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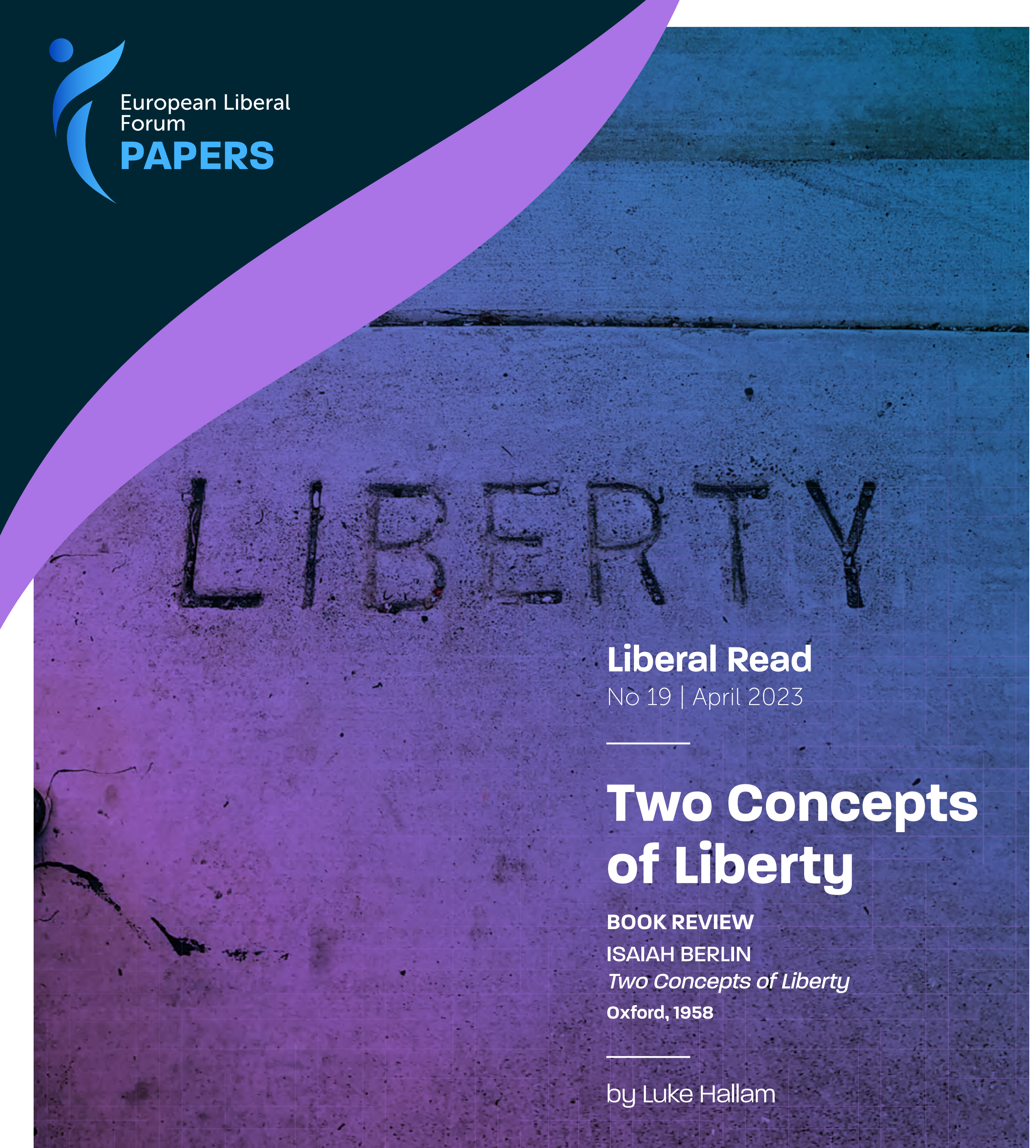

