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Are liberal objections to consumption corridors justified? On the relation of freedom and limits in green liberal thought

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ABSTRACT

The concept of consumption corridors proposes minimum and maximum limits to consumption on the normative premises of justice, human wellbeing, and guarantees of a good life for all. A central objection to the idea is that limits on resource use would interfere broadly with liberal freedoms, and consumption corridors would thus not be compatible with a liberal democratic setting. This claim rests on the assumption that protecting liberal freedom rights and enforcing limits constitute opposing forces. Here, liberal freedom is equated with the expansion of (unlimited) options of choice: the more options people have, and the fewer limits that are imposed on them, the greater the overall level of freedom. Therefore, discussions of limits are often reduced to negative restrictions and undemocratic demands. To problematize this rationale, we argue that in most liberal accounts, freedom and limits are mutually supportive of each other, and that the understanding of freedom as “the absence of limits” is in fact a particular understanding that has become dominant. Against this backdrop, we develop the notion of “green liberal freedom” that posits limits as a core concern of liberal understandings of freedom. We suggest that the recognition of the environment as “provider of basic needs,” democratic deliberation, and capability to reflect upon and judge conflicting values in light of individual and collective versions of the good life are important “building blocks” of an adjusted concept of freedom that is at once compatible with liberal thought and in support of the negotiation and implementation of consumption corridors.

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Introduction

In recent years, concepts that relate environmental limits to human wellbeing have gained traction in academic discourse (see e.g., Gough 2017; Raworth 2017). Such conceptualizations are primarily concerned with the societal organization of “living well within limits,” constantly asking how wellbeing can be secured, or even expanded, in the face of climate change and environmental degradation. The concept of consumption corridors (CCs) is concerned with similar objectives. On one hand, CCs are about setting lower and upper limits of consumption in order to allow everyone to live a life s/he values (with access to sufficient resources, i.e., lower limits). On the other hand, the concept strives to prevent harm (to present and future generations) caused for instance by the overconsumption of finite resources or the degradation of environmental sinks (i.e., upper limits) (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014; Fuchs 2020). Compared to ideas that have dominated the environmental governance discourse for some time, such as “environmental space” (Hille 1997) and

“planetary boundaries” (Rockström et al. 2009), the novelty of the CCs approach results from a focus on consumption and the goal of guaranteeing a “good life” for all humans living now and in the future.¹

According to this approach, people are free to make consumption choices that contribute to personal and collective wellbeing as long as these choices do not interfere with the chances of others to live a good life, highlighting the importance of intra- and intergenerational justice (Fuchs and Di Giulio 2016). Minimum and maximum limits of consumption have to be constantly related to each other to ensure that societies have enough resources at their disposal to “live well,” but do not contribute to the excessive exploitation and overconsumption which threatens the former (Gumbert and Fuchs 2019). The space between these consumption standards makes up a sustainable CC (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014), in which “individuals are free to consume as they wish” (Fuchs 2020, 299). These explanations indicate that, apart from such concepts as wellbeing and justice, reflections on the notions of

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limits, freedom, as well as the relation between both of these ideas are at the core of the CC debate.

In this context, issues emerge especially in relation to the setting of upper limits to consumption. Because CCs emphasize the “good life” as a starting point for living well within limits, the argument that upper limits might severely restrict freedom of choice is a central concern. In testing seven different objections to CCs among citizens in Switzerland, Defila and Di Giulio (2020) show that the belief that individuals would not accept limits to their freedom for the sake of the common good or to protect other humans finds the least consent among respondents (albeit by a small margin). Accordingly, the value attributed to individual freedom is likely to present a serious obstacle to openly engaging with the idea of CCs. The salience of individual freedom in liberal democracies is substantial: both (negative) freedom from state intervention and (positive) freedom to pursue personal happiness “make up the very heart of the liberal constitutional state” (de Geus 2001, 32).

At the same time, it is also in the nature of democratic legal systems to restrict freedom rights to prevent self-harm (e.g., drug use) and harming others (e.g., speed limits). And yet, evidence suggests that the way governments currently deal with freedom and limits in sustainability-related policy fields creates the impression that they are aiming for maximizing freedom of choice and consumption options while reducing potential limits to consumption as much as possible (Blühdorn 2016; Ellis 2016). We argue that this form of dealing with freedom and limits creates important barriers for introducing CCs. In order to arrive at CCs, citizens, in conjunction with other stakeholders, are supposed to deliberate about and agree upon both acceptable and justifiable minimum and maximum limits of consumption (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014). However, as long as the notion of “limits” represents a restriction of freedom to both individuals and state actors, and freedom is, in turn, closely linked to unlimited consumption options, the public is more likely to reject any limits on freedom. While a number of challenges in operationalizing, negotiating, and enforcing CCs remain (Hayden 2016), we argue that examining the way societies understand and deal with freedom and limits is crucial to building political support for the idea.

