employment, hiring and workplace regulation to prevent discrimination on grounds of race, colour or religion are regarded as deplorable, and such anti-discriminatory regulation should, from their point of view, be removed. Accordingly, Friedman (2002 [1962]: 111) references this as ‘interference with the freedom of individuals to enter into voluntary contracts with one another’, while such contracts are taken to be the defining aspect of freedom. This primacy of ‘the economic’ justifies the neglect of all other types of freedom, such as political liberty and autonomy. Going beyond and partially against Hayek, Friedman defines freedom primarily as choice and so essentially economic.³ Only if enough similarly valuable alternatives are available, from which an individual can choose, can an individual be considered free in their decision (Ibid: 28). Freedom is thus reduced to choice, and choice means nothing but the ability to pick from a pre-selected number of alternatives in the marketplace (Ibid: 15). The individual’s decision-making process and their formation of desires and preferences are treated as if they were a black box that cannot, and should not, be investigated.⁴ Any decision an individual takes is regarded as an expression of their ‘free will’(see Fellner and Spash 2015).

The primary societal objective of an idealised neoliberal society then becomes the pursuit of economic freedom as market choice, which presupposes establishing and protecting ‘free’

3 Here economics itself is redefined as the study of individual choice based on Lionel Robbins (1984 [1932]: 16) prescriptive definition relating to human behaviour and the fulfilling of ends based on scarce means which have alternative uses. This approach was adopted by the Chicago School and epitomised by Gary S. Becker’s economic writings, which applied the ‘economic’ choice model to everything from buying a cup of coffee to marriage and even suicide (Becker 1976).

4 That preferences should go unquestioned aligns with the tradition in mainstream economics of regarding preferences as being exogenous and given either a priori or as innate. Even when preferences are treated as endogenous, their role and meaning has remained unquestioned and unquestionable (see discussion in an environmental context by Spash 2008).

markets. A market is ‘free’, according to Friedman (2002 [1962]: 13f), if all of its transactions are undertaken by individuals or private firms and are strictly voluntary (i.e., if nobody is forced to enter into a transaction). The outcome produced by such markets is then conceived of as an unintended order that emerges spontaneously as the result of a multitude of human actions. Following Hayek’s ‘evolutionary’ understanding of social progress, markets are deemed to provide the best instrument to coordinate individual knowledge, interests and purposes for the benefit of society as a whole (Hayek 2011 [1960]: 91f; Gamble 1996: 27f).

Two social institutions are claimed to be absolutely vital for a functioning market system. First, there needs to be a universal system of enforceable private property rights and contracts. Only if a person is certain about their exclusive control over some material objects (or they know who else is in control), are they assumed to be able to carry out a coherent plan of action (Hayek 2011 [1960]: 207). Second, in order to curb coercive power in market interaction, competition is necessary between both sellers and buyers. It is the decisive mechanism through which markets are believed to produce spontaneous order (Hayek 1948: 21; 2011 [1960]: 88; Friedman 2002 [1962]: 14f; Gamble 1996: 69f).

Under this political economy, any attempt to interfere with market mechanisms is regarded as likely to obstruct their ability to achieve spontaneous self-organisation, and hence carries the risk of reducing both individual liberty and social prosperity. In particular, concentrations of power are identified as a major threat preventing markets from fulfilling their full potential (Friedman 2002 [1962]: 15; Friedman and Friedman 1980: 309). In this context, there is a clear prioritisation of capital over labour. Indeed, as Barry (1979: 50f) notes, Hayek regards trade unions as posing a much greater menace to liberty than the power of employers or monopolies on the side of capital. As a result, his vision of a ‘free’ society deprives workers of their right to organise collectively and pool their bargaining power, while capitalist monopolies are accepted as legitimate (i.e., naturalising corporate power).

Hayek and Friedman also consistently target government power and the role of State authorities as needing to be tamed and curtailed. Yet, despite their vigorous anti-State rhetoric, their conceptualisations of an ideal society require the existence of a strong neoliberal State, heavily involved in the lives of its citizens, even if this is restricted by the meta-legal principles of the ‘rule of law’ (Hayek 2011 [1960]: 232f). The neoliberal State’s main task is to enforce and safeguard the conditions required for markets to be operative (e.g., a functioning price system, property rights, contract law, judiciary and national security) and protect individuals against reciprocal acts of coercion (Ibid: 71f, 312). In addition, the State is responsible for spreading market logic to all spheres of social life, ultimately aiming at a social order entirely based on competitive, market-like structures (e.g., through policies of deregulation and privatisation, dismantling of the welfare state and opening-up of new markets for the nation State’s business interests).

In such an idealised neoliberal society, inequality is not only accepted as an outcome, but even deemed a necessary precondition for markets to function properly and society to flourish (Friedman 2002 [1962]: 161f; Hayek 2011 [1960]: 96, 104). The only type of equality conceived as desirable is equality before the law, which is viewed as incompatible with material equality (Hayek 2011 [1960]: 150; Friedman 2002 [1962]: 195). The two forms are regarded as mutually exclusive, because deliberately bringing about material equality would necessitate taking from some to give to others, which is to treat people differently and so, the argument goes, inequitably. In true trickle-down fashion, Hayek contends that ‘[e]ven the poorest today owe their relative material well-being to the results of past inequality’ (Hayek 2011 [1960]: 98). Any form of social planning that attempts to balance out an unequal distribution of material endowments—and, thus, ultimately also of actual opportunities—is rejected by both Hayek and Friedman as an infringement on individual liberty. In the long

run, for them, only if market mechanisms are left to operate ‘freely’ can society achieve freedom for the individual and generate the greatest public good.

