Freedom of or freedom from? Pluralism of values and determinism in design of technological artifacts

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Background and motivations

Why

- Open data and government as subject of enthusiasm and (sometimes) idealized view as enabler of public value(s).

A relevant dimension is missing:

technology as representation

Technology (representation)

- Representation is technology in terms of
  - "an overall world orientation concerned with the objectification of the natural and social worlds in ways which render them amenable to calculation and mastery."
    (Kallinikos ,1995)
  - "an ensemble of diverse and minute techniques which embody and realize such an orientation"(Kallinikos, 1995).

OPEN ISSUES

The malleability of these representations in situated design

vs

The regulative regime of technology

Value(s)

- What value(s) are enabled, bounded, enacted or allowed by information technology and as a consequence by design?

- Freedom as (a) value promoted or bounded by information technology adoption and diffusion seems to be an a priori premise.

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Concepts of freedom

Freedom of

- *"What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?"*

- Positive freedom has often been thought of as necessarily achieved through a collectivity.
- Many authors have suggested that the positive concept of liberty carries with it a danger of authoritarianism.

Sef-realisation

The divided self

- The higher self >
  - The rational, reflecting self, the self capable of moral action and of taking responsibility for what she does.

- The lower self >
  - The self of the passions, of unreflecting desires and irrational impulses.

One is free when one's higher, rational self is in control and one is not a slave to one's passions.

Freedom from

- *"What is the area within which the subject — a person or group of persons — is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?"*

- Having freedom means being unprevented from doing whatever one might desire to do.

- To promote negative freedom is to promote the existence of a sphere of action within which the individual is sovereign, and within which she can pursue her own projects subject only to the constraint that she respect the spheres of others.

A sphere of non-interference

MacCallum (1967)

- A subject, or agent, is free from certain constraints, or preventing conditions, to do or become certain things.

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Constraints (source and types)

- Obstacles that count as constraints on freedom are those

  - brought intentionnally by other agents (external to the agent)
  - unintended obstacles for which someone may be held *morally* responsible, or *causally* responsible.

Freedom as a non-social relation is said to be more the concern of engineers and medics than of political and social philosophers.

Democracy and individualism*

- **Individual's sovereignty** and **dissent** are inseparable within a democratic society whose legitimacy is based on
  - consensus
  - autonomy of judgment
  - reciprocal respect of ideas

*- Urbinati, N. Liberi e uguali. Contro l'ideologia individualista, collana: Anticorpi, Laterza, 2011. ISBN 8842095400
- Urbinati, N. Democracy and dissent, ResetDoc, Wednesday, 11 March 2009

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Republican freedom

- Republican freedom can be thought of as a kind of *status*

- Only arbitrary power is inimical to freedom, not power as such.

- Participation is seen as instrumentally related to freedom as non-domination.

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Individualism and freedom

- **Solitude** (autonomy)
- **Isolation** (atomism imposed by an external force, where public relation are severed)
- **Loneliness** (when private as well as public relations are severed)

See: Arendt, H. "The Human Condition." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958

Arendt, H. "Between Past and Future." New York: Viking Press, 1961. Revised edition, 1968

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Freedom and the regulative regime of information

Isaiah Berlin (1969)

- *"If Newton was able in principle to explain every movement of every particular constituent of physical nature in terms of a small number of laws of great generality, is it not reasonable to suppose that psychological events, which constitute the conscious and unconscious lives of individuals, as well as social facts—the internal relationships and activities and "experiences" of societies—could be explained by the use of similar methods? . . .*

- *[I]s there any objection in principle to the view that a sufficiently scrupulous and imaginative investigation of human beings might, one day, reveal laws capable of yielding predictions as powerful and as precise as those which are now possible in the natural sciences. (p. 56)"*

*Berlin, I. Historical Inevitability, in Four Essays On Liberty London: Oxford University Press, 1969

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Freedom and determinism (Berlin, 1969)
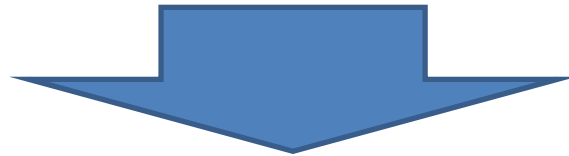
- To accept determinism required a radical transformation of the language and concepts we use to think about human life—especially a rejection of the idea of individual moral responsibility.
- To praise or blame individuals, to hold them responsible, is to assume that they have some control over their actions, and could have chosen differently.