In this vein, the central aim of this article is to scrutinize the current relationship between freedom and limits in liberal democracies and to contribute to the debate on obstacles impeding the broader negotiation of CCs. We assert that liberalism may have immanent problems in making way for CCs (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, see also the discussion

on freedom and limits in Lambacher 2016 and on liberty and environmental limits in Barry and Wissenburg 2001). Advertising as well as the notions of consumer sovereignty and economic growth—generally associated with actual liberal democracies—contribute to the prevalence of unsustainable consumption and the strong rejection of limits to consumption as root causes (Blühdorn 2016; Fuchs 2020). Especially since action by the state is needed to make CCs a reality, the concept will remain a purely scholarly debate if the state is not interested in furthering establishment of supporting conditions.

Against this background, we argue that liberalism already has all the necessary tools to debate and justify limits—and by extension CCs—at its disposal. Specifically, we demonstrate that within the liberal paradigm, freedom and limits are in fact conceptualized as mutually supportive of each other, even if “liberal” freedom is currently often equated with an “absence of limits” (Lambacher 2016). However, in the context of sustainability governance, liberalism demands attention to particular conditions that have to be met to legitimately limit liberal freedoms for the sake of the common good. We suggest the notion of “green liberal freedom” to make clear to what extent freedom and limits are co-dependent, and to specify the criteria under which liberalism consents to and supports the setting of limits, especially in environmentally related contexts.² Our theoretical argument provides reasons to reject the claim that CCs would, in principle, be incompatible with the liberal institutional setting, and clarifies that it is possible to justify lower and upper limits of consumption on liberal grounds.

In the next section, we briefly outline the alleged liberal objections to CCs by drawing on the debate on freedom and limits in green political theory. In the main part of this article, we develop the notion of “green liberal freedom” (GLF) with recourse to classical liberal sources and to scholarship in the field of green liberalism. The notion of GLF (a) rests on recognition of the environment as “provider of basic needs” (a formulation borrowed from Bell 2005), (b) posits limits as a core concern of liberal understandings of freedom that need to be an object of democratic deliberation, and (c) presupposes an individual willingness to make sacrifices, i.e., to reflect upon and judge conflicting values in light of individual and collective versions of the good life and to forego less valuable options for action.³ To be able to generate broader acceptance for CCs and to translate the idea in different societal contexts, it is necessary to reformulate the currently dominant notions of freedom and limits from within the liberal tradition and to diffuse this idea of the

interdependence of freedom and limits more widely. Ideally, our conception of GLF can be utilized to help to achieve this goal.

Limits and liberal objections to consumption corridors

In political discussions on environmental regulation, setting upper limits to consumption is treated almost like a red flag, and the concept of liberal freedom is regularly invoked to justify the political focus on voluntary action and individual responsibility. Under these circumstances, CCs are less likely to be regarded as a legitimate democratic approach to organize relations of production and consumption in liberal societies. This section summarizes alleged liberal objections to CCs and subsequently introduces recent scholarship on the relation of freedom and limits in green political theory. We argue that freedom and limits to freedom can and should be conceptualized as co-dependent, while doubting that liberal societies would endorse such a view.

Discussing possible objections to CCs, Di Giulio and Fuchs (2014) already dealt with a range of arguments that question their legitimacy and enforceability. These points of resistance include claims made from pluralist and liberal perspectives, as well as charges that CCs would lack information, acceptance, and/or impact (for the discussion, see Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, 188–190). While these objections are built on valid concerns, we believe that the (alleged) “liberal” concern, together with the argument that “people would never accept such a thing” (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, 190) because they want “unrestricted” freedom of consumption, may produce the most serious barrier for advancing the societal acceptance of CCs. Within the liberal paradigm, state neutrality and individual freedom, especially freedom of choice (e.g., in the sense of consumer sovereignty), are treated as priority values. Individuals should be free to satisfy their needs and desires, and to express their identity and views through consumption without interference and restrictions set by external agents. Di Giulio and Fuchs (2014, 189) argue that the liberal state should be committed to guarantee the common good (which includes management of the commons), and has the right and obligation to prevent individuals from (directly or indirectly) harming others and their chances to live a good life now and in the future. They are, however, rather skeptical of how the liberal state governs freedoms of consumption. While they address the aforementioned lack of responsibility to ensure the common good, they stress the fact that it should be in the interest of, as

well as the obligation of, the state to restrict freedoms if they run the risk of producing harm.

On the surface, these concerns to setting upper limits of consumption may appear puzzling, considering that the negotiation of limits is currently developing into an increasingly important environmental management strategy. Especially since global endorsement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, regulatory limits on carbon-dioxide (CO₂) emissions, fine particulate pollution, excess nitrates in drinking water, and so forth are frequently discussed in different fora. However, since discussions about limits usually provoke strong opposition and a rise in anti-prohibition rhetoric, which in turn undermines important political measures, many authors doubt that effective governance mechanisms could result from “limits discourses” (Schlosberg 2016). In fact, in terms of safeguarding and enforcing environmental limits, an “ecological assessment” of the liberal democratic system as such will arrive at a rather negative conclusion. Environmental policies do not form a constitutive element of the liberal democratic order—their popular acceptance thus tends to be difficult to establish, especially since the “right to act wrongly” (Walzer 1981, 385; cited in Ellis 2016, 507), is a core feature of democracies. A source of skepticism toward any restriction of individual freedom is thus already embedded within the liberal democratic system. Furthermore, seemingly typical features of this system (e.g., the demand for reversibility of political decisions (Ellis 2016, 509) or the fear of endangering economic growth potentials) weaken the political will to discuss the implementation of ecological limits (de Geus 2001, 20ff; Blühdorn 2010, 8). Consequently, limits appear to be unnecessary and undemocratic restrictions on individual freedom. The idea that the implementation of limits (e.g., in the sense of upper limits to consumption) is *per se* restrictive of freedom and should therefore only be the “last resort” of liberal democracies complicates the negotiation of more progressive institutional approaches aiming to adhere to biophysical limits.⁴

