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ON FREEDOM: A MANIFESTO FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

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Snyder, T. (2024). *On Freedom*. Penguin/Vintage.

Timothy Snyder's *On Freedom* offers a compelling exploration of the multifaceted nature of freedom, emphasizing the importance of individual agency and collective action in preserving democratic values. The latest book from the renowned American historian offers a hopeful perspective, inviting readers to engage with pressing global issues.

Snyder is a prolific author whose works, including *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017) and *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2018), have significantly contributed to historical and political discourse. His scholarship consistently explores the interplay between history, politics, and societal structures, with a particular focus on the themes of freedom, democracy and civil society.

"History does not repeat, but it does instruct," (Snyder 2017, p. 9). While *Bloodlands* delves deep into the tragic history of Europe during the 20th century, *On Tyranny* describes the rise of authoritarianism and offers practical guide on preserving democratic values (each chapter provides a valuable lesson, such as "Defend institutions." or "Believe in Truth."). The author's subsequent

publication, *The Road to Unfreedom*, shifts its focus to the current influence of Russian state ideology on global affairs.

On Freedom commences with a poignant reflection on Snyder's travels to Ukraine during the ongoing war. He asserts that freedom is not merely the absence of oppression, but rather the active presence of positive values. Central to Snyder's thesis is the notion of human agency in shaping freedom. He emphasizes that freedom is contingent upon our ability to identify and enact our values. By cultivating knowledge and embracing our values, we can actively construct the foundations of freedom. "Only people can be free, if we believe something else make us free we never learn what we must do. The moment you believe that freedom is given, it is gone," (p. 16).

According to Snyder, there are five distinct forms of freedom: sovereignty, unpredictability, mobility, factuality, and solidarity. While the first three forms of freedom are associated with specific life stages – sovereignty with childhood, unpredictability with youth, and mobility with young adulthood – the mature forms of factuality and solidarity are essential for the realization of the earlier ones. These latter forms, particularly factuality and solidarity, require active engagement from both individuals and society. As Snyder (p. 221) argues: "Freedom never just means government leaving us alone; nor does it mean our leaving government alone." Instead, freedom is a dynamic process that necessitates ongoing participation and negotiation.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is referred throughout the book. Snyder even employs the widely-circulated

video documenting Volodymyr Zelensky's first public appearance following the Russian invasion in February 2022. The subsequent day, Zelensky posted a video of himself and government officials in Kyiv, conveying the powerful message: *"The president is here."* Snyder interprets this moment as a transformative example of the power of free speech. *"Like freedom in general, freedom of speech is not negative but positive, not about the barriers but the person, not about an absence but a presence,"* (p. 37).

As Okulicz-Kozaryn (2014) notes, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* was first published in the United States over 80 years ago. In this seminal work, Fromm delineated two distinct conceptions of freedom: positive freedom (*"freedom to"*) and negative freedom (*"freedom from"*). According to Snyder, negative freedom is a repressive concept that hinders our ability to perceive the true conditions of freedom. Snyder argues that those who seek to limit our freedom construct barriers between individuals or discourage the development of structures that would facilitate mutual understanding. While Mounk (2018) primarily focuses on the erosion of trust in institutions and explores the challenges facing liberal democracies, Snyder emphasizes the power of individual behavior.

"Freedom from is a conceptual trap. It is also a political trap, in that it involves self-deception, contains no program for its realization, and offers opportunities to tyrants. Both a philosophy and a politics of freedom have to begin with freedom to. Freedom is positive. It is about holding virtues in mind and having some power to realize them," (p. 47).

The works of Václav Havel, Leszek Kołakowski, and Edith Stein permeate the entire book. Their reflections on democracy, civil society, and especially Havel's concept of *"living the truth"* serve as foundational elements for Snyder's understanding of positive freedom. *"Freedom is positive; it needs the vivifying world of values. If we have no purpose, we serve someone else's, or we serve a purposeless machine. We have been assigned a senseless task: to adjust, to adapt, to normalize, to internalize the death principle before we die,"* (p. 107).

The convergence of various factors, the pressing issues of climate change and ecological degradation, the current political climate in the United States, the pervasive influence of social media and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has significantly amplified the importance of freedom of speech and positive freedom in our contemporary society. While Sandel (2020) highlights the contemporary era as one characterized by stark divisions between winners and losers, focusing on societal attitudes toward success and failure, Snyder offers a more optimistic perspective, emphasizing human agency and the capacity to effect positive change. *"We link the words democracy and freedom, and rightly so. Freedom is the value of values, and the case for democracy must begin with it. Democracy is the system toward which the forms of freedom lead, the best resolution of freedom as a principle,"* (p. 225).

Snyder underscores the significance of local news and local journalists who reside in close proximity to their communities and can effectively draw our attention to local issues and events. *"We need*

home truths, both for their own sake and as preparation for the larger ones. A vacuum of local factuality draws in the big lies and the conspiracy theories," (p. 249).

The indispensable role of human reporters in investigating complex issues is emphasized, including those involving technology and artificial intelligence. "The internet cannot report. It can only repeat. And as AI (or rather "AI") enters the picture, it will not even repeat what people once reported – it will invent what people want to hear." (p. 183)

Snyder briefly delves into the historical context of efficiency. „History demonstrates that prioritizing efficiency can have detrimental consequences for freedom. The decision to shift American manufacturing to China in the 1980s and 1990s was justified on the grounds of efficiency," (p. 207). However, this led to a decline in American freedoms and the rise of China as a global authoritarian power. Contemporary China, a blend of communist ideology and capitalist practices, continues to prioritize efficiency.

The book functions as a manifesto for a brighter future. While Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) delineate the global decline of democracies, emphasizing the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, Snyder adopts a more optimistic perspective. "Our problem is not the world; our problem is us. And so we can solve it. We can be free, if we see what freedom is. We can see creativity in the past, possibility in the present, liberty in the future. We can recognize one another, create a good government, and make our own luck," (p. 258). This provocative and hopeful work is undeniably worth reading in the current complex geopolitical climate.

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