2.2 An Alternative Notion of Freedom for a Degrowth Society

There is no explicit formulation of freedom in the degrowth discourse. However, many of its proponents share a common understanding of what kind of society they deem desirable, including the institutions, modes of organisation, values and social objectives they consider valuable. Castoriadis, who died before degrowth emerged as a social movement, developed two concepts—‘social imaginary’ and ‘autonomy’—that have had a great and lasting impact on key scholars within the degrowth movement (Latouche 2014, 2009; Kallis 2011, 2019; Asara, Profumi, and Kallis 2013; Muraca 2013; Deriu 2014a). The wide acceptance of his deliberations on autonomy within the degrowth literature, and the almost canonical reference made to them, justify regarding his work as central to a radical and alternative rethinking of freedom.

Castoriadis defines autonomy as the lucid (i.e., conscious) self-legislation of both individuals and collectives (Castoriadis 1983: 308). At the individual level, being autonomous implies that the institutions (i.e., conventions, norms, rules and regulations) guiding a person in their action and thought are not imposed on them by some external force, but by subjects themselves. Even though individuals can never entirely evade the influence of their unconscious psyche and historical, cultural and social context, out of which they think and act, total independence from these mechanisms is neither desired nor required for an individual to be free. Instead, what autonomy implies is a particular mode of being in which a person rejects becoming a passive product of their psyche and history in favour of being an active co-author of their own life (Castoriadis 1991: 165). This presupposes practices of introspection, reflection and deliberation, that help the individual to step back from their own

internalised behaviours, routines, beliefs and desires, in order to critically evaluate their meaning, validity and desirability (Kalyvas 1998: 170; Kioupkiolis 2012: 150). An autonomous individual should aim to attain an active relationship to, and engagement with, their own psyche and societal influences, while accepting they are unable to fully control them.

According to Castoriadis, a reflective and deliberative subjectivity paves the way for a third element of vital importance for individual autonomy, ‘radical imagination’ (Castoriadis 1991: 165). As part of an individual’s psyche this relates to acts of ‘positing, creating and bringing-into-being’ (Gezerlis 2001: 482). The enormous creative capacity innate to human beings enables them to envision alternatives in the construction of themselves and their lives that exceed the range of already available forms. This is vital, since it helps in the formation of resistance against social powers, which, in Castoriadis’ opinion, are manipulative, in as far as they predetermine what one perceives as conceivable and eligible options (Kioupkiolis 2012: 153).

Against the backdrop of these considerations, being free is not then a status that can be achieved once and for all, but rather requires a sustained effort, a continuous struggle, or, as Kioupkiolis (2012: 151) puts it, an ‘agonistic process’. This is understood as a fight against internal and external forces that constantly try to impose their meanings and laws on the individual, holding them captive in static patterns and thereby threatening to impede alternative possibilities (Castoriadis 1991: 163; 1997: 264). This makes practices of self-engagement, emancipation and self-empowerment important mechanisms for achieving freedom. Going beyond the narrow neoliberal focus on the ‘freedom from’ external acts of coercion, Castoriadis’ conception hence emphasises the freedom from both external *and* internal constraints. It also transcends negative freedom by opening up the door for creative

acts of self-identification and self-realisation, highlighting the freedom ‘of’ a person ‘to’ achieve certain ends.

Individual autonomy involves intersubjectivity (Castoriadis 1991: 164), which relates to the inextricable embeddedness of individuals in social relations (Castoriadis 1987 [1975]: 108). This signifies a crucial difference from liberal theory and its methodological individualism. Castoriadis’ notion of autonomy does not define the individual as an isolated person existing separately *in* society. Rather, it conceives of them as being inevitably social, socially connected and embedded, as a person *of* society. Consequently, following Castoriadis (1991: 166), an individual can neither be free on their own, nor under all forms of social structure. A specific type of society is needed that allows its members to realise autonomy both at the individual and the collective level (Castoriadis 1987 [1975]: 107). This implies the possibility of taking part in the processes whereby society is institutionalised. This is where negotiation and desires occur as to social meanings, or ‘social imaginary significations’ (Castoriadis 1991: 41), and their entailed societal rules, norms and objectives. This condition is linked to the second facet of autonomy, social autonomy.

For Castoriadis, social autonomy means that a society posits its own laws and institutions in a collective way, while its members know that they are the source of these laws. The institutions governing the lives of the members of a community are decided upon through democratic processes, and these institutions are themselves understood as self-imposed constructs. As a consequence, rather than permanent they are perceived of as contingent, human-made structures open to interrogation and deliberate alteration (Castoriadis 1997 [1983]: 310).

Politics is understood as ‘the reflective and lucid collective activity that aims at the overall institution of society’ (Castoriadis 1991: 169). Going far beyond nation States and representative democracies, politics encompasses all the activities and processes in which the

members of a society discuss, interpret and (re)define the norms, aims and limits of their own social institutions. All aspects of public life—‘everything in society that is participable [sic] and shareable’ (Ibid)—should be politicised (i.e., be open to collective evaluation, debate and reconsideration). While autonomy does not require each and every social law to be approved by every single member of society, it implies that they have the ‘effective possibility of participating actively in the formation and the implementation of the law’ (Ibid: 167). This is a key prerequisite for individuals to be able to endorse a particular social institution that is governing their life, i.e., to say, lucidly and reflectively, that ‘this law is also mine’.

On the basis that there is a plurality of individual ends and goals, and assuming that the value of autonomy as such is accepted, democracy becomes an indispensable condition for both social and individual autonomy, and, thus, a free society. Castoriadis refers to democracy as ‘the effective possibility of equal participation of all in instituting activities as well as in explicit power’ (Ibid: 168). An autonomous society presupposes a wide-scale democratisation of social relations as well as an institutional framework which enables and encourages all individuals to take part in collective deliberation and decision-making. At the same time, a ‘true’ democracy is supposed to ensure and protect a free private sphere of their members,⁵ and establish an economic sphere characterised by a variety of different modes of production and organisation (Castoriadis 1997 [1989]: 405-411). In order to ensure equal opportunities to participate in the instituting activities of a society, these economic institutions should be directed at providing a minimal livelihood for every citizen, reducing disparities of wealth and power and increasing individual autonomy.