Scholars in the field of green political theory, such as Barry and Eckersley, have subjected this conceptual relation to further critical scrutiny. They point out that liberal thinking about freedom and limits is characterized by some specific—and from their point of view problematic—basic assumptions. It starts with the assumption of an individual who is independent (from the external environment, among other things) and free *qua* this independence (Eckersley 2004; Barry 2012). This initial idea not only results in an “aversion to human vulnerability and dependence... particularly acute in liberal thinking” (Barry 2012, 46), but also in the

conclusion that setting limits—even in the course of a “greening” of liberalism that recognizes ecological preconditions of human freedom—is “simply restraining rather than constituting freedom” (Eckersley 2004, 103). Both argue that republicanism, and deliberative democracy theory, respectively, are better equipped to understand “freedom [as] something that is *constituted* by mutually negotiated and mutually recognized norms, or common rules” (Eckersley 2004, 50; emphasis in original). Republicanism also recognizes the notions of embodiment and embeddedness into the ecological and social environment as basic conditions of human existence, and on this ground dependence, vulnerability, and limits as central characteristics of human life (Barry 2012, 45, 218).

In Barry’s account, especially dependence and vulnerability are essential to a republican concept of freedom. The idea of vulnerability constitutes an impulse to consider the possibility of losing something of importance for one’s own life, and to consequently develop awareness for certain values (Barry 2012, 75ff). Dependence on other human agents, in turn, carries the danger of being dominated by them and thus constitutes a potential limit to personal freedom (Barry 2012, 226ff; see also Pettit 1997). If we share the general notion that the exercise of freedom is always embedded in social contexts where people that are vulnerable and dependent on others come together, then it follows that, in order to protect human needs and well-being, both the political institutionalization of limiting freedoms (Barry 2012, 49) as well as “the willingness to pursue and even sacrifice one’s self-interest for the public good” (Barry 2012, 232) are paramount. Since positions of dependence and vulnerability are distributed highly unevenly across society, public deliberation by as many people as possible is necessary to negotiate limits, and interventions decided in the course of this deliberation are legitimate and thus not detrimental to freedom (Barry 2012, 220ff). Eckersley also shares this view that—in the face of (ecological) dependencies—liberal democracy ought to be designed differently than is currently the case, and that active participation in public deliberation is both necessary for the protection of freedoms and constitutes an expression of freedom in itself. Against this background, it becomes clear why the idea of a “green public sphere” (e.g., Eckersley 2004, 86) plays a major role in her writings on ecological democracy.⁵

Here, it appears that republican ideas on the relation of freedom and limits harmonize well with the vision of CCs outlined earlier. In currently dominant strands of green political theory, freedom and limits are thus not only main constituents of

democratic societies, but conceptualized as mutually dependent rather than mutually exclusive. Setting limits appears to be necessary to secure minimum consumption standards, which in turn help individuals to live a subjectively valued good life, but the political system has to be organized in such a way that weighing different choices—setting limits to restrict certain freedoms in order to enable and secure others—becomes comparatively easy. Authors like Barry and Eckersley claim, however, that as long as liberalism bases its assumptions on the existence of independent, free individuals, the liberal state is prone to prioritize freedoms of choice (of production and consumption) independent of their social and ecological context. Given the dominant understandings of freedom as the expansion of personal options, and of limits as paternalistic restrictions, the question is posed to what extent the liberal state is willing and able to take on the responsibility to encourage and foster debates about the relationship between freedom and limits. To us, this is also a highly relevant question in the context of negotiating and implementing consumption corridor CCs. In the next section, we discuss the specific conditions under which (minimum and maximum) consumption limits are compatible with liberalism and highlight three related elements in this regard that make up what we call “green liberal freedom.”

Liberalism: unlimited freedom?

The concept of freedom can be situated in a long and extensive tradition in political theory and political philosophy. The most prominent concept to date is probably Isaiah Berlin’s (1969) distinction between negative and positive freedom, which had decisive influence on the way we think about the relationship between freedom and limits. Berlin describes the absence of coercion, the freedom from the influence of others and from external influences as negative freedom. Positive freedom, by contrast, aims at self-determination and realization in the sense of freedom to pursue personal goals and life plans. He himself advocates a negative conception of freedom, since the positive concept of freedom had served to “justify all sorts of paternalistic and illiberal policies” (Strecker 2011, 185) in the past. In Berlin’s view, only the guarantee of a space of action in which individuals can act freely safeguards freedoms from unjustifiable interventions. In this dominant liberal understanding of the relation between freedom and limits, private independence is cast as a *sacred* space and almost every intrusion into that space (even those in the name of positive freedom) presents a violation.

