



Eva von Redecker

The Freedom to Stay

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Rarely has freedom been discussed as intensively as during the pandemic: freedom to travel, to move around without restriction, to meet up with people wherever one would like. But just how future-proof is such a spatially defined concept of freedom when we are facing times in which habitable places are disappearing and the climate crisis or wars are rendering entire regions uninhabitable? For this reason, philosopher Eva von Redecker has reconceptualised freedom: as the freedom to live in a place where we can remain. The freedom to remain evolves over time. In considering liveable freedom in the future, she not only focuses on the preservation of our present living conditions, she also reduces the gap between the freedom of individuals and that of the community. The freedom to remain can only be achieved communally. And it expands when we share it.

"Erudite, rigorous, playful, and readable, at once of the world and soaring above it, von Redecker is a brilliant and wondrous intellectual, driven by the philosophical question of how we can make a better future through what we do now." – Prof. Wendy Brown, Princeton University NJ/USA

Eva von Redecker, born in 1982, is a philosopher and freelance writer. From 2009 to 2019, she was a research associate at the Humboldt University in Berlin and a visiting scholar at Cambridge as well as the New School for Social Research in New York. In 2020/2021, she held a Marie Skłodowska Curie scholarship at the

University of Verona, where she investigated the history of ownership. Eva von Redecker's work focuses on critical theory, feminism, and a critique of capitalism. She contributes to several newspapers, including *Die ZEIT*, and regularly gives interviews on radio and TV. S. Fischer most recently published her book *Revolution für das Leben. Philosophie der neuen Protestformen* (2020) as well as her foreword to the anniversary edition of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. She grew up on an eco-farm, and now lives in rural Brandenburg.

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The Arrival of the Swallows

The freedom to stay

Do you know how it feels when the swallows come back? I don't know anyone who has lived near barns or farm buildings and doesn't attach special meaning to that moment. It is a festive day, almost like Christmas or May Day. Even the most conventional farmer who has umpteen thousand chickens vegetating in his poultry sheds as they wait to be slaughtered props open the barn windows so that the swallows can easily fly in and out. The gardeners in the next village have made clay bowls so that a nest under the tin roof doesn't get too hot. Even lesbians curse their cats. In the midst of the daily grind of the dawning Anthropocene, swallows have remained holy.

But the date isn't marked in advance in the calendar, and we don't organise the festival ourselves. We don't do anything at all, other than tell each other about it. "The swallows have come back here – have you seen any at your place?" Part of the magic is the fact that the swallows don't even fully come back to us. Unlike other songbirds, they hardly ever land on the earth. It is only for building their nests that they collect small balls of mud from the ground; they bring a bit of earth up high, so that they can live on it there. Drinking, hunting and mating all take place in the air. Swallows remain in their element. And our world opens out a little when we see these seemingly weightless bodies looping the loop over our roofs. Not our swallows – but still they come to us.

During the first wave of the pandemic, I was supposed to travel to the US to give some talks. Invitations that I was originally very happy about. But when it became clear

that I wouldn't be able to travel, I was strangely indifferent. In fact, I was downright relieved. It suddenly seemed like a stroke of luck, as if some kind of crime had narrowly been prevented. What had I been thinking – to imagine getting on a plane these days and pumping CO₂ into the atmosphere? With a manuscript on my lap for a talk about authoritarianism, but trapped in my old habits? But the sense of freedom on that day did not come from an unburdened conscience. It's not as if I had done something right. It was just an astonishing pleasure to feel that everything was open – no plans, no deadlines today – and then a particularly auspicious gift. On that very day, the swallows came back. And I was there.

Freedom of movement

“The freedom to stay” is what I tried calling it. Being free not to go anywhere. That is obviously paradoxical. Why call it freedom when a flight is cancelled? Especially since I didn't even have to accept those invitations in the first place. And now that the trip was planned, I was being prevented from taking it – I hadn't chosen that. Being forced to stay put cannot be called freedom. Even aside from my concrete situation, the idea of remaining in one place goes against the notion of freedom.