Liberal Read

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Two Concepts of Liberty

BOOK REVIEW

ISAIAH BERLIN

Two Concepts of Liberty

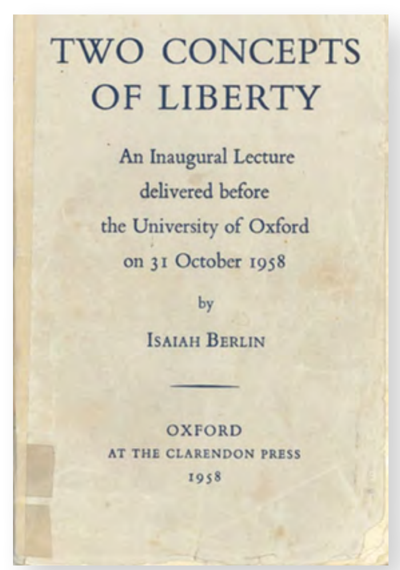
Oxford, 1958

by Luke Hallam

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Two Concepts of Liberty


TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY

An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958

by

ISAIAH BERLIN

OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS
1958

Introduction

The twentieth-century thinker Isaiah Berlin was more interested in the history of philosophy than in philosophy *per se*. This is unsurprising, given that his life spanned the major events of the twentieth century. Born in Latvia in 1909, he moved to Russia at a young age and witnessed the revolutions of 1917. He would live to see the fall of communism from the safety of the UK, and the end of the oppression and totalitarianism that had hung like a shadow over Europe his entire life.

These brushes with history gave him a profound concern for the way that ideas can impact ordinary people. He agonized over the dangers of allowing abstract principles to tyrannize human lives. It was this profound concern for human life that led him to the study of philosophy—as both a teacher in thrall to the great texts of the past, and a moralist concerned with the application of somewhat abstract concepts to real life.

Berlin's most famous contribution in this vein is his 1958 essay "Two Concepts of Liberty." On the surface, it is an attempt to distinguish between two types of freedom: one "negative," and the other "positive." More specifically, however, Berlin is concerned with the vague boundaries that pertain between the two. He focuses his attention on the inherent ambiguities of the concept of freedom itself, suggesting that unless we are clear about what exactly the concept of "liberty" can and cannot do for us, we will end up misusing it, sometimes with devastating consequences.

Negative freedom

The first of Berlin's two concepts is "negative freedom." At its core, negative freedom means the freedom to take a course of action without external impediment. He calls this "freedom *from*"—meaning freedom from interference. It denotes a sphere in which we can do as we wish.

Berlin often refers to negative freedom in the context of state coercion. Obvious examples today include the right to protest: democratic countries allow you to stand in a public square and protest on behalf of a cause since the law has carved out a sphere of negative freedom in which you can act.

Of course, this right is not absolute, but Berlin would not claim that it ought to be. He argues that negative freedom is often (rightly) curtailed in the name of other values. The most important of these is to prevent harm to other people. A protester can hold up a sign on the street but they cannot beat up other protesters who disagree with them.

Individuals must be prevented from infringing upon other individuals' negative freedom. Nor can the protester, for example, force themself into government buildings to confront politicians. In these cases, the law determines when negative freedom can be violated to protect others, to facilitate the smooth running of the country, or for other good reasons that are generally accepted in democratic societies.

When Berlin says that negative freedom can justly be curtailed, he argues that we must recognize that it *is* freedom that is being curtailed in these situations. He is wary of demagogues who claim that an infringement of liberty is actually an *increase* in liberty. The infringement might be justified in the name of other values; but, Berlin says, "Liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or quiet conscience." (197)

Neither is negative freedom as clear-cut as these simple examples suggest. The concept is packed with ambiguity. Strangely, Berlin relegates the discussion of these difficulties to a lengthy footnote, though they are vitally important to any understanding of negative freedom. For example, negative liberty might seem to be simply the ability to choose between different options. However, Berlin notes, "not all choices are equally free, or free at all. If in a totalitarian state I betray my friend under threat of torture, I can reasonably say that I did not act freely." (202) He notes numerous gradations of freedom at play here. What matters is not, in any particular scenario, being able to judge in a black-and-white manner that a certain action is fully free or unfree. What matters more is our ability to make general—though specific—statements about the freedom available to agents in various situations. Berlin gives an example: "We can give valid reasons for saying that the average subject of the King of Sweden is, on the whole, a good deal freer today [1958] than the average citizen of Spain or Albania." (202)