⁵ Hence, autonomy presupposes a system of (negative) rights which licence and protect a diversification of being and safeguards individuals from infringements by other individuals or the community (Kioupkiolis 2012: 167). Following Castoriadis (1997 [1989]: 405-413), these rights and liberties have to be agreed on collectively, but should include some minimal human rights and the achievement of past democratic struggles.

Degrowth can then be placed within the context of Castoriadis thought, while also going beyond his ideas. Here new concepts enter the picture and offer a democratisation of the social and economic spheres—such as ‘commoning’, which returns to localised group organisation of resource use (Akbulut 2017; Helfrich and Bollier 2014; Euler 2019), and ‘tools for conviviality’, which question the role of technology and technologically driven change and place it in the context of social relations (Deriu 2014b; Illich 1973). These concepts raise the potential for mechanisms to counter the disempowerment inherent in capitalist modes of (re)production and consumer society. For example, they raise the need to prevent the conversion of individuals into consumers dependent on industrial output and technocratic structures. Moreover, in a social-ecological transformation, that aligns social provisioning with needs, a society based on commoning and conviviality would empower its members to liberate themselves from market capitalism and norms of hedonic consumerism and profit-maximisation.

More generally, the vision of a degrowth society challenges the utopia of a continually growing, technologically driven material economy, whether capitalist or of any other form. The idea of freedom is then no longer allied with endless consumption possibilities, but rather to be found in the ability of the individual and collectives to negotiate and set their own limits (Kallis 2019; Kallis and March 2015). While neoliberal freedom is likely to foster the production of passive consumers, whose freedom is mostly limited to choice in the market place and constrained by pre-established institutional ties, an idealised degrowth society would be constituted of proactive, self-conscious and self-constituting citizens. Such citizens would be involved in the creation of the structures and institutions which delimit their own range of action. This is the essence of self-limitation, instead of being understood as an inevitable reaction to scarcity, impending catastrophes or other external imperatives, being a lucid process of self-determination and thus an inherently emancipatory action.

According to Kallis and March (2015: 363), Castoriadis placed concerns over ecological degradation within the context of self-limitation that brings ‘true’ freedom, rather than interpreting it as love of Nature. Adams (2012: 316) believes that Castoriadis understood the environmental movement as a reactivation of the project of autonomy, reiterating the need for collective self-limitation that is necessarily absent from the capitalist and techno-scientific pursuit of unlimited rational mastery. From this perspective, degrowth becomes an expression of self-limitation as freedom at the societal level. By analogy, at the individual level, the conscious decision to live a frugal life of sufficiency is perceived as a potential source of freedom rather than a constraint.

For Castoriadis (1991: 168), there is also a ‘reciprocal implication of equality and freedom’, since freedom ought to be accessible to everybody in the same way. Based on the awareness of economic, social, cultural, psychological and power structures and their impact on actual opportunities of self-awareness, political participation and self-realisation, this implies the need for redistributive measures. These should reduce material inequalities (and thus relations of dependence and subordination) and establish equal opportunities that lead to a life that is self-determined for all within autonomous social communities.

3. How do Members of the Degrowth Community Conceptualise Freedom?

Table 1 summarises the two theories of freedom in terms of ten key concepts identified as constitutive for a free neoliberal and Castoriadian degrowth society. The concepts refer to social, political, economic, psychological and institutional conditions without which freedom, from the respective point of view, is inconceivable. They are paired in such a way as to contrast and highlight fundamental discrepancies between the two positions related to a specific topic. Due to the omission of freedom as an explicit topic in degrowth debates, there remains uncertainty as to whether the conceptualisation depicted on the right-hand side of

Table 1 coincides with the actual views prevalent in the degrowth community. Therefore, an empirical study was conducted to help investigate this potential gap, and explore how degrowth advocates relate to the concept of freedom.

Table 1. Two Theories of Freedom

Topic	Free Neoliberal Society	Free Castoriadian Degrowth Society
1. Individual & society:	Methodological individualism	Social and ecological embeddedness
2. Vision of the social realm:	Economisation	(Re)politicisation
3. Governance:	Neoliberal State and Rule of Law	Deep democracy
4. Guiding principle(s):	Competition	Reflection, deliberation, imagination
5. Main property relation:	Private property	Commoning
6. Primary type of freedom:	Liberty (absence of external coercion)	Autonomy (conscious self-legislation)
7. Central act of freedom:	Free choice on markets	Self-limitation
8. Source of emancipation:	Self-regulating markets	Continuous struggle
9. Economic power relations:	Minimisation of (non-capital-related) power concentrations	Conviviality
10. Distributive justice:	Inequality	Equality

3.1 Study Design

The questionnaire was designed in three main sections. Part I consisted of two sets of questions. First, respondents were asked to imagine being in ten different scenarios relating to constraints on their personal freedom (CPF). They were asked the extent to which they would feel constrained by the scenario and to record on a five-level Likert item, from (1) ‘not at all constrained’ to (5) ‘seriously constrained’. A separate score (0) was allowed for ‘don’t know’ responses. Each scenario corresponded to a certain constitutive element of either the neoliberal or Castoriadian- degrowth theory. The design took a common context in which the respondents might find themselves and introduced an aspect of freedom implicitly into a specific concrete example. The CPF scenarios are represented in Table 2 and the full wording

is given in Appendix 1. The expected responses are from the perspective of an individual who is committed to the Castoriadian-degrowth theory of freedom outlined in Section 2.2.