After all, in the western tradition, “freedom” is inseparable from freedom of movement. Thomas Hobbes, who founded modern political philosophy with *Leviathan* in the mid 17th century, declared for instance: “LIBERTY, or FREEDOME, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition, I mean externall Impediments of motion;)” One hundred years later, the British jurist William Blackstone wrote that individual freedom consisted of “locomotion” – the ability to move. The mechanical notion of freedom as unhindered movement may seem rather simplistic, but it also underpins more complex versions of the concept. If freedom is derived from the autonomous will, it is located in the scope for decision-making within which that will can operate. Liberal freedom always relies on a spatial imaginary, to the point that it is practically a geometric shape. Legally delineated spheres within which we should not be limited by anything apart from the fact that others have the same rights as we do – this is what gives it the framework it needs. And already before freedom was defined in revolutionary terms as a human right, it could

be experienced as a change of place: the free people are those who leave Egypt for the Promised Land. A free city is one where corvée has been abolished, and free states are the northern states where slavery is banned. After the supposedly equal right to freedom was introduced, its value stood and fell with the claim to freedom of movement, meaning the right to leave one's hometown without paying a fee.

After all, freedom of movement was also one of the key points of leverage heralding the end of undemocratic state socialism. And if you were to ask me about the worst injustices of the present day, I would probably say that they consist in the way in which the national borders that have established themselves over the last two hundred years make global inequality ever more entrenched, at the price of tens of thousands of human lives. The sense of open horizons which comes over us when we see birds migrating is still something that humans have not succeeded in realising for ourselves. My German passport allows me to travel to 191 countries without a visa. A citizen of Zimbabwe, where many swallows spend the other half of the year, is barely allowed to travel to a third of those – the northern ones least of all.

Given that freedom is so closely associated with freedom of movement, it is no surprise that many experienced the pandemic travel restrictions as a drastic loss of freedom – and not just because when they did confine people to cramped or violent households. Freedom is freedom of movement. Looked at like this, staying in one place is virtually at the lowest point on the scale of freedom.

Shattered freedom

I would probably have dismissed the notion of “the freedom to stay” as one of the idiosyncrasies of a homebody who would rather stick to her desk and her vegetable garden, if it hadn't been echoed by some of the fundamental political demands of the present day. Protesters against coal mining insist that “all villages stay”, defenders of the forests say, “Danni stays”, “Moni stays” or “Fechi stays,” using nicknames to refer to the places they are trying to preserve. “We're all staying” is the rallying cry against gentrification and displacement from the city. Against every deportation of asylum seekers, there is the demand for a safe place to stay. The LGBT emancipation movements

place a similar emphasis on the refusal to move: “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.” And when the conservation board fixes signs on farm buildings that are particularly swallow-friendly, it is once again about making sure that the nests can stay, so that the non-monogamous pairs of birds can faithfully return to them.

But the fact that people demand to be able to stay does not mean that staying is a freedom. Isn’t it more about security? Or – at most – about “life”? Or perhaps simply protection of the environment, protection of minorities. And such protection is currently under suspicion of trying to destroy freedoms.

Over the last few years, there has in fact been no more effective manoeuvre, when it comes to undermining progressive demands, than the appeal to freedom. What was once the central value of the 1968 generation is now fuel for the campaigns of Meloni, Bolsonaro and Trump. I don’t see that as a simple takeover. It is more like the uncovering of a fracture which has always run through the liberal notion of freedom: on the one hand, modern freedom promises that we can on principle all be property owners and rule unimpeded over particular sectors of the world. On the other hand, this freedom obliges us not to encroach on the claims of other people. A moderate lack of moderation. And there is now an obvious gulf between these two sides. In almost every heated public debate – whether it’s about protecting people from infection, or about discrimination, migration, sustainability – the drama is repeated: both sides wave around one piece of the shattered notion of freedom. The claim to ownership versus the boundaries of consideration for others. It is as if we were beating each other over the head with these broken pieces.