In short, Berlin gives a nuanced picture of the concept of negative freedom. This contrasts with absolutists such as the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who believed that any situation in which a choice is made, even if the agent is coerced into making that choice, is a type of freedom. Berlin did not think that such an extreme account of liberty was tenable. Nevertheless, he did think that negative freedom is vitally important and worth protecting.

Positive freedom

The second type of freedom is positive freedom. In popular understanding, this is generally summarized with the brief phrase "freedom to," in contrast to negative freedom, which is "freedom from." Berlin himself uses the phrase "freedom to" in describing positive liberty. (203)

However, a clearer formulation is, arguably, rendered by freedom *through*, i.e., the ability of a person to use their own will to guide themself on an authentic path through life. This is the thread that seems to connect the various characterizations of positive freedom that Berlin offers. One is, "conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them." (203) Second is, "I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself." (203) The third is, "by whom am I ruled?" (202)

These various definitions, although sprinkled liberally throughout Berlin's essay, do not get us very far. The question of what government I live under is certainly linked to my ability to make my own life choices; but to try and tie them together begs so many questions that it is unclear why Berlin thinks he is talking about just *one* thing (positive freedom), as opposed to *many* things.

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A more fruitful approach is to examine how the idea of positive liberty has changed throughout history, and Berlin provides many examples.

The eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that we must conceive of individuals as each possessing an autonomous will, free from outside influence. This is an early liberal conception of positive liberty, though Berlin notes that it has appeared throughout history in many guises. Many religions describe the existence of an eternal "soul" existing beyond contingency, being a radical kernel of free will that implies that human beings are morally responsible agents.

It is not entirely clear from Berlin's essay what positive freedom means in these contexts. It seems to mean that a person's will must be free to pursue its own path, unhampered by the corrupting influence of emotions or irrationality. However, he does not aim to defend this idea; rather, he shows us the dangers inherent in it.

For example, the idea that true freedom is "inside us" has been adopted by certain ascetic religions, which claim that we can achieve freedom by lowering our expectations of the material world. By giving up earthly pleasures and material possessions—forcing ourselves to change our "desires," or to desire *less*—we will become less dissatisfied, because we have fewer needs. This will lead to a feeling of freedom.

This line of reasoning is riddled with dangers. Drawing upon Berlin's earlier argument, we can say that a life of meditation and voluntary poverty might be many things (peaceful, meaningful, simple, etc.), but contrary to many religious teachings, it is *not* freedom. You cannot be "positively" free if you adopt an ethic of pure renunciation.

Furthermore, Berlin was concerned about how political regimes might force people to lower their expectations and accept a lower standard of freedom. Citizens under a totalitarian regime may think they are free, but this is merely the outcome of the absolute power that the state has over their lives. Berlin says that if a tyrant "conditions" subjects to want less, then they may "*feel* free"—but this is clearly "the very antithesis of political freedom." (211)

It should be clear that Berlin is making a distinction between personal forms of positive liberty and political forms, even if he is not very explicit on this point. (As an aside: Berlin's essays are sometimes characterized by a lack of focus. Ideas meld together without their distinct implications being drawn out. This is perhaps a function of the fact that Berlin did not enjoy the act of writing—many of his essays, including "Two Concepts of Liberty," emerged from speeches he gave or thoughts he had others transcribe.)

However, the distinction between positive liberty in its personal and *political* forms is useful, and it is the latter that Berlin is most concerned about. It is a recurring feature of tyrannical governments that they claim to allow citizens to manifest their "true" interests and desires. Berlin notes that while this idea is a distortion of the rationalist idea of inner freedom found in Kant and others, it nevertheless owes something to them.