Table 2. Scenarios Relating to Constraints on Personal Freedom (CPF)

Code	Summary Phrase	Expected Degrowth Response	Theoretical Concept(s)	Conceptual Ideology
N 1	I have to bow to the majority vote.	Unconstrained	Individualism vs. collective decision-making	Neoliberal
N 2	There is no possibility for me to satisfy my needs outside of markets.	Seriously constrained	Absolute reliance on markets	Neoliberal
N 3	There is only one show model to choose.	Unconstrained	Choice between consumption alternatives	Neoliberal
N 4	I don't want to pay taxes, but I must.	Unconstrained	State coercion & redistribution	Neoliberal
D 1	I am forced to work extra hours.	Seriously constrained	Structural constraints without overt coercion	Degrowth
D 2	I'd love to learn dancing, but I can't afford dance classes.	Seriously constrained	Material means & actual opportunities	Degrowth
D 3	I decided to stop flying for environmental reasons.	Unconstrained	Self-limitation & social/environmental responsibility	Degrowth
D 4	I'm trying hard to fulfil my parents' dream without being aware of it.	Seriously constrained	Introspection, reflection, deliberate will-formation	Degrowth
D 5	I have no possibility for political participation.	Seriously constrained	Democracy & political participation	Degrowth
D 6	I am fully dependent on industrial production.	Seriously constrained	Industrial & expert dependence vs. convivial tools	Degrowth

Second, thirteen conceptual statements on freedom (CSF) were presented to respondents who were asked for their degree of agreement with each. Again, a five-level Likert item was employed for each, with the level of agreement being assessed from (1) 'completely disagree' to (5) 'completely agree', and again with (0) 'don't know'. Each item was based on a key assumption of either the neoliberal or the Castoriadian-degrowth concepts of freedom. In contrast to the specific context of the CPF items, here the aim was to get respondents to

address more general theoretical aspects. Table 3, summarising the CSF, shows their relationship to specific ideological positions and gives the expected response from a person committed to the degrowth conception of freedom; full wording is given in Appendix 2. The order of both CPF and CSF items was randomised in the questionnaire.

Table 3. Conceptual Statements on Freedom (CSF)

Code	Summary Phrase	Expected Degrowth Response	Theoretical Concept(s)	Conceptual Ideology
N 1	Overall societal progress justifies an unequal distribution of freedom.	Disagree	Utilitarianism & inequality	Neoliberal
N 2	Without the right to possess private property, it is impossible for me to be free.	Disagree	Private property	Neoliberal
N 3	The market mechanism creates a more socially beneficial order than human planning.	Disagree	Market mechanism & competition	Neoliberal
N 4	Redistributional policies should be rejected as a threat to individual freedom.	Disagree	Individualism & absence of coercion	Neoliberal
N 5	Economic freedom is essential because it makes markets work properly.	Disagree	Economic freedom	Neoliberal
N 6	Economic freedom is more essential than political rights.	Disagree	Primacy of the economic	Neoliberal
D 1	Freedom implies the chance to go beyond the already available.	Agree	Creativity, emancipation, self-empowerment	Degrowth
D 2	Self-limitation is an expression of freedom.	Agree	Self-limitation	Degrowth
D 3	Being free implies having a say in the making of societal rules and principles.	Agree	Political participation & self-legislation	Degrowth
D 4	Collectively owning and managing property leads to a more free society.	Agree	Commoning	Degrowth
D 5	In a free society, societal norms must be open to challenge and collective reconsideration.	Agree	Social autonomy	Degrowth
D 6	In a degrowth society, being free primarily means to be autonomous.	Agree	Autonomy	Degrowth
D 7	Freedom implies a continuous struggle.	Agree	Freedom as agonistic process	Degrowth

Part II of the questionnaire consisted of three questions. First, respondents were asked to indicate the single most important condition for them to feel free by choosing one of six options. Each of the options reflected an underlying belief related to a dominant position in philosophical debates about freedom: negative liberty, positive liberty, autonomy, freedom as independence, deliberate will-formation and self-emancipation. While, from a neoliberal theoretical viewpoint, negative liberty is clearly given priority over all other types of freedom, a person adopting a degrowth viewpoint would be expected to emphasise autonomy, positive liberty, deliberate will-formation or self-emancipation.

Second, Part II of the survey included an open-ended question that gave respondents the opportunity to share what they believed were other preconditions necessary for them to be free, beyond the ones mentioned in the first question. This aimed to gain additional information about personal interpretations of freedom independently of the theoretical theories. New facets of freedom, that might have been neglected in the theories, could then be introduced by respondents.

Third, another closed-ended question focused on the role of freedom in a possible degrowth society. The aim was to discover whether participants considered the pursuit of freedom compatible with degrowth and, if yes, what role they assigned to it in the value hierarchy of an ideal degrowth society. For this purpose, respondents were requested to pick one of four statements that held freedom should be either: (i) the single most important value in a degrowth society; (ii) one of its central principles, together with others; (iii) secondary to other, more important values; or (iv) rejected as a guiding principle due to its incompatibility with degrowth.

Part III consisted of a set of seven questions focusing on demographic and socio-economic information: age, gender identity, level of education, employment status, income, religious beliefs and nationality. These factors (e.g., educational attainment) could potentially

link to a person's understanding of freedom. However, the primary use in the current context is to report on the socio-economic make-up of the sample.

3.2 Sample and Results

The survey was conducted at the *6th International Degrowth Conference for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity* in Malmö, Sweden, between the 21st and 25th of August 2018. In total, 300 hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed, of which 146 (49%) were returned. The sample size in relation to the total number of conference participants (800) was thus slightly above 18%. The majority (76%) of respondents were under 34 years old, and highly educated (91% having a university degree, N=145). The gender distribution was relatively equal (52% female vs. 43% male, N=145). Nationality (N=139) was biased with 51% Germanic (43% German, 8% Austrian), followed by French (8%) and Italian (7%).

In a Likert item assessment, as in Part I, respondents who lack a strong belief are expected to tend to the middle option (see Nadler et al. 2015). Therefore, in the analysis, emphasis is placed on the more extreme answers for each scenario or statement. Following this approach, Table 4 lists the codes of the ten CPF scenarios as well as the expected and obtained responses presented as four groups: (i) those who felt more than moderately constrained (scores 4 and 5), (ii) those who felt moderately constrained (score 3), (iii) those who felt not at all or less than moderately constrained (scores 1 and 2), and (iv) those who answered 'don't know' (item score 0). The scenarios are arranged in order of their mean rating, starting with the cases that respondents regarded as posing the greatest threat to their personal freedom.