The campaigns to be able to stay – against deportation and demolition – could be described as spearheading the process of taking back the self. The demand that something or someone should stay calls for new boundaries here and now, as lines of defence – boundaries which stand in the way of the possessive liberals. This could hardly be symbolised more clearly right now than by the activists who glue their bare hands to the tarmac. In a way, they turn themselves into a barrier. Facing them, shaking their heads, are people whose everyday lives are already so full of obstacles that they don’t know how to endure a further complication. And some of them are obsessed with claiming ownership over mobility, so they jump out of their cars with raised fists and use an arsenal of language which expresses the desire to exterminate human beings like insects. The

outdated, hollow claim to power over others, which I describe as phantom possession, is all the more likely to flip into violence in an instant.

But is that really it? Are the additional obstacles the aim of the protests? Or are they not in fact an already distorted translation of a more far-reaching demand into the pictures we're used to? What if it's not primarily about re-measuring the boundaries, but about a different notion of how we relate to each other? The position of those who stubbornly remain in Lützerath or on the runways could also be interpreted quite differently. Not as an extreme point in a familiar space, but as the emergence of something quite new. However, this would not be a space at all, but a different time. Because the idea of staying departs from the spatial imaginary of liberal freedom and refers instead to the possibilities of the future. On the spatial axis, staying might not represent any kind of freedom. But all kinds of freedom might exist on the temporal axis.

Being able to stay here and stay free. The pandemic restrictions can already be justified better if they are detached from immediate freedom of movement. They were about the freedom to be more carefree again with other people at some point. Staying at home now, so as to be able to travel more easily in the future: to think like this, we have to be able to see freedom in temporal terms. No longer flying now, so that we'll be able to breathe later. Even more for that one. But is that actually possible? Can we imagine freedom in temporal terms?

Future freedom

In its famous ruling of the 24th of March 2021, the German constitutional court decided that it was unlawful to distribute climate protection measures very unequally across time. If we don't do anything now, today's young people will be forced into all the more drastic restrictions. That would mean that we are using our freedom right now at their expense. The court itself describes this temporal perspective as "the intertemporal guarantee of freedom," thus enabling itself to put forward an argument which is unusual, or even downright revolutionary. The justification for the ruling dispenses with the dependence on the present which means that freedom can only be claimed by those who are actually here. This is only possible because the federal government itself has signed

the Paris Agreement and thus pledged to make its contribution to limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees. This prevents the claims which will be raised in the future from becoming endless and overwhelming. At this point, it is clearly possible to see which emissions can still be given off. If the budget is used up, logically nothing will be left. And the delayed development of alternatives affects the future. More traditional mobility now means less mobility later.

Without meaning to underplay the importance of this legal decision, it is still important not to read too much into it. The notion of freedom with which the decision operates is still that of scope for movement versus barriers. In fact, the freedom which is supposed to be fairly distributed actually consists of the ownership of fuel. Protecting the environment is seen as absolutely necessary, but is approached as a block to freedom. The idea that freedom could be found in the riches of a living, biodiverse world or in the collective power derived from reinventing our form of life: that doesn't come into it.

For good reasons, the constitutional ruling is not responsible for fully revising the constitutional notion of freedom, and the concept of intertemporality is already very daring. But truly seeing freedom in temporal terms would encompass much more than just taking the same freedom to travel and saving it for the future. It could mean measuring freedom itself according to the amount of available, liveable time. Not: how much space can I take up? But: how much time is allotted to me? Now, afterwards, and in the long run? From freedom across time, we would arrive at freedom in time – being granted an abundance of time. The freedom to stay can bring these aspects together. Do we want to give this freedom to those who live in the future?

