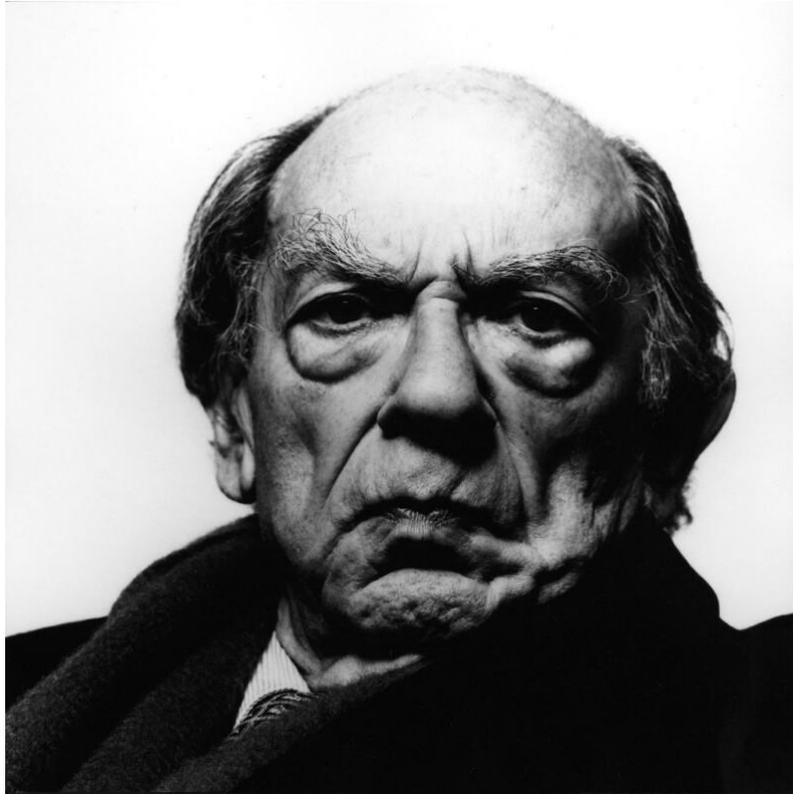# Political Freedom and Democracy in the 21st Century

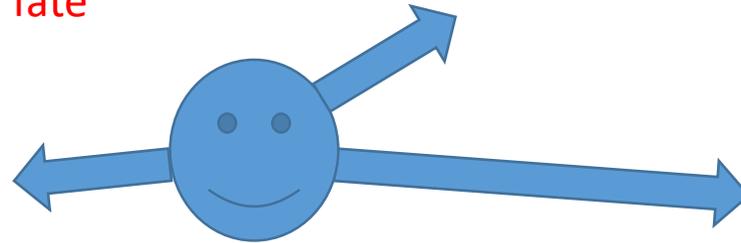By Eric Livny
International School of Economics at TSU (ISET)

Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty

Positive liberty is about the freedom of individuals and societies to determine their own fate

Liberty in the negative sense involves an answer to the question: what is the area within which individuals or groups of individuals should be left alone = do whatever they please, without interference by other persons, the majority, or the state

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), a Russian-British social and political theorist and philosopher
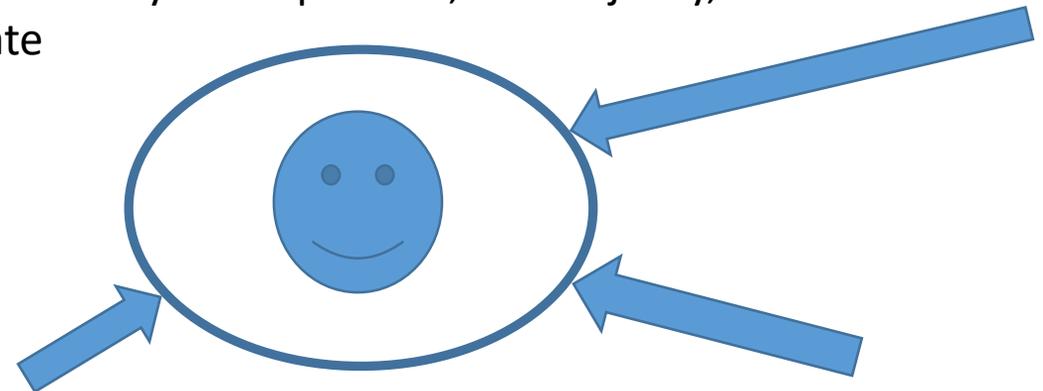
But, people are interdependent!

- **Isaiah Berlin (**"Two Concepts of Liberty" essay**):** "Men are largely interdependent, and no man's activity is so completely private as never to obstruct the lives of others in any way. 'Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows'; the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others. "
- In other words, there is a tradeoff – more positive freedom for some comes at the expense of negative freedom for others.

Democracy and the two concepts of liberty

- What aspects of democratic governance are concerned with people's "negative liberty"?

- What aspects of democratic governance are about people's "positive liberty?"