Berlin's distinction between negative and positive freedom has been problematized for various reasons. Many authors have criticized, for example, that even negative freedom in the sense of protecting certain goods actually requires a prior determination of these goods in the sense of positive freedom (Dierksmeier 2016, 41; see also Raz 1986), addressing the interdependence of both concepts. Pettit (1997, 9) refers to the possibility of a third understanding of freedom, "freedom as non-domination," which is rooted in the republican tradition.⁶ Transcending the negative-positive binary, it is based on a mutual relation of negative and positive concepts of freedom. Both Pettit's concept and more recent related works (see e.g., Dierksmeier 2016; Cannavò 2019) are of particular interest for outlining the notion of "green liberal freedom," which is why we draw on this argument here in more detail.

Pettit (2003) draws attention to how freedom is operationalized in actual politics by making a fundamental distinction between "agency-freedom" and "option-freedom." While the former attributes value to the recognition and protection of individual freedoms in order to enable every member of society to shape his/her own life by actively exercising them, the latter focuses on expanding individual options in the political, social, and economic realms. According to Pettit (2003, 393), the scope of "option-freedom" is determined by the number and diversity of available options as well as by individual access to them. Limits, in this sense, always appear as a freedom-limiting factor. "Agency-freedom," by contrast, does not depend on the number of available options, but is rather a question of the relationship to other people and thus of one's status, as Pettit (2003, 394) explains, agency-freedom "is an ideal that turns on how a person relates to their fellows, not something that is fixed just by the quantity of choice they enjoy. It is a matter, essentially, of social standing or status."

Following Dierksmeier, "option-freedom" can also be understood as a quantitative conceptualization of negative freedom, according to which freedom is evaluated by the absence of restrictions, and defined by "external points of reference as well as the quantity of options included therein" (Dierksmeier 2016, 55; authors' translation). Seen from this angle, freedom equals the maximization of choice, and the corresponding understanding of the state reduces the state to a "maximization machine of individual freedom" unaffected by normative considerations (Dierksmeier 2016, 55ff). The alternative to this conception, or its counterpart, is "qualitative freedom" (comparable to Pettit's "agency-freedom"), which is "less about maximizing options than about optimizing them, i.e., expanding and living out

particularly valued freedoms" (Dierksmeier 56; authors' translation). With regard to sustainable consumption, it is apparent why a quantitative conceptualization of freedom is problematic. The focus would lie on preventing the restriction of consumption choices and on prioritizing efforts to expand them. Sustainable consumption policies based on enhancing "option-freedom" would, for instance, create incentives to generate less harmful consumption options—and steer individual choices in that direction—instead of limiting potentially harmful choices (e.g., through demands to produce and purchase "better" products and the use of information labels). As this underlying rationale of governing sustainable production and consumption has become a dominant tendency in many Western countries (Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Brooks and Bryant 2014), the absence of limits, or the *limitlessness* of prevailing understandings of liberal freedom, is naturalized. However, when "option-freedom" is presented as being essentially *the* liberal concept of freedom—and freedom is, in turn, considered an indispensable, almost sacred point of reference within the liberal symbolic order—then every reference to "limits" within public debates will run the risk of being identified with potential illiberal restrictions.

Although the quantitative variant of "option-freedom" is currently often presented as "the" liberal understanding of freedom in contemporary policy discourses, a scrutinizing of various works of liberalism reveals that within scholarly discourse, understandings of "liberal" freedom differ markedly. Many liberal scholars formulate quite different points of view on the relationship between freedom and limits and on the conditions under which the liberal state may restrict the freedom of citizens. Liberal commentators answer the questions of how the relation between freedom and limits should be conceptualized and of under which conditions the liberal state may be able to limit the freedom of individual citizens quite differently. John Locke, as Stephens and Wissenburg acknowledge, does indeed justify the setting of limits on the appropriation of goods in his property theory (Stephens 2016; 61ff; Wissenburg 2001, 195).

Similarly, John Stuart Mill recognizes that in specific cases interventions (e.g., the provision of public goods) may even contribute to the protection or enhancement of freedom, even if he considers individual freedom as a fundamentally valuable asset that generally ought to be protected from state intervention. Nevertheless, he argues that in certain situations freedom may actually be *increased* by external interventions (e.g., by providing public goods) or protected (if, for example, the actions of

some citizens interfere with the exercise of freedoms by others). In the thought of these classical liberal authors, a positive understanding of freedom is already inherent, and although there are exceptions (e.g., in libertarian perspectives, exemplified by Nozick) (Bratu and Dittmeyer 2017, 148ff), many central representatives of liberal approaches emphasize the mutual relationship of freedom and limits. Locke, but also Rousseau and Rawls, understand freedom in the sense of a positive concept of possibility, in the sense that they “grant the state a more comprehensive role than that of a mere night-watchman state” (i.e., minimal state, authors’ translation) (Bratu and Dittmeyer 2017, 58), because “legislation may restrict the scope of action of citizens insofar as it only deprives citizens of *worthless* possibilities for action” (Bratu and Dittmeyer 2017, 57–58; authors’ translation, italics added). Here, we come across a central subject of controversial debate between liberal understandings of freedom: while liberalism in general wants to grant individual citizens the greatest possible freedoms and accordingly tries to limit state intervention, the question of “which actions are to be regarded as valuable, so that the liberal state must not make them impossible to realize for its citizens” (Bratu and Dittmeyer 2017, 57–58; authors’ translation) remains controversial.