For example: writing in the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that "the people" in a society have a "true" will, and that this will can be implemented by a wise government. A few decades later, at the height of the French Revolution, the Jacobins under Maximilien Robespierre used Rousseau's logic to persecute anyone accused by them of betraying the authentic will of the people.

Similarly, in the nineteenth century, Karl Marx argued that the workers of the world have (or will eventually come to have) an indivisible shared interest in overthrowing capitalism. Soon enough, Vladimir Lenin and others seized upon this idea to argue that only the Bolsheviks represented the authentic expression of the will of the people and that state repression was necessary to curb dissent and maintain hegemony in the name of the workers.

The connecting thread here is a warped idea of positive freedom that makes some untenable assumptions about what human beings "ought" to want. Berlin says: "In this way, the rationalist argument...has led by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible from an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-perfection to an authoritarian state obedient to the directives of an elite of Platonic guardians." (223)

How is this possible? How did ideas of positive freedom become so degraded that they served as justification for the suppression of liberty?

Part of the answer relates to the inherent ambiguity of the idea of "freedom" itself, particularly positive freedom. As soon as you scrutinize it, it is clear that positive freedom is constantly changing. Berlin gives the example of learning mathematics. As a schoolchild, your ignorance of algebra and the difficulty of learning it impose themselves upon you as impediments. Once you have learned algebra, however, you have acquired another skill, and this feels to you like an increase in freedom.

Here, we can return to the idea that positive freedom means "freedom *through*." While Berlin might say that mastering mathematics opens up the freedom *to* perform complicated sums, we might more accurately say that we experience freedom *through* our ability to perform them. Of course, we must remember that mastering mathematics (or anything else) is not *inherently* an increase in freedom. What matters is that we experience mastering mathematics as an aspect of freedom only *if* mastering mathematics is something we desire to do. It should be clear from the above that positive freedom is very difficult to define. The boundary between freedom and mere abilities or states of mind is not clear-cut.

Recognition is certainly related to positive freedom: it is hard to imagine being free to chart our own path on our own terms while being denied the recognition that comes with basic dignity and rights. Berlin stresses that, although recognition is important, we cannot use it as a substitute for freedom without deceiving ourselves and opening the door to all kinds of oppression. After all, a group of which I am a member—one which recognizes my identity—may nevertheless violate my negative freedom. Berlin says: "I may, in my bitter longing for status, prefer to be bullied and misgoverned by some member of my own race or social class, by whom I am, nevertheless, recognised as a man and a rival—that is as an equal—to being well and tolerantly treated by someone from some higher and remoter group, someone who does not recognize me for what I wish to feel myself to be." (228–9)

In addition to this innate slipperiness, there are other reasons why the concept of positive freedom has been so misused and misunderstood. One is that people tend to confuse it with other, related concepts.

For example, Berlin notes that when political zealots claim to be fighting for positive freedom, what they often mean is that they are fighting for *recognition*. After all, the desire for recognition is a deep-seated instinct. Human beings want recognition for themselves and for the groups to which they belong. This can take the form of a demand for political rights, or for recognition and dignity based on identity characteristics such as gender or race.

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Ultimately, Berlin suggests that the desire for recognition and solidarity is, at most, a "hybrid form of freedom." (231) It is, however, an important part of our politics; indeed, it is an important part of what it means to be human. Berlin notes that most people throughout human history have conceived of freedom in something like this "hybrid" sense, while the negative liberty championed by John Stuart Mill and others is a somewhat eccentric historical novelty. (232)

Freedom, power and politics

Today, we are witness to plenty of demands for both positive and negative liberty. Take the 2022 protests against the mandatory wearing of the hijab in Iran: on the one hand, the negative liberty of the women of Iran is being violated by laws which criminalize the removal of religious headwear. At the same time, the protesters are also fighting for the freedom to make sovereign decisions over their own bodies, and this appears to resemble positive freedom. In addition, the demand for freedom in Iran is connected with the demand to be ruled by a less repressive government. Berlin cites the question of "who is to govern us?" as a question of positive liberty (231), and this, too, clearly pertains to the situation in Iran.