Comparing the expected with the actual answers shows that, apart from CPF-N1 and CPF-D3, the outcome is in line with the values predicted. This implies an overall inclination among respondents towards the notion of freedom conceptualised on the basis of Castoriadis'

concept of autonomy. The two exceptions were also the only cases that did not yield an absolute majority on either side of the item scale (i.e., seriously constrained or unconstrained). In fact, assessment of these items was quite divided and will be discussed further in Section 4.

Table 4. Respondents' Beliefs in Constraints on Personal Freedom (CPF)

CPF Code	Expected response ¹	Sample size	Mean ²	Seriously constrained ³		Moderately constrained ³		Not/slightly constrained ³		Don't know	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
D 1	SC	146	4.5	133	91	6	4	5	3	2	1
D 5	SC	146	4.2	115	79	19	13	9	6	3	2
D 6	SC	146	3.7	90	62	34	23	22	15	0	0
N 2	SC	144	3.7	87	60	29	20	23	16	5	3
D 4	SC	145	3.6	84	58	27	19	25	17	9	6
D 2	SC	146	3.6	83	57	40	27	22	15	1	1
N 1	UC	145	3.0	34	23	61	42	41	28	9	6
D 3	UC	146	2.9	43	29	48	33	52	36	3	2
N 3	UC	146	2.7	36	25	34	23	75	51	1	1
N 4	UC	146	2.3	20	14	41	28	82	56	3	2

Notes:

¹ UC = unconstrained; SC = seriously constrained

² Excluding 'Don't know'

³ Sum for Likert score 1/2 (not or only slightly constrained), 3 (moderately constrained), and 4/5 (seriously constrained). Marked in dark grey are absolute majorities (i.e. more than 50% of all respondents rating a scenario as either seriously freedom-constraining or not/only slightly constraining).

A similar presentation of results is given in Table 5 for the CSF items. There is a majority position among survey participants as to their conceptualisations, as evident from there being only one item that was neither agreed nor disagreed upon by more than 50% of respondents. However, this statement refers to the interpretation of freedom as autonomy, a central element of the Castoriadian conceptualisation of freedom. Apart from this item, all of the statements were accepted by the majority of respondents and support the anticipated degrowth position, while all of the statements that were broadly rejected are connected to the neoliberal concept of freedom.

Table 5. Respondents' Agreement with Conceptual Statements on Freedom (CSF)

CSF Code	Expected Response ¹	Sample Size	Mean ²	Agree ³		Neutral ³		Disagree ³		Don't know	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
D 7	A	144	4.3	122	85	8	6	7	5	7	5
D 5	A	144	4.2	118	82	14	10	9	6	3	2
D 3	A	145	4.2	127	88	6	4	11	8	1	1
D 4	A	145	4.0	112	77	16	11	7	5	10	7
D 2	A	145	4.0	107	74	19	13	13	9	6	4
D 1	A	145	3.7	89	61	22	15	24	17	10	7
D 6	A	145	3.1	57	39	32	22	43	30	13	9
N 1	D	142	2.2	23	16	18	13	96	68	5	3
N 6	D	145	2.2	8	5	26	18	78	54	33	23
N 2	D	143	2.0	19	13	10	7	112	78	2	1
N 5	D	145	1.9	6	4	21	14	104	72	14	10
N 3	D	145	1.9	8	5	15	10	111	77	11	8
N 4	D	144	1.5	3	2	5	3	130	90	6	4

Notes:

¹ A = agree; D = disagree² Excluding 'Don't know'³ Sum for Likert score 1/2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), and 4/5 (agree). Marked in dark grey are absolute majorities (i.e. more than 50% of all respondents agreeing or disagreeing with a statement).

The answers to the first question from Part II of the questionnaire show that approximately a quarter of participants reported that the single most important condition for their freedom was the ability to deliberately form and endorse one's beliefs and desires (i.e., deliberate will-formation), while a fifth selected the capacity to be in control over one's own life (i.e., autonomy). Both these positions are constitutive of the Castoriadian theory. A fifth of respondents also opted for freedom as independence from the arbitrary power of others. These responses focus on independence and autonomy, and clearly go beyond the neoliberal theory's purely negative notion of freedom. This highlights the importance of the origin and nature of a person's desires and beliefs, a domain completely excluded from consideration by the neoliberal theory. At the same time, however, there does remain a substantive minority

(15%) committed to the negative and neoliberal consistent concept of freedom (see Appendix 3).

Part II also asked an open-ended question on pre-conditions for freedom, in addition to those already mentioned in the preceding question. In comparison to the closed-ended question, the number of non-respondents was relatively high (30%). Respondents could give more than one answer, and the 102 respondents gave a total of 120 suggestions. These answers were analysed in terms of their content, by means of a quantitative frequency analysis (Mayring 2014: 22), and classified into seventeen categories (see Appendix 4). The three categories subsuming the most frequently mentioned answers were the following: free and equal access to education and knowledge (22%), being able to satisfy basic human needs (16%) and acceptance, support and self-efficacy in a community and/or social relationships (9%). None of the remaining categories crossed the 5% threshold. The main outcome supports an interpretation of freedom that is grounded in material and social conditions for leading a meaningful and self-determined life. This implies a more substantive, positive notion of freedom as compared to the rather formal, negative, neoliberal one. The focus in the highest frequency categories on actualising opportunities and their equal distribution is compatible with the Castoriadian-degrowth theory, while being at odds with central assumptions on which the neoliberal interpretation rests. The results also indicate support for the embeddedness of individuals in social relations and the entailed view of humans as inherently social beings.

The responses to the third question from Part II show that the vast majority (97%) selected an option that finds freedom is compatible with a degrowth society. Most (76%) believed freedom should constitute a guiding principle, but few (2%) considered it to be the single most important value. Instead, the importance of other fundamental principles was emphasised, and for some respondents (19%) these exceeded the importance of freedom.