While we will return to this point later, we would first like to summarize what has been argued so far. The assumption of a fundamental incompatibility of individual liberal freedom and (politically negotiated) limits proves to be untenable in light of large parts of liberal thought. The civil right to comprehensive individual freedom forms the intellectual starting point for liberal theories, but at the same time they agree that there must be limits to individual freedom and, consequently, a corresponding right of the state to restrict it. These restrictions are subject to the condition that citizens must collectively decide where the limits of individual freedom are drawn and which options for individual action are so valuable that their realization justifies the restriction of other options. In liberal democracies, limits are therefore in need of public justification, but they do *not* constitute a fundamental problem. In order to connect the liberal understanding of the relation between freedom and limits with current debates on sustainability policy and consumption in liberal democracies, and to counter the dominant, narrow understanding of freedom as “option-freedom,” an updated and adapted understanding of freedom should be given greater weight. The organization of sustainable consumption governance must acknowledge the biophysical limits of the Earth, by restricting overconsumption and exploitation of

natural resources and sinks. At the same time, sustainable consumption governance ought to safeguard individual freedom and a plurality of subjective versions of the good life without imposing specific lifestyles (Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Cannavò 2019; Defila and Di Giulio 2020; Fuchs 2020). The concept of CCs rests on these normative premises, and we argue that the liberal concept of freedom is not opposed to but rather supportive of these commitments.

By proposing to develop an updated notion of liberal freedom—an understanding of liberal freedom adapted to the context of sustainability—we plead for a notion of liberal freedom that reflects the special importance of an intact nature for realizing versions of the good life. It upholds freedom as a core value of liberal democracies and outlines the conditions under which restrictions on individual freedom are legitimate on liberal grounds. Additionally, it allows for weighing and deciding upon valuable and worthless options individually and collectively, but most importantly *freely*. In the next section, we introduce “building blocks” for this updated understanding of liberal freedom which we call “green liberal freedom” (GLF).

Green liberal freedom: three conceptual building blocks

Though we speak of an “updated” or “adapted” understanding of liberal freedom it is important to emphasize that our conceptualization stands in a certain intellectual tradition: the compatibility of liberal democracy and sustainability has been the subject of extensive debates under the heading “green liberalism” for quite some time (see e.g., Wissenburg 2001; Hailwood 2004; Wissenburg and Levy 2004; Bell 2005; Stephens 2016; most recently Orr, Kish, and Jennings 2020). This adaptation is necessary and justified within the scholarship on “green liberalism” for two reasons. First, in the face of rapid climate change and overconsumption of natural resources, people are increasingly deprived of chances to live a good life by the free consumption choices of others, and by the impact these choices have on the biophysical environment. Therefore, human dependence on the natural environment has to be acknowledged by a liberal concept of freedom. And second, liberal thinkers discuss controversially how deliberation may contribute to a positive understanding of limiting individual freedoms. It is therefore important to address the role and responsibility of the state, as well as of individuals, in this regard. The relevant literature shows that liberal ideas offer numerous starting points for a conceptualization of freedom which is supportive of

and dependent on social and ecological contexts and justifies the setting of (upper and lower) limits (to resource use).

The destruction of biophysical living conditions as a limit to liberal freedom

Within current liberal scholarship, Derek Bell (2005, 183) argues, a “concern for bodily survival” plays only a minor role. The relationship of an individual to her or his physical environment, he claims, is hardly addressed. He demands that the freedom to develop and realize individual understandings of the good must also cover the possibility “to live a life in which [individuals] are connected to their physical environment” (Bell 2005, 183). Here, Bell emphasizes an intact environment as a prerequisite for exercising certain individual freedoms. On this basis, he argues that in order for liberalism to fully address the ecological context, it must acknowledge the environment as a “provider of basic needs” (Bell 2005, 183),⁷ in so far as the liberal state has to draw limits if the environment is endangered in its function as a basis for human survival. Bell demands that within liberalism the protection of the environment in the aforementioned role ought to be given greater weight than individuals’ freedom to take possession of the physical environment. The latter form of freedom, that is, the freedom of appropriation of nature, is often interpreted as one of *the* central freedoms of liberalism.

Nevertheless, as Wissenburg (another proponent of “green liberalism”) argues, this restriction is not necessarily in conflict with liberal ideas. He points out that already Locke wanted to prevent a completely unlimited exploitation of natural resources (see above) by introducing a so-called restraint principle. This principle places the appropriation and possession of property (e.g., in the sense of natural resources) under the condition that “enough and as good” has to remain for others (Wissenburg 1998, 83). It prohibits the destruction of property (understood as the complete exploitation of a natural resource) unless its destruction appears as absolutely necessary. In this case, the destroyed resource ought to be compensated for by an equivalent good or some other form of compensation (Wissenburg 1998, 125). What is meant by the expression “absolutely necessary” remains open at this point. Wissenburg admits that there is an ambiguity here, as proponents of various liberal approaches would answer this question differently, and that this ambiguity constitutes a weak point of the restraint principle.

