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Freedom is an Act of Faith

For decades within western societies, philosophers have set forth theses trying to establish the ontological differences between freedom as an individual value and freedom as a value of society. That is, between freedom as it is ordinarily understood and another version of it stemming from its relationship with social equality and justice. Norman Mailer, the great American writer, tried to settle the hairsplitting debate according to his way of living life: “One discovers how far one can go only by traveling in a straight line until one is stopped.” Given his fame as an amateur boxer and man of action, it would not have been an easy task telling Mailer when to stop, but of course the contradiction between these two forms of freedom cannot be solved with such a practical, and perhaps physical, approach. It is rather more complicated.

It is rather more complicated because even in the most developed western democracies it has been theoretically impossible to agree on the point at which one should be stopped. Up to what point can an individual be free to act according to his will without being interfered with by others or by the state? That is, where is the line that sets the boundaries of his freedom? Even more importantly, who or what is going to draw this line – and with what powers of coercion?

According to the other version of this debate, beyond the *limes imperii*, the borders, of individual freedom lies the realm of social freedom, whose relationship with the individual is of a dialectic nature; the existence of one type of liberty permits the existence of the other. In order to guarantee a minimum range of freedom to all members of a society, particularly to the less gifted by nature, some power has to exert coercion in order to stop free individuals who, like Norman Mailer, will keep moving forward until being stopped. When setting the limits to guarantee a basic equality among all humans, obviously tension arises between the two concepts of freedom. It is tension that remains under control in a precarious equilibrium that, when broken, leads to social eruptions, usually violent.

As an armistice in the debate, the most developed western democracies have reached the conclusion that there should always be a safe place in which individuals can exercise their humanity. That area has been rendered sacred by an agreed bundle of rules, ethical principles and even social conventions whose violations by other men or by state institutions are persecuted and their damages amended when possible. As part of that armistice, it is accepted that there is a permanent tension between groups trying to push the boundaries in one direction or the other. Accordingly, democratic and republican institutions would be the arbiters of those disputes.

Of course, this does not mean that there have not been violations of individual freedom within western democracies; there have been and there are. But certainly there also exists the deep and irreversible belief that there is and there should be an undeniable space for freedom. That conviction has mobilized western societies and made them recognize violations and somehow do the necessary things to repair damages, compensate victims and condemn violators, though it might take longer than expected and be done in the political or social spheres and not in the criminal, though the offenses many times demand the latter. That has been the case, I believe, of the USA after September 11. That is the theoretical contradiction materialized in real life.

In this very debate, in countries like mine - and probably also in other underdeveloped countries, but I am going to refer to my own because it is the case that I know best - so-called social freedom, associated with other values like justice and equality, has been favored by philosophers and intellectuals. That bias for philosophical principles has had tragic consequences in real life. Why has it been tragic? Because it has promised to favor the just freedom of many versus the abusive freedom of the few, which is where populism - that political form that has devastated our countries more than the most crude of wars - has found its source. The core of populist discourse has been exactly that: society should be egalitarian and its resources used in such a way that a minority does not benefit at the expense of the majority, without any economic concern about where the resources to honor that promise are going to be found. This skewed idea of freedom was the philosophical base of the only democratic experience that Venezuela has had historically, this between 1958 and 1998.

That is, in line with the theoretical discussion on freedom, the democratic state initiated in 1958 took as its responsibility the creation of boundaries for the realm of individual freedom and, as a result, the Venezuelan Norman Mailers were stopped closer to the point where they began to travel their straight lines, closer than they desired, and paradoxically, so close that society could not benefit from their genius. Just as an example, economic freedom was suspended by law between 1958 and 1989. But somehow, the great danger in assigning a state unlimited power to draw the line that sets the boundaries of freedom was compensated, in the case of Venezuela, by the fact that it was really an open democracy, with checks and balances among powers.

But what happens in that state if power is in the hands of a twenty-first century dictator? Exactly what has happened in Venezuela: one colonel, usurping the representation of a majority supposedly oppressed by a privileged minority, has reduced that sacred space of freedom for individuals that used to be respected. Worse, the hand - his - that now draws the line is more and more audacious and the space for freedom, particularly economic freedom, freedom of speech and political freedom, has shrunk dramatically since 1998. It has shrunk so much that

there are Venezuelans in jail, Venezuelans exiled and many Venezuelans that simply have fled the country to escape oppression.

The vast majority, thank God, has stayed and led a democratic fight to restore lost freedom because, as everyone knows, in order for the world to be the world and mankind to be mankind, a sacred space for freedom must exist. It is a space whose limits are blurred for philosophers who theorize on it but which is crystal-clear and precise for the ordinary man. Because it is also true, paraphrasing the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, that perhaps freedom is the last and only act of universal faith.