Only 3% believed that the pursuit of freedom is incompatible with the idea and goals of degrowth and should thus be abandoned.

4 Interpretation and Discussion

4.1 General Agreement with the ‘Castoriadian-Degrowth Theory of Freedom’

Overall, there was a clear majority position amongst respondents that is compatible with the understanding of freedom conceptualised on the basis of Castoriadis’ notion of autonomy. This is most evident in the results for the CPF items. Having to work extra hours under the pressure of losing one’s job (CPF-D1) was voted by more than half of the respondents to be severely constraining their freedom. Additionally, more than a third stated that they would feel more than moderately constrained in a similar situation. This represents the role of structural power constraints (such as social and economic pressures) operating without any overt coercion but as a significant factor influencing the extent to which respondents feel free/unfree. This view contradicts Hayek’s narrow negative definition of freedom. It involves a much broader understanding that includes structures, societal arrangements and the specific social-economic context of an individual. The high ratings for scenario CPF-D2 support this claim. They reveal the centrality of actual opportunities to realise one’s aims and desires, which is entirely neglected in the neoliberal theory.

In terms of the central role of economics and markets given to freedom by the neoliberal position, this is also broadly rejected. The results for scenario CPF-N2 allude to the perceived threat to personal freedom arising from an absolute reliance or dependence on market structures. The firm belief in a causal relationship between markets and freedom, embraced by both Hayek and Friedman, appears to be rejected by the bulk of participants. In fact, they seem to oppose the central neoliberal assumption that markets present the most important precondition for individual freedom. Similarly, the fact that more than 50% fail to consider

their freedom limited in scenario CPF-N3 indicates that consumption alternatives, a precondition for freedom defined as choice (Friedman 2002 [1962]), are mostly regarded as unnecessary in order to feel free.

The obligation to pay taxes, combined with the threat of punishment (CPF-N4), is a prime example of coercion and thus considered a major constraint on individual freedom by many neoliberals. Yet, this is only regarded as gravely impacting on freedom by 14% of respondents. This outcome might be grounded in a different understanding of freedom, one that is non-individualistic and avoids the defining aspect of coercion, while being closely tied to the well-being of others and society overall. The inclusion of collective responsibility and actual opportunities into the web of conditions for individual freedom implies the need for some degree of material equality, necessitating a distributing mechanism other than the market and an assumed meritocracy. This could be one plausible explanation why an obligation to pay taxes is, overall, not judged as a threat to individual freedom.

The rating for scenario CPF-D5 strongly supports the central position of political participation constitutive for the degrowth conceptualisation of freedom. Similarly, case CPF-D6 reveals a general agreement with the interpretation of the capitalist mode of production and the entailed dependence on industry and experts as a main source of ‘unfreedom’, as proposed by Illich (1973) and others in his tradition. Moreover, scenario CPF-D4 indicates that the majority of respondents regard being free as implying a certain degree of deliberate will-formation, self-awareness and reflexivity, marking a proximity to Castoriadis’ notion of autonomy.

This overall agreement with the Castoriadian-degrowth theory can also be observed in the assessments of the CSF items. The results here reflect a general consensus which is based on the rejection of central aspects of neoliberal freedom. These include: the threat to freedom connected to redistributive policies (CSF-N4), the assumption of a self-regulating market

mechanism and its priority over human planning (CSF-N3), the centrality of economic freedom (CSF-N5), the right to possess private property (CSF-N2), the priority of competitive markets over political rights (CSF-N6) and the consequentialist justification of an unequal distribution of freedom (CSF-N1). At the same time the results are grounded on the affirmation of core characteristics of the Castoriadian degrowth concept of freedom. These are the identification of freedom with a continuous effort and agonistic process (CSF-D7), the condition that all societal rules, norms and principles need to be open to collective scrutiny and reconsideration (CS-D5), the importance of political participation and self-determination (CS-D3), the sympathy for collective ownership and commoning (CS-D4), the interpretation of self-limitation as an act of freedom (CS-D2) and the relevance of self-emancipation, openness and creativity (CS-D1).

4.2 Indicators of an Under-Conceptualisation of Freedom

Despite the general agreement outlined above, some of the results bring into question an alignment with the pre-theorised conceptualisation of freedom for degrowth. This is the case for the two scenarios that were rated by a majority as ‘moderately constraining’ (an item score of 3): CPF-N1 and CPF-D3. The fact that most people, in judging these situations, opted for the middle option, might signify either that many respondents lacked a strong belief about the scenarios or that they were too uncertain about their evaluation of the situation to choose a stronger position. This could apply especially to the referendum scenario (CPF-N1), where 42% picked the median option. However, there also appears to be a strong disagreement between respondents, most obviously in the scenario about the environmentally motivated decision to stop flying (CPF-D3), where 29% rated it as seriously constraining, whereas 36% rated it as not very constraining. How can these contrary positions be explained?

First, this could reflect the heterogeneity of conference participants. As Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018: 245) found, in a survey of degrowth participants at the 2014 Degrowth Conference in Leipzig, there appears to be a broad diversity within, what they term, the ‘degrowth spectrum’. They did identify some widely shared basic concerns amongst their respondents (e.g., economic growth as destructive leading to the need to reduce material wealth in the Global North via democratic means involving female emancipation and non-violence). However, there was also considerable substantive variety in how they related to the degrowth movement. As summarised by Spash (2018), their study identified five groups: (C1) sufficiency-oriented critics of modernity with an eco-radical aspect; (C2) techno-optimist reformers who think within existing structures, are sympathetic towards conservative politics and have weak personal practice; (C3) mostly German young female students believing in a kind of classic liberal individual agency and pacifism; (C4) mostly German urban male traditional left wingers holding a somewhat theoretical, techno-optimist position with a focus on redistribution; (C5) another left wing group against capitalism and social domination, experimenting with alternative living. In terms of the overall sample, clusters C1, C3 and C5 were 22%-23% each, C2 19% and C4 13%. The authors regard C5 as the most consistent with the degrowth ideal of mediating theory and practice through self-transformation. In terms of relating to the current study, we can note the conservative politics and weak degrowth practices of C2 and the classic liberalism of C3, mean around 40% of their sample, could hold a position on freedom consistent with the neoliberal theory. Their groups also evidence some stark differences of opinion. For example, 45% of C1 wanted a ban on long-haul pleasure flights, whereas two-thirds of C2 were against this and exhibited frequent flying behaviour. Their overall sample was also found wanting in several other environmental aspects with 69% supporting long-haul flying for pleasure, 66% pro-technology and 54% against old lifestyles, 68% holding social inequity above climate change and 75% supporting individual consumer-