This brief excursus on the restraint principle illustrates two things. First, several proponents of

liberalism acknowledge a limitation on individual freedom, for example in relation to natural resource use, and demand limits where the freedoms of others (e.g., to use the same resource) are violated. In the words of Bell, if liberal freedoms negatively impact the environment in her role as “provider of basic needs,” limits are legitimate and necessary. And second, questions such as what counts as “enough and as good” (see above), which conditions justify “necessity” as a legitimate reason to destroy a resource, and how this destruction can be compensated for are not answered coherently among liberals. But liberals do agree that answers to these questions have to be discussed routinely and can only be translated into legitimate political measures if they are decided and agreed upon through public deliberation, which—as we will now explain—constitutes the second building block of “green liberal freedom.”

Public deliberation as a prerequisite for protecting freedoms through limits

The protection of the environment as “provider of basic needs” (Bell 2005, 183) should be a non-negotiable principle for liberalism according to Bell, as we explained in the prior subsection. Still, he argues, “reasonable disagreement” (Bell 2005, 186) may exist about nature and value of the environment in liberal democracies. In this respect, Bell draws on the idea of “reasonable pluralism” emphasized by Rawls (Rawls 2001, 3; cited in Bell 2005, 184), which forbids governing a society according to a particular, controversial moral concept. It follows that the liberal state must grant its citizens the freedom to deliberate about diverse, reasonably justifiable conceptualizations of the nature of the environment in public forums.⁸ The politics of the liberal state should only express conceptualizations of the environment that would have prevailed in the course of this deliberation and in democratic processes more generally, while the state itself has to remain neutral. On this basis, environmental laws that are considered fair could promote and establish legitimate limits to the freedom of citizens, e.g., by prohibiting environmentally harmful behavior (Bell 2005, 183ff).

Returning to Pettit’s conceptualization of freedom outlined above, it could be argued that, on one hand, Bell advocates increased “option-freedom” (less as the extension of freedoms but rather understood as the recognition of diverse conceptions of the good) by calling on the liberal state to recognize a range of possible conceptualizations of the environment as a subject of political debate. On the other hand, he appears to advocate extensive

“agency-freedom” for citizens by demanding that they must be enabled to negotiate which understanding of the environment should be implemented politically, e.g., by setting limits. Even potentially far-reaching state interventions are justified from a liberal perspective as long as they have been agreed and decided upon within the framework of public deliberation and are therefore democratically legitimized. This collective deliberation about and decision on possibly freedom-limiting political measures presupposes that citizens exchange ideas about their own version of the good life, their concept of the environment, and the role the environment plays in their individual good life. Since conflicting values are inevitable in this context, we believe that public deliberation can only be meaningful and successful if citizens are capable of collectively weighing and balancing different options for action.

Sacrifice as an expression of voluntary and freedom-promoting self-limitation

If citizens engage in discussions about various freedoms and try to justify potential limits to harmful actions, they positively contribute to governing the circumstances in which their actions take place—that is to say, they exercise “agency-freedom.” However, to engage in this kind of deliberation about freedoms and limits is extremely challenging. It requires the ability to reflect on, weigh, and finally prioritize different and possibly mutually exclusive values. It also calls citizens to decide on restricting certain freedoms in favor of a good that is judged to be more important, and thus to voluntarily forego and sacrifice other options for action—options they may have become accustomed to. Thus, there is a potential tradeoff between enhancing “option-freedom” and “agency-freedom.” Following Cheryl Hall (2010, 63), we understand sacrifice, as an act of voluntarily abandoning a valuable good that stands in the way of realizing another good that is judged to be more valuable. Thus, sacrifices can be understood as voluntary self-limitations, which liberalism may encourage if the actions of citizens negatively affect the freedom of others.

These ideas about sacrifice clarify important aspects of what we believe are necessary adjustments to a robust concept of liberal freedom. First, in order to be able to guarantee a pluralism of understandings of the environment, different ideas about its value must be treated equally by the liberal state—insofar as they do not question the environment’s role as “provider of basic needs” (Bell 2005, 183). Only then will citizens have the freedom to exchange their ideas about the role of the environment within their personal conceptions of the good

life, and to deliberate about political measures that concern freedoms and limits. Through this process, citizens may gain the competencies to understand that there are always value conflicts inherent in concrete cases where individual freedom (e.g., acts of consumption) and ecological goods (e.g., ecosystem integrity) must be balanced, and that these conflicts often require limiting individual action in the sense of voluntarily sacrificing some freedoms in order to realize other, more valuable ones. By reflecting on and making these choices together, “agency-freedom” is ultimately promoted, and limits may be experienced subjectively as an increase in personal freedom.