Negative liberty	Positive liberty

Negative liberty	Positive liberty
Presumption of innocence principle	Children are assured an equal opportunity at the start
Separation of powers principle	Jews are allowed to receive higher education
Independent courts	The Georgian economy is fully deregulated
Georgian "patroli" not harassing people	People freely choose where they want to live
(note: when Georgian "patroli" do NOT do anything to prevent or punish crazy driving behavior, other people's rights (life, health, safety) are not secured	People can at any time depose their rulers
Dangerous criminals are not pardoned by the Georgian president	People can elect their representatives in parliament
Parents have to knock before entering the rooms of their teenager kids	Every major change in taxes has to be approved through a referendum
Constitutional constraints on the legislative and executive branches of power	People can directly decide the appropriate level of taxation and how their taxes are used
Anti-trust regulations not allowing monopolists to abuse their market power	Every major political decision requires discussion in the city council
The state does not criminalize light drugs or homosexual behavior	Government decision-making has to be transparent

19th century democratization and liberty

- Current republican/democratic arrangements (republicanism, representation by political parties, voting every 4-5 years) go back to the 19th century.

- They represent a major step forward in advancing both the positive and negative aspects of liberty :

  - 19th century democracies expanded the sphere of individual autonomy (negative liberty) by imposing constitutional constraints on monarchical rule, instituting independent courts, etc.

  - They have also enfranchised an ever larger number of people (the middle class, the poor, and women), provided basic schooling and social safety nets for the poor, and recognized women's rights to education and economic freedom.

The "tyranny of the majority" danger…

- The greatest fear of the British ruling elite in the 19th century was that democratic decision-making will lead to tyranny of the majority (the plebs).

- **John Stuart Mill** in his famous 1859 book "**On Liberty**":
  If the majority of an electorate (the poor, major religious or ethnic group) places its own interests above, and at the expense of, those in the minority (e.g. Jews, landed aristocracy, or owners of oil and capital), the result will be terrible oppression of minority groups comparable to that of a tyrant or despot.

Representative democracy as a solution

- Expansion of voting rights (enfranchisement) proceeded very slowly. It was not until 1918 that *all* British men over 21, and wealthy women won the right to vote, and it was not until 1928 that *all* women over 21 won the right to vote (only 90 years ago!)

- "Representative democracy" – voting by educated and (mostly) wealthy "intermediaries" rather than direct voting by all citizens – was considered to have a moderating effect, serving as a filter and constraint on the whims of the uneducated and poor majority.

- And, of course, this method was the only feasible one given the sheer size of 19th century states (much larger than the ancient Greek police) and cost of getting people to vote.

And a problem…

What is common to Brexit, Trumpism and Armenia's velvet revolution?

- Brexit can be understood as an expression of voter anger against the EU bureaucracy, but it was also an exercise in direct democracy, a revolt against patronizing 'experts', traditional political parties, and, generally, Britain's social and economic elites.

- The 'anti-establishment' sentiment is not confined to British politics. "Revulsion at government and traditional politicians" is a central theme of contemporary US politics, the main driver of Trumpism, of the young movement behind Bernie Sanders, and of the Armenian revolution…

- The institutional machinery of representative democracy, once perceived to represent, is now increasingly seen as standing in the way of, and distorting, the popular view (or views). In *new* democracies, such as those in Eastern Europe, political parties have become a joke, and parliaments are the least trusted institutions..

iVOTE AND iDECIDE DEMOCRACY?

- Recent advances in communication technology make it much easier for the 'simple folks' to shop for information and actively engage in policy debates way beyond occasional voting. In other words, technology enables more direct forms of democracy and of democratic participation in state affairs.

- People get used to comment, like, rate and vote on a daily basis, creating demand for more direct forms of democracy rather than rule by out-of-touch professional politicians sitting in Washington and Brussels (and London, and Tbilisi). Demand for greater **POSITIVE FREEDOM!!!**

- Modern technology allows people to communicate with each other, find support for their ideas or interests, and get organized. In this way, it *greatly reduces the role of intermediaries* (professional politicians) in the political process, enabling people to "take their countries back", not only from Brussels and Washington, but from the political establishment as such.

Armenia's revolution as a quest for of positive freedom

A former student, a young Armenian guy sent me this link. He wrote "look at this young protestors who have been cleaning the city from the last night!"