based action (i.e., agency over structure). This last position is clearly also consistent with neoliberal freedom. In addition, 34% did not want degrowth to be distanced from conservative thought. There is then evidence not only of diverging and contradictory positions on a number of issues relating to freedom, but also of the presence of hegemonic concepts of freedom amongst a substantive part of their sample.

Second, the fact that freedom is seldom explicitly theorised in the degrowth community implies that it is under-conceptualised. This could help to explain why many survey participants appear to find a situation in which they have to consciously consider committing to stop an otherwise normalised behaviour (such as flying) as severely freedom-inhibiting. Here there is an implicit value conflict that appears to remain unarticulated. A behaviour or practice may be regarded as necessary for their personal freedom despite the awareness of its destructive environmental and social consequences and its impacts on others (i.e., human and non-human, present and future). Remarkably, while almost 75% of respondents endorsed the abstract idea of freedom as self-limitation (expressed in CFS-D2), many were unable to confirm their commitment when confronted by a concrete example.

Thus, we hypothesise that the underlying understanding of freedom of a non-negligible share of respondents is still based on internalised neoliberal principles and values. That is, the parameters of freedom remain conceptualised in terms of individualism, neglect of social and environmental responsibility and maximisation of personal consumption opportunities.

If we turn next to the thirteen CSF items, only one (CFS-D6) was neither agreed nor disagreed upon by a total majority. Unexpectedly, this was the statement on autonomy, a key concept for Castoriadis. The statement was phrased as follows: ‘In a degrowth society, being free primarily means to be autonomous (i.e., self-governing)’. A third of participants actually disagreed with the statement. Rejection might indicate departure from Castoriadis’ political philosophy and his project of autonomy. However, this is not necessarily the case, because

40% did actually agree with the statement. Furthermore, many of the key characteristics of Castoriadis' interpretation of autonomy were approved of by respondents (e.g., CFS-D7, CFS-D5, CFS-D3 and CFS-D1). Also, the first question of Part II resulted in 20% of respondents declaring that 'being in control of my own life' constitutes the most essential condition for them to be free, while 26% chose 'forming and endorsing my beliefs and desires deliberately, not blindly'. Respondents appear to be more likely to endorse autonomy when it is implicitly stated rather than explicitly. This hints at an underdeveloped understanding of and/or a lack of consideration given to the concept.

Further evidence for the claim that the conceptualisation of freedom amongst survey participants is neither fully elaborate nor entirely consistent with the degrowth vision is provided by the outcome for statement CFS-N6. Strikingly, 23% stated that they 'didn't know' whether they consider economic freedom or political rights as more important for a free society. In addition, close to 18% opted for the neutral middle option. From a degrowth perspective this widespread doubt is problematic. Equal political rights are a cornerstone of any degrowth vision. This is supported by the survey participants themselves, for instance in their assessment of scenario CPF-D5, where almost 80% felt their freedom would be seriously constrained if they had no possibility for political participation. Similarly, 82% said they could not consider themselves free if they had no say in the making of the rules and principles that determine their own scope of action. At the same time, the dependence on markets is clearly perceived as freedom-constraining (e.g., responses to CPF-N2). Also, the claim that economic freedom is essential because it makes markets work (CFS-N5) was univocally dismissed by 72% of respondents.

How can the evidence for a failure to decide between economic freedom and political rights be explained? The most plausible answer is to be found in the original phrasing of statement CS-N6, which left economic freedom implicit and formulated it as an 'economic

system that guarantees that no one is being forced into transactions’—a definition employed by Friedman (2002 [1962]). Respondents appear to have found judging and rejecting a specific statement, explicitly using the term ‘economic freedom’, easier than a more abstract paraphrase of the concept. This might be due to the negative associations the notion evokes in some degrowth supporters. Rejecting a concept they can clearly associate with a worldview opposing their own (e.g., neoliberal market fundamentalism) is clearly easier than recognising the same concept left implicit in a statement. We might then speculate that the apparent dependence of judgements on the wording of a particular sentence is likely to be linked to an emotional rejection of some key words, rather than a sound personal understanding of what it means to be free for themselves.

Combined, the above evidence indicates an under-conceptualisation of freedom, reflected in the incomplete and sometimes inconsistent interpretation of freedom and its central constituents. While there is no single causal explanation, the lack of conceptual clarity is aided by the absence of thematic discussion and debate concerning freedom in the degrowth discourse. In order to rectify this situation, the degrowth movement would need to explicitly address the meaning and role of freedom in a future degrowth society, and make more explicit an alternative vision of freedom that is compatible with conscious, voluntary self-limitation placed within an economic and social provisioning system outside of market choice. This could pave the way for both a theoretical clarification and the internalisation of a new framework to make sense of freedom in the context of a social-ecological transformation.