It is not easy to shift our thinking so that we imagine freedom itself as time. It is not simply a process of thought; it relates to all our impulses and interests. "Full speed ahead!" – we all know that feeling. But what do we feel when we have the freedom to stay? It is like being able to exhale. The freedom to stay grants us the unhopèd-for, intense sensation of being able to live without being under threat. This sensation is thanks to the certainty that the place where we are is truly not a prison. This means that where the freedom to stay starts, unfreedom really ends. In contrast with this, mere freedom of movement has a catch: it leaves unfreedom unaffected. It just means that we are elsewhere. In an extreme case, we even need continuing social injustices as a contrast, to keep on reminding

ourselves that we ourselves are free. That downgrades the freedom we have achieved – the place where we can breathe a different air – turning it into a merely comparative quantity. At least it's better than before. Or even: at least it's not exactly the same as before. This lets us comfortably conceal the question of whether that's all. Whether we have even reached the right place. The freedom to stay does not depend on any such comparison. The realisation that we are not in prison would continue to stand, even if there were no real prisons anywhere. It is not a comparison – “in prison it would be worse than it is at home” – but an experience. I can remain here and free. And this experience is under much greater threat and is disappearing much more quickly than the freedom to travel, much as the latter may be regulated by political decisions.

If we have a place to stay and be free, we are very lucky. It is a gift – not in the sense of a talent, but in the sense of good fortune. The struggles I have mentioned for the right to stay are devoted to the task of making this basic foundation available to everyone. The aim is to secure a future with lasting freedom for everyone. In workers' struggles and protests against oppression, it is about free access to time; conservationists and the health service want to secure future time for life. Nevertheless, as a concept, the freedom to stay does not make a categorical decision a priori. So you could also argue that children should stay at school, that a tradition should remain alive or that a coal mine should remain active, if you could prove that these things represented freedom across time.

The vanishing world

Our usual concept of freedom is unfit for the Anthropocene. It reacts sensitively if anyone comes close to denting our ability to move around in petrol-burning metal boxes. But the question of whether there will still be birds in the future leaves it completely unmoved. Where landscapes have been made uninhabitable by war and natural disasters, permission to travel is an emergency measure, more like forced migration than a freedom. The flight of the swallows should also not be stylised excessively as a freedom: the birds leave because in the cold, wet season in the north there is not much to eat. Just as the freedom to stay assumes that we would be allowed to leave, freedom of movement is only

freedom if staying would also be possible. And that – the possibility of staying – is dependent on a lot more conditions. It requires that we preserve a habitable world.

For a few years, I shared the fears of Californian colleagues, as wildfires in their regions grew out of control and spewed so much ash into the atmosphere that our sunsets here in Germany became more dramatic. Then, in summer 2022, Brandenburg was on fire too. Within my lifetime, if I get to live it in full, large parts of the surface of the earth that are currently settled will become uninhabitable. The climate question is on most people's minds by now. As we have seen, it has reached the highest court in Germany. But just like the Paris Agreement, which has remained unimplemented and which in any case only takes account of emissions, this consciousness of the climate crisis has no effect. The amount of CO₂ emitted rises to new heights every year. We are still on course for a world where temperatures will be at least four degrees higher than in pre-industrial times. Rainforests, glaciers and coral reefs will disappear, and the proportion of fertile land will be dramatically reduced. Even the latitudes that are spared – comparatively speaking – will frequently be afflicted by extreme weather events and floods, which will disturb deposits of toxic or radioactive waste, destroy infrastructure and make basic necessities such as clean water scarce. In a world like that, is anyone going to be able to exhale?

But something about these evocations of the future seems dishonest. As if we were searching desperately for a tool that would manage to push past the pain barrier. I am more interested in tools that dispel numbness. The apocalypse is already here. I look up at the sky with anxiety, and the hot summer air is so empty that I'm sometimes glad to be bitten by a mosquito. The swallows must have something to eat. Even at the height of our fears for the coming catastrophe, the present is in some way exonerated. As if this right now were intact life. Everything we're afraid of is already happening to somebody right now. Most of the time we even profit from it. And even the truly new effects of global warming won't come from the future, but from previous actions.

