

RECONCEPTUALIZING EMANCIPATION(S) – BEYOND THE WHITE AND WESTERN GAZE

A BRIEF OUTLINE

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Normative 21st century political theorists usually acknowledge contemporary theorizing “must [...] face the common challenge to develop a ‘post-metaphysical’ normative foundation for criticism and constructive theorizing” (Fleuß 2021, pp. 23-24; see Allen 2016; Harcourt 2020; Vincent 2004; Wingenbach 2011). Yet this acknowledgement also confronts theorists with a serious methodological challenge: *What can serve as a foundation for normative theorizing? How can we get democratic theorizing “off the ground”?* At the the end of the day, “armchair philosophical strategies” (e.g. Rawls 2005; Habermas 1984; Honneth 2014; Korsgaard 2003) tend to propose either highly abstract visions of democratic legitimacy and legal/political norms – or they risk “paternalistically” imposing particular worldviews and understandings of “good politics” or “good democracy” on diverse people and societies (Fleuß, 2021). What is more: these understandings tend to come with a *status quo bias* and (often inadvertently) promote a Western-centric notion of “good democracy” or “good politics”.

Briefly put: they cannot get rid of the white, Western, (usually) male gaze in theorizing about democracy. This also applies to critical (democratic) theory. Democracy is usually understood as a community of self-governing, “autonomous” individuals or groups. Yet particularly for critical theorists, this ideal of self-governance is intrinsically intertwined with assumptions about emancipation/emancipatory processes. While some theorists hold that only “emancipated” individuals or communities can truly govern themselves, others conceive of emancipation as the *goal* that should be achieved *through* democratic, inclusive politics. In this presentation, I suggest to take a step back from these debates to scrutinize existing understandings and to *reconceptualize* “emancipation”. My point of departure is an analytical differentiation between *personal* and *political emancipation*. I then argue that established democratic theories usually provide us only with a vague – and potentially biased – understanding of emancipatory goals and processes. Taking stock of existing theoretical notions, I particularly argue that decolonial, feminist and intersectional perspectives challenge us to develop a more in-depth understanding of the interrelationship between personal and political emancipation.

The project proposes to take a “methodological turn” (also see Fleuß 2021): “genuinely democratic” normative theorizing should ground understandings of personal and political emancipation in peoples’ lived experiences, their perspectives, and beliefs. Grounded normative theorists share the notion that normative theorizing should proceed “bottom-up”, use empirical data to inform, diversify, and deepen their normative arguments. They pay particular attention to the requirements of (epistemic) inclusion and highlight that researchers must reflectively engage with their inquiries’ premises and results (Ackerly et al. 2021). Against this background, the project employs grounded normative theorizing as a methodological strategy for developing a “*genuinely democratic*”, *more inclusive*, decolonizing notion of “emancipation”.

So far, I conducted a first pilot study that pursues this approach by grounding uses semi-structured interviews with political activists, NGO representatives and “lay citizens” in East Africa. Moving ahead, the project shall extend its reach to include diverse perspectives on personal and political emancipation in Tanzania, Kenya and Bangladesh.

To extend the scope and get as much diverse input as possible, I am keen to learn about your perspectives on emancipation – I would be very grateful if you could provide some answers to the questionnaire (open-ended questions) which you may find [here!](#) 😊

All answers will be treated confidentially, and you may answer the questions as short or comprehensive as you like. You’re also welcome to skip questions in case you’re not feeling comfortable with answering them!

If there are any further questions, don’t hesitate to get in touch with me!

THANK YOU!! :-)