Nevertheless, we can perhaps add clarity to the idea of positive liberty, beyond that which Berlin offers, and returning to Thomas Hobbes is useful here. In his book *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes, as we have seen, believed that only negative liberty—being free from external interference—deserves to be called "freedom." He says that a hypothetical man who throws his possessions off a ship to prevent it from sinking is still acting freely because although circumstances compelled him to take that action, there is nothing directly inhibiting him from taking the action. (146)

Hobbes, in his archaic English prose, also makes this curious remark: "When [an] impediment of motion is in the constitution of the thing it selfe, we use not to say, it wants the Liberty; but the Power to move; as when a stone lyeth still, or a man is fastned to his bed by sickness." (146) In other words: many of the things that people call positive freedom are, in fact, expressions of *ability*, rather than freedom. In this view, a sickly, bed-bound man lacks the power to move, but not the freedom.

We have already seen that Berlin argues that recognition, while related to freedom, is not, in itself, identical to freedom. Hobbes would add that the same is true with power. Nationalists demanding freedom for their particular ethnic group may, in fact, simply be seeking power and recognition. This no doubt confers a strong feeling of freedom—but Berlin would say that it is a dangerous misrepresentation of the situation to claim that "freedom" is the only thing at stake.

There is one final implication of positive freedom left to draw out: the political implication. For liberals, at least, it is clear that positive freedom implies some form of a democratic system. This can take a republican or a parliamentary form, as long as each adult in society is, in theory, given a voice and a stake in the decision-making process. Even if people choose not to exercise their democratic rights, they still benefit from certain positive freedoms because they have recourse to the ballot box.

Berlin adds: "Perhaps the chief value for liberals of political—'positive'—rights, of participating in the government is as a means of protecting what they hold to be an ultimate value, namely, individual—'negative'—liberty." (236) This ties the two concepts together: given the dangers inherent in the concept of positive liberty, it is useful to view one (negative) as acting as a safeguard on the other (positive). That is, positive freedom cannot be allowed to result in the violation of basic negative liberties.