I don't believe, in any case, that we have to convince anyone that a collapse is coming. On the contrary: the sense of a collapsing world is omnipresent. In this phenomenally rich society, in the middle of all this technology and competence, there are no longer any reserves anywhere. A few decades of privatisation, increased efficiency and financialisation, and suddenly everything is falling apart. The system no longer has any

slack built in for emergencies, so that we would have time to ward off the worst. The energy that people manage to find in exceptional situations is already planned into the normal running of a neoliberal world, as a fixed quantity. And it is because everyone can sense the impending emergency that the reactions drift so far apart from each other. Because from the standpoint of futurelessness, phantom possession and the grasping ruthlessness of self-assertion certainly have their own rationality. If we are no longer going to be able to participate in future wealth, then we at least want to make the most of what we can get in the general inferno. No one's going to take my bit of destruction away from me!

We are not simply going to stay in the Holocene, that friendly epoch which followed the last ice age twelve thousand years ago and allowed a luxurious number of ecosystems to flourish in concert with each other. But for that very reason, absolutely everything depends on how much we can take with us into the Anthropocene, to make a home for ourselves there.

The missing swallows

In the same spring that I did not fly to California, a good friend phoned me. Elisabeth is a generation older than me and used to be my history teacher. Like me, she comes from a farm in Schleswig-Holstein and lives in a house with a barn beside it. She spoke with in a strangely flat voice, as if from a world without echoes. "Eva," she said, "the swallows haven't come back here this year." Silence. "Now it's really over," she said, not as if complaining, but as if reading the result of a measurement. "Now I don't expect anything anymore."

The Australian nature philosopher Glenn Albrecht created the word "Solastalgia" in 2005, to describe the trauma arising from the loss of the familiar ecological surroundings. Nostalgia, but in real time: a longing not for something from the past, but for things we had thought were an unalterable part of the present. Combining the Latin "solacium," meaning comfort, with the Greek root "algia," from "algos" (pain), it is not a word that trips off the tongue. "Pain from a lack of comfort": that's not a bad description of how people are affected by a dying world. But I can't help wondering about this neologism, because so

much is missing from it. It does not mention the world, which is the object of longing. Nor does it mention the reason for its loss. It is not just dying of its own accord. The swallows are starving because the insects are dying out. In long dry periods they can't build nests, because they need puddles of water in order to collect little balls of mud. In many regions, songbirds are also actively hunted. Solastalgia does not name those responsible, nor even the causes. No word about insecticides, industrial emissions of CO2 or air rifles. And after all, homesickness is also different if you have been forced to leave, rather than moving voluntarily.

Maybe "Weltschmerz" would be a better category than solastalgia, since it would at least emphasise that this is about an overall context and not about an individual location which we can still leave behind. The barn is still standing. But for Elisabeth, time has stopped. Not clock time – which would still keep ticking away in the wristwatch of a corpse – but time that is living and lived. The time in which years coincide with the arrival and departure of the swallows: it has been destroyed. The shock at the absence of the four familiar breeding pairs does not only relate to eight birds and their offspring, but is a sign of the sixth mass extinction. The lack of comfort does not arise because nothing can help to get over this loss, but because it isn't just about this one loss. What would be a compulsive idea in a normal experience of trauma – the sense that things will keep on being like this – is, in this case, a scientifically proven reality.

Given this reality, the echo of "nostalgia" in "solastalgia" is also scandalous. You can almost hear the governments of wealthier nations coming up with programs to develop solastalgia cures for their wealthier citizens, and funding research into the factors creating resilience – and apart from that, people can always say that such sentimentalities as the irreplaceable connection with a place ought to be overcome. Modernity didn't promise solace, after all; it promised freedom.

But was it the whole freedom? Isn't something crucial missing? Doesn't our freedom depend on the continuing existence of the living world? Doesn't it – in fact – consist of that more than anything else?