5. Conclusion

Degrowth as a social movement, with links to the works of Castoriadis, has an implicit conceptualisation of freedom. We have sought to make this explicit and then test for the gap between degrowth and neoliberal theories of freedom, combining a conceptual analysis of the

two with an exploratory empirical study employing original survey design. We found that the prevalent understanding of freedom amongst those who participated in the 2018 Degrowth Conference is largely in line with Castoriadis' notion of freedom and autonomy. Neoliberal positions and arguments were firmly rejected by the majority of respondents. For this majority, freedom clearly goes beyond the narrow negative definition, as absence of external coercion, and the sole focus on markets implied by the neoliberal theory. Instead, they embrace a positive, more substantive interpretation of freedom that encompasses the awareness of and engagement with external *and* internal constraints, while also emphasising the importance of reflective and creative acts of self-determination, both in the individual and collective dimension.

However, the empirical study also revealed an under-conceptualisation of freedom, which can be explained in part by the neglect the topic has so far experienced in the degrowth discourse. The nature and role of freedom in a future, socially and ecologically sustainable and equitable society takes on added significance when considering concrete actions. In a movement devoted to social ecological transformation, the inability to identify core conceptual aspects of freedom, when they are implicit, is worrisome. Individuals appear confused as to their core values and may face unarticulated value conflicts. This is hardly surprising due to the dominance of the hegemonic structure in pushing a neoliberal interpretation of freedom. However, this also implies that alternative conceptualisations of freedom require far better articulation than so far appears to have taken place.

The results presented here are only an initial exploration, but the study raises some important issues concerning the extent to which theory and practice are being united in the political project of degrowth. Degrowth conference participants are likely to be structurally caught in a mode of living that is part of the hegemonic neoliberal political economy. In communities and amongst groups whose daily practices are aimed at implementing an

alternative mode of living we would expect strong adoption of transformative agendas including the degrowth conception of freedom. At present, this is likely to apply only to a minority of degrowth conference participants. This raises the importance of the role that different institutions play in empowering and preventing a substantively different common conceptualisation of what it means to be free.

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Appendix 1: Ten Scenarios Relating to Constraints on Personal Freedom (CPF)

‘To what extent is your personal freedom constrained in the following situations?’

Survey Order	CPF Code	Full Scenario
1	N1	There is a referendum in my town. The outcome is the opposite of what I voted for. I have to bow to the majority vote.
2	D1	My boss asks me to work extra hours all the time. I cannot afford to lose the job, so I never say no.
3	D2	All my life I’ve dreamed of learning how to dance. I would love to enrol for dance classes, but I can’t afford them.
4	N2	Where I live, the economy is entirely organised through markets. There is no other way for me to satisfy my needs.
5	D3	After reading about the environmental consequences of flying, I decided not to travel by plane anymore. Now it’s nearly impossible for me to visit some good friends who live abroad.
6	N3	I need new shoes. There is only one shoemaker in town who sells only one model. I have no choice but to buy these ones.
7	D4	My parents always wanted me to be a doctor. Now I’m trying really hard to become one. I’ve never questioned if that is what I really want.
8	N4	I don’t want to pay taxes, but I have to, otherwise I’ll get punished.
9	D5	I live in a society where I am protected by an exhaustive list of rights and liberties. However, I have no possibility to participate in political decision processes.
10	D6	Nowadays, everything is being produced industrially. I have no idea how to amend or repair stuff I bought. I am fully dependent on experts.

Appendix 2: Thirteen Conceptual Statements on Freedom (CSF)

‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?’

Survey Order	CSF Code	Full Item Statement
1	N1	An unequal distribution of freedom is justified, as long as the overall society benefits in the long run.
2	N2	Without the right to possess private property, it is impossible for me to be free.
3	D1	Freedom implies the chance to go beyond all options available to me and come up with something completely new.
4	N3	The market mechanism creates a spontaneous order which is more beneficial to society than an allocation of resources based on human planning.
5	D2	Self-limitation is a deliberate choice, and thus an expression of freedom.
6	N4	Redistributional policies infringe on someone’s individual freedom and should hence be rejected.
7	D3	I cannot be considered free, if I don’t have a say in the making of the societal rules and principles which determine the scope of my actions.
8	D4	Collectively owning and managing property favours a democratisation of production processes, leading to a more free society.
9	D5	In a free society, every societal norm, rule and principle must be open to challenge, collective reconsideration and reconfiguration.
10	N5	Economic freedom is essential, because it makes markets work properly.
11	D6	In a degrowth society, being free primarily means to be autonomous (i.e. self-governing).
12	N6	An economic system that guarantees that no one is being forced into transactions is more essential to a free society than political rights.
13	D7	Freedom implies a continuous struggle, rather than a state achieved once and for all.

Appendix 3: Single Most Essential Condition for Personal Freedom

‘Among the following options, what is the most essential condition for you to be free?’

Options	Theoretical concept	N	%
Forming and endorsing my beliefs and desires deliberately, not blindly	Deliberate will-formation	37	26
Not being subject to the arbitrary power of others (even if their power is not exercised)	Freedom as independence	30	21
Being in control (i.e. being the author) of my own life	Autonomy	29	20
Not being coerced to do something I don't want to do	Negative liberty	22	15
Having the effective possibility to realise my life goals	Positive liberty	19	13
Being able to go beyond all pre-defined alternatives and invent something new for myself	Self-emancipation	7	5
Total		144	100

Appendix 4: Other Preconditions necessary for Personal Freedom

‘What other preconditions are necessary for you to be free?’

Categories	Frequencies
Free, equal access to education & knowledge	26
Being able to satisfy basic human needs	19
Acceptance, support and self-efficacy in social relationships & community	11
Equal distribution of and respect for other people’s freedom	6
No discrimination & equality of gender and race	6
Being able to live in a sustainable/healthy environment	6
Free mobility	6
Safety & legal system	6
Critical thinking & self-reflection	5
Equal opportunities to realise capabilities	5
Freedom of expression	4
Privacy, leisure time, arts	4
No exploitation of other beings, no violence or coercion	3
No oppressive social norms	3
Equal access to resources	2
Universal Basic Income	2
Overcoming ideological domination (capitalism, colonialism)	2
Other (single mentions)	4
Total	120

Note: Total items mentioned by 102 participants.