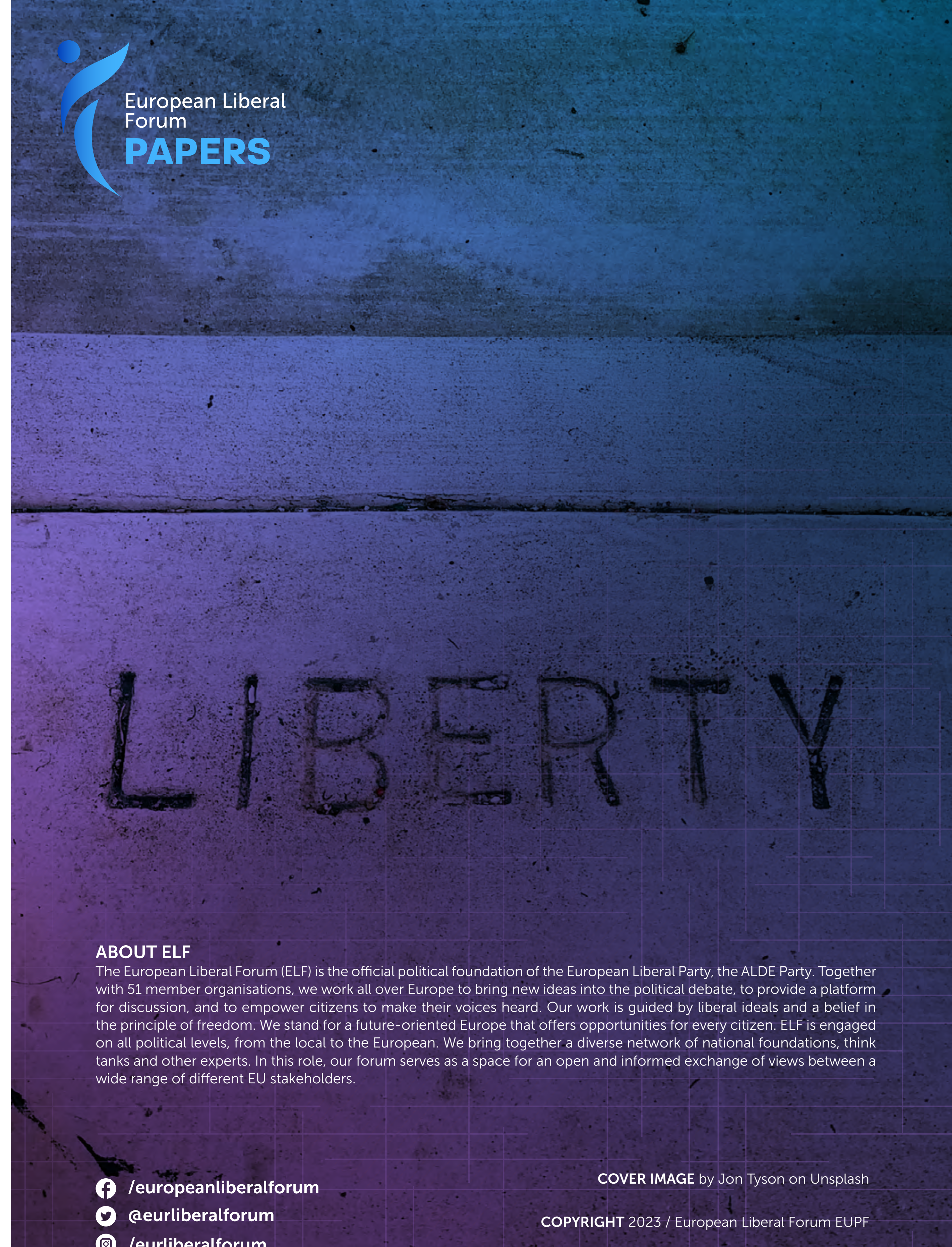
Conclusion

Berlin's words continue to shape our debates today. His remarks about the importance of negative liberty have implications for spheres such as economics. According to one view, if freedom from interference is, as Berlin suggests, the more fundamental (or at least the more coherent) type of freedom, then liberals ought to take a *laissez-faire* or free-market fundamentalist approach to economic problems to preserve the optimum amount of negative freedom.

However, this does not quite follow, as market capitalism takes many forms, from the comparatively highly regulated Scandinavian and French systems to the comparatively libertarian American and British systems. Liberals indeed ought to err on the side of freedom in economic matters, ensuring that citizens have "freedom from" government interference. Nevertheless, this is still compatible with various types of (measured) interventions in the economy, including a high marginal income tax rate, wealth taxes, subsidies for certain industries, and regulation of financial markets. After all, we do not argue that freedom in the political sphere involves the *maximum* amount of decentralization in the hands of individuals. Instead, we are content with choosing between various frameworks that fall under the rubric "democratic," such as the republican model of the United States, or the parliamentary system in the UK.

Similarly, in the economic realm, "freedom" ought to be understood in terms of competing frameworks, and within each framework, the balance of liberties will be different. Universal healthcare in one country facilitates a certain degree of positive freedom (the freedom to enjoy one's health). At the same time, lower tax rates in another country permits a certain degree of negative freedom: the freedom to keep the money you earn. Certain countries institute tax breaks and other incentives for major corporations to move there. One system may be more worthwhile than another, but we cannot say *ipso facto* that less regulation results in more freedom.

This is just one example. The key point is that liberals, whether they realize it or not, are engaged in a constant balancing act when it comes to freedom. Perhaps the greatest benefit of Berlin's essay is that it reveals just how complicated the notion of liberty truly is. Rather than presenting a clear-cut, reductionist account of positive versus negative freedom, Berlin encourages us to think beyond the binary, while at the same time striving for maximum clarity in the concepts we use. In today's turbulent world, where calls for "freedom" and "liberation" continue to echo loudly, his advice is timelier than ever.



ABOUT ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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