The joy of the swallows

In order to connect freedom with life, we have to think about them in terms of time. That in turn raises the question of what we understand by “time.” The moment of staying seemed freeing to me, because it unexpectedly gave me more time, as well as the realisation that I was happy to spend it in the place where I live. But there was more. The birds were arriving. In a certain sense, the swallows are part of the place. But maybe that is the wrong perspective, maybe it is precisely the other way round, and a place is nothing more than that: the intersection of various temporal cycles. Not only the wall, but the rays of spring sunshine that touch it, and the blossoming pear trees in front of it. All of that is time. Not my time, but time that accommodates me. The seasonal migratory cycles of the birds, the position of the sun at different times of day, crop cycles and growing seasons. And even the wall, formed from different time periods: red clay from the ice age stratum of the earth, the heat of wood burnt two hundred years ago, the work of hands helped by other hands. When we are not talking about the unique span of an individual lifetime, but about nature, we can describe this time as cyclical. Not simply time, not an empty future, but tides, abundance. And that is what it could mean to see freedom temporally: an abundance of time and tides. To allow real freedom, free time also has to mean time that is filled. Inwardly, we know that very well; it is the difference between boredom and experiences; between time that drags and time filled with things we can do and things we want to do. But what fills our time does not come from us. Living a full life also means living in a time of fullness – of abundance.

Joy at the return of the swallows is older than the threat that now hangs over them. In the horror of the sixth mass extinction, swallows as a species are actually in a relatively good position. They are adaptable; they can change their flight routes. The familiar *Hirundo rustica* is currently “only” listed as “decreasing” and not on the actual Red List. Weighing twenty grams, with a red spot on the throat and elegantly forked tail feathers, it is a small miracle that any of these little creatures survive, even without the end of the world. The freedom to stay points to the unique possibility of being there for their arrival, not missing the moment of joy and relief. Ten thousand kilometres of wind and weather, and suddenly they’re back, safe and well.

The joy at the arrival of the swallows is an echo of the time when we went hungry in the winter, shivering and longing for the season of plenty. The swallows were the

messengers of the material abundance of the tides. But that does not fully explain the sense of joy. We don't necessarily need the swallows to tell us that it's getting warmer. The swallows allow us an extra moment to pause, a moment of fascination with this particular facet of life. Something about their joyful high-pitched concert is infectious. It speaks to us, even if we can't translate it. Michel de Montaigne, who was writing philosophy more than four hundred years ago, even saw a certain freedom at work in the swallows. He attributed to them the ability to judge a certain place and approve of it. "Do the swallows that we see on the return of spring ferreting in all the corners of our houses search without judgement, and choose without discrimination, out of a thousand places, the one which is most suitable for them to dwell in?"

Swallows are synanthropic. Unlike other wild animals, they would not be better off if we were simply not around. It is our old walls that they find homely, and it is the insects flourishing in our dung that they find tasty. We don't need to do anything more than that. Their conditions of life arise from ours. This relationship is an example for a successful circular economy, in which different elements enable each other to regenerate. The swallows share our time, but that doesn't mean we have less of it. And we can enjoy their presence without it costing us anything. The freedom found in interactions which easily perpetuate themselves is a theme running through the balanced ecosystems of our planet, which have evolved to find that balance over hundreds of thousands of years. Our notion of history, just like our current economic system, is designed as if that background were simply a given. But abundance is actually a fragile undertaking. It exists when the tides are attuned to each other; it exists in the seemingly effortless way that the swallows live with us, which by itself is not enough to feed us. Absolutely all future freedom – even the freedom simply to leave – depends on how many of our supply cycles we manage to preserve through similarly regenerative relationships. The claim to the full freedom to stay brings this question to the fore. Can I stay here and stay free? Can we live on this planet without being in a constant state of terror, working laboriously against its catastrophes, can we stay here in such a way that we also stay free, that we enjoy an abundance of time, that we can look up at a sky in which swallows are dancing?

Perhaps the joy of the swallows' arrival is not our joy at all, but theirs. Perhaps the jubilation of the swallows is transferred to us. They sing of their happiness at having found

a place after their difficult journey – a place to stay for now. We share their joy and enjoy our own freedom.