https://www.facebook.com/tamrazianh/videos/1670944242952953/

Change is in the air!
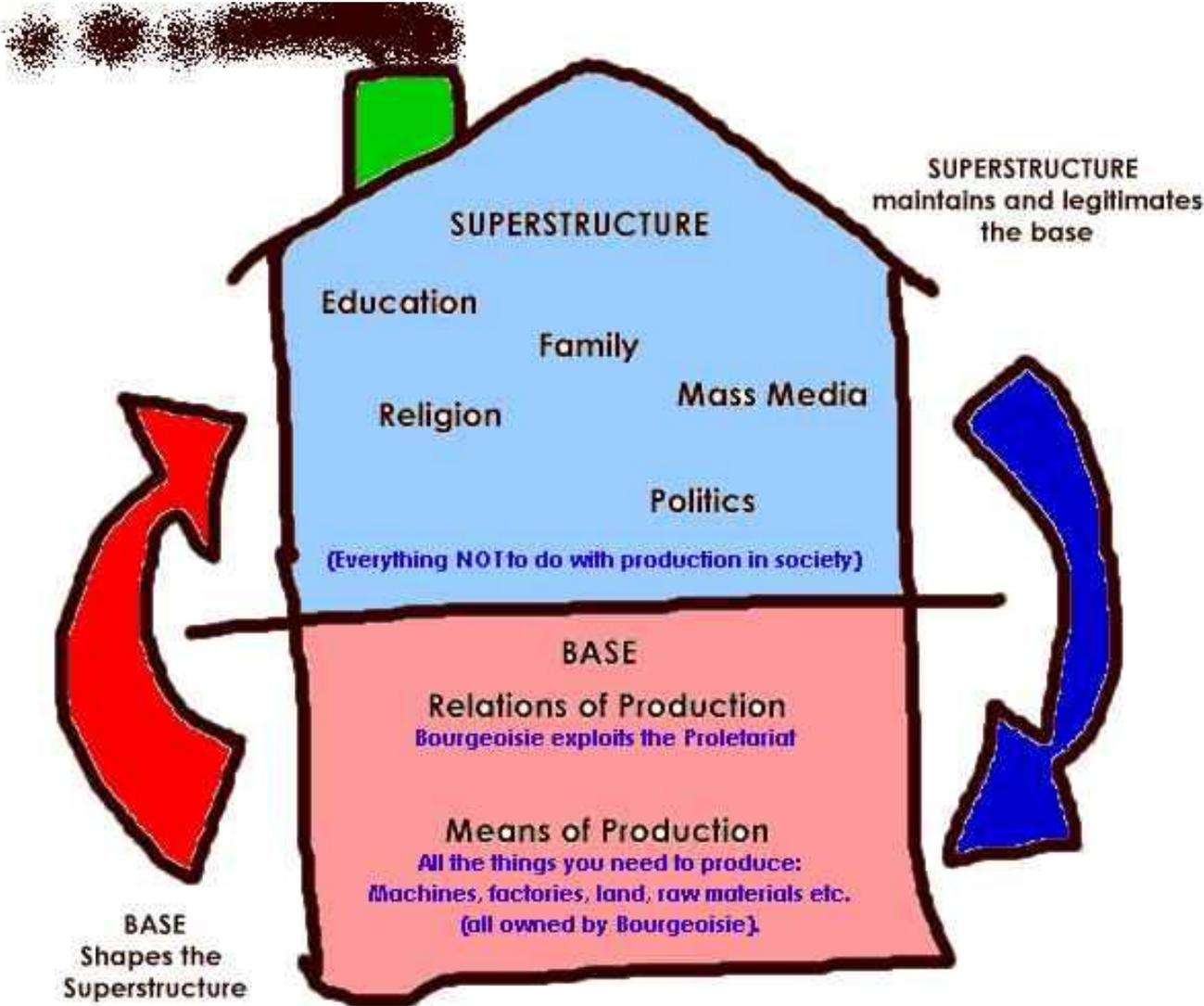
But, the demand for more direct forms of democracy comes with many questions…

- What is the right size of democratically governed communities?
- Existing nation states are <u>too small</u> to be able to deal with any of the global threats such as climate and environment, or take advantage of opportunities – space, ocean, fundamental science and technology.
  - Even large nation states have an incentive to freeride (pollute, etc.)
  - Out-migration, capital flight, and tax evasion (by the wealthy) through offshore jurisdictions are a great challenge for nation states that fall behind.
- But, paradoxically, nation states may be <u>too large</u> for a meaningful (informed) citizen participation in democratic governance.
  - Would the majority of Georgian people be able to judge whether in would be in their common interest to raise interest rates or taxes?

What should be decided at the sub-national, national, and global level? And how?

- The UN charter does not provide any legal mechanism to modify the existing political architecture, preventing sub-national (regional) communities from achieving greater political and cultural autonomy, on the one hand, and blocking cooperation on tackling the truly global challenges of our time, on the other:
    - It is not clear what takes precedence - territorial integrity or national self-determination. As a result, more than a dozen of states and self-governed territories have no path to full recognition (e.g. Taiwan)
    - There is no legal mechanism to remove "political trash" - failed states that serve no purpose and inflict infinite misery on their "citizens" (people who happen to be trapped in their borders).
- National borders stand in the way of economic development given rapid advances in communication and transportation technology. But, terrorism and migration waves – fueled by great global disparities – give rise to xenophobia and populistic demands for national "walls".

THERE IS NO PLANET B

Hence, solutions will have to be found… by trial and error, through evolution and revolutions…

THANK YOU!