After having outlined the central building blocks for an adapted concept of liberal freedom, we will now briefly summarize our argument and explicate how a notion of “green liberal freedom” may contribute to building political support for the implementation of CCs in liberal democracies.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this article, we outlined that a narrow concept of liberal freedom, subsequently identified as “option-freedom” (Pettit 2003), contributes to dismissing any societal discourse on the necessity of limits to consumption as anti-liberal or anti-democratic. We also argued that this alleged incompatibility between freedom and limits may severely debilitate political and societal support for negotiating consumption corridors in liberal democracies. By way of summarizing the debate on freedom and limits in green political theory, reconstructing this conceptual relation from within liberalism itself, and carving out three central “building blocks” that specifically address the relation of freedom and limits in sustainability-related policy fields, we argued that individual freedom and potential limits are mutually supportive of each other and co-dependent. The notion of “green liberal freedom” which we propose highlights particular aspects of this co-dependence with the aim to illustrate that (a) lower and upper limits of consumption are justifiable (and even demandable) from a liberal standpoint, that (b) certain conditions have to be met in order for limits to be legitimate, and that (c) by thinking about the practicalities of applying the notion of GLF to actual politics, we get closer to building support for CCs. In the remainder of this section, we expand further on this last point.

First, in its role as “provider of basic needs” (Bell 2005, 183), the environment is essential for the survival of individuals and liberal democracies. In this function, it should be protected, if necessary also by political measures restricting freedom. Only if

survival is guaranteed, is it possible for individuals to choose and realize subjectively valued ideas of the good life. This argument refers directly to the role of the state in enabling supporting conditions for the negotiation of CCs (as demanded by Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014). The state must not only *allow for* civic participation (in the sense that any form of participation is voluntary, which is basically what we have), but *actively* create appropriate framework conditions (e.g., material infrastructures to support citizen dialogue). This will make it easier and thus likelier for citizens to participate in discussions on freedoms and limits, to invigorate the debate on what people individually and collectively understand as a good life, and on which limits are legitimate in the face of current challenges.

Second, while the liberal state must protect the environment in its role as “provider of basic needs” (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014), it must not prescribe specific visions of the good life for citizens, so that a pluralism of individual conceptions is ensured. Political measures, including restrictions on freedom, are legitimate if citizens collectively decide them within the framework of public deliberation. This second argument focuses on the creation of spaces for comprehensive deliberation among citizens and opportunities to actually exercise political influence, thereby emphasizing the important role of communities and collective action. Society needs to play a pivotal role in defining limits on individual freedoms, and “deliberative participatory processes are highly desirable as a basis for the design of consumption corridors” (Fuchs 2020, 301). This discussion can greatly benefit from the literature on “democratic innovations”, i.e., “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith 2009, 5).

Due to two specific characteristics, we believe that democratic innovations are a suitable starting point for the practical implementation of “green liberal freedom.” (1) Instead of involving representatives of organized groups, they directly involve individual citizens, and (2) they “provide citizens with a formal role in policy, legislative or constitutional decision making” (Smith 2009, 6). Especially certain deliberative innovations (e.g., citizen juries, opinion polls, deliberative mapping) (Smith 2005, 41ff), certain co-governance innovations (e.g., citizen assemblies or participatory appraisal) (Smith 2005, 58ff), or certain direct democracy innovations (Smith 2005, 79ff) constitute promising approaches in this respect.

Finally, in the context of public deliberation, negotiations will always produce conflicts of value, and liberal democratic settings depend on the

exercise of “agency-freedom” by its citizens in this regard. Such conflicts will require self-limitation in the sense of voluntarily giving up options that have been identified as *less valuable* through deliberative processes, for the sake of guaranteeing particularly valuable options. Such acts of sacrifice constitute, if collectively negotiated, exercises of liberal freedom. This argument underscores the role and responsibility of individual citizens in facilitating CCs. One important personal characteristic that Defila and Di Giulio (2020) provide empirical evidence for is that citizens must be generally open to the idea of CCs as such. But while many citizens will inevitably remain skeptical toward the idea, the belief that CCs would be “utopian” is certainly not culturally hard-wired, which creates entry points for building support on the individual level. A first essential step involves communicating to citizens that limits are not only relevant in the sense of upper (environmental) limits (e.g., restrictions on flying or meat consumption). If, for example, specific individual behaviors endanger the minimum standards of a good life of others, limits must be set in order to guarantee their freedom to live a good life. If we generally acknowledge that humans are vulnerable and dependent on others (MacIntyre 1999; Barry 2012), and that the chances to live a good life are distributed unevenly across time and space, then it is much easier to realize that limits are enhancing the exercise of freedom instead of restricting it.

While the three “building blocks” presented here can be closely associated with a republican perspective, our argumentation goes to show that they are, in fact, also compatible with (green) liberalism. Consequently, the argument that the negotiation and implementation of CCs must be rejected on liberal grounds, i.e., that lower and upper limits of consumption would constitute an illegitimate interference in liberal freedoms, is invalid. However, the demands and challenges that CCs present to the liberal institutional setting are significant. A short-term goal to build political support includes informing public discussions on limits in a way that that does not immediately evoke dismissal and contempt, and that includes perspectives on particular freedoms that may be *gained* by weighing options and foregoing certain choices. Academics, public officials, and citizens should ask: Where do we have to limit particular freedoms for the sake of guaranteeing others? Which freedoms are particularly valuable to us? Where do conflicts between freedoms exist? What limits can we collectively agree upon? We believe that an open dialogue on these questions can act as a counterweight against identifying freedom with the (unlimited) expansion of options. In this regard, we hope to have shown that a renewed

understanding of the relationship between individual freedoms and limits can provide valuable normative support and guidance.