If individuals are wholly determined by unalterable forces, it makes no more sense to praise or blame them for their actions than it would to blame someone for being ill.
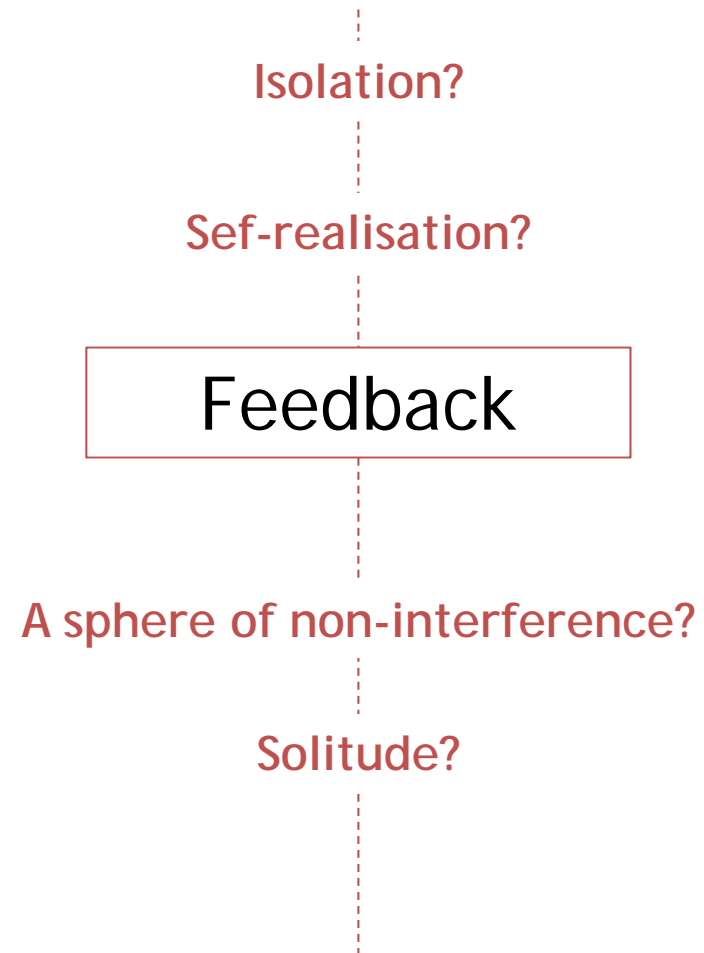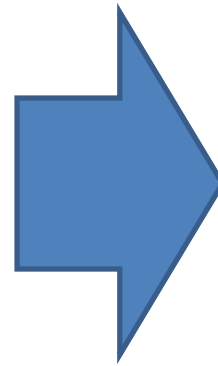
(Information) Technology regulation (Kallinikos, 2011)

- Functional simplification/closure
- Automation/objectification
  >Predictability
- Information tokens/rules (software)
  >Calculability | Describability | Manipulability

Framing and sampling < > Re-contextualization

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Freedom and information value

- Openess
- Accessibility
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Efficiency
- Trust
- …

Isolation?

Sef-realisation?

Feedback

A sphere of non-interference?

Solitude?

Conclusion

- The dimensions of freedom in information systems and infrastructure need still to be investigated
  - freedom as non-social relation or/and
  - freedom as social relation
- Design as re-contextualization of the constraints and dimensions of freedom

Thank you for your attention

...any questions?