Notes

1. We understand a “good life” in this context as not being “about a life being good in a moral or ethical sense but about a life being good in terms of the quality it holds for individuals” (Di Giulio and Defila 2020, 100). This does, however, not mean that subjectively experienced wellbeing would constitute, in our view, an exclusive yardstick by which to judge and evaluate notions of a “good life.” While the subjective view is important, we rather subscribe to objective theories which “claim to define universally valid elements of a good life that are independent of subjective wishes and individual preferences” (Di Giulio and Defila 2020, 102).
2. In green (or environmental) political theory, the supplement “green” is frequently used to denote that a concept is adapted to a particular environmental, ecological, or sustainability-related context. For example, Lambacher (2016) speaks of “green freedom” to stress, among other things, the importance of functioning ecological systems for the exercise of freedom.
3. In this article, we understand sacrifice in the sense of a “contribution, an offering, ‘doing one’s bit’ towards a common endeavor” (Barry 2012, 232; see also Cannavò 2010; Hall 2010; Maniates and Meyer 2010). For the concept of sacrifice, two assumptions are crucial, namely that (a) sacrifice is based on a voluntaristic act, and (b) that conflicting values exist (e.g. intact nature versus cheap, material comfort) (Hall 2010, 69). Sacrifice therefore relies fundamentally on freedom and the weighing of interests.
4. Our concept of limits is based on a social constructivist understanding. Ecological problems do not reside *in nature* but are a consequence of communications *about this nature* (Luhmann 1989). This goes to say that biophysical limits or planetary boundaries are never objectively “out there” but rather represented through (mostly) particular scientific models and subsequently transformed into prescriptions or guidelines within political systems. Peter Cannavò (2020, 84) reminds us that “if one frames natural limits as part of a larger normative order by which human beings must abide, it can indeed involve a derivative relationship between nature and politics,” by which he means that the natural world is seen as a guiding authority, providing blueprints for the organization of human life. This could have anti-democratic implications, since “it potentially empowers an expert elite supposedly equipped to understand and apply the requirements of nature” (Cannavò 2020, 84). When we use the term “biophysical limits” or “environmental limits” in the following, we refer to the understanding outlined here.
5. At the same time, Eckersley points out that the translation of pluralistic and possibly contradictory interests and notions of the good life into a framework of the “common good” in and through public deliberation carries the danger of facilitating “homogenizing and potentially oppressive tendencies” (Eckersley 2004, 141).
6. Pettit (1997, 2003) distinguishes freedom as “non-limitation,” as “non-interference,” and as “non-domination.” Domination occurs when one actor is able to intervene arbitrarily in the life and decisions of another actor—regardless of whether he actually *does* intervene. Freedom as “non-domination” cannot be characterized as either positive or negative, since it demands both an absence of domination (which threatens the possibility to take control of one’s life and to realize one’s personal goals) and protection against arbitrary interference (Pettit 1997, 51). In the debate on CCs, others have also noted that notions of negative freedom, or freedom as “non-limitation” in the terminology of Pettit, are prioritized in Western society (Fuchs 2020, 300).
7. With the claim to recognize the importance of “basic needs,” Bell refers to the “concern for bodily survival,” which, in his reading, is not emphasized within contemporary liberal theories (Bell 2005, 183). He does, however, not explicitly claim the existence of more basic and less basic needs: “basic” means “bodily survival.” It must be emphasized at this point that the needs that must be met for a “good life” (in the above sense of life satisfaction and wellbeing) go far beyond Bell’s “basic needs.” Although the question of where exactly human survival ends and a “good life” begins cannot be answered unequivocally and must surely be subjected to debate, it is clear that Bell uses the absolute, bare minimum idea of “need satisfaction” in order to tie the liberal perspective to some minimalist notion of ecological concern. We believe however that this is a strategic move to convince even strong advocates of preference neutrality of the compatibility of liberalism and positive valuations of nature, and to make sure that despite reasonable disagreement (see below) any reasonable doctrine may conceive of survival as a good, as a “precondition for the pursuit of any other good” (Bell 2005, 185). While we cannot flesh out this argument in full detail here, we believe that an extension of Bell’s basic needs beyond bodily survival is possible and even necessary in order to include a range of other non-environmental goods that many (while certainly not all) liberals can subscribe to.
8. We explicitly refer to “deliberation” to make clear that discussions should be a negotiation process based on the exchange of arguments and critical inquiry, as opposed to a mere aggregation of individual interests. Within deliberative processes, the environment must be treated as “a subject about which there is reasonable disagreement” (Bell 2005, 185). The guarantee of a pluralism of diverse conceptualizations of “nature” (or “environment,” which is used interchangeably here) addresses the fact that citizens (or collective actors) may evaluate the significance of “nature” for their individual idea of a good life very differently. For example, a mountain range can be viewed individually as a spiritual source of inspiration, as a place for sports and leisure activities, or as a resource for the mining sector. From these diverse understandings, political claims for protection, exploitation, and so forth can be derived, which must be negotiated in society. However, as stated above, it is crucial that the

“nature as provider of basic needs” principle must not be violated.

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