

Text for Freedom speech – National Committee for Remembrance of the Surrender in 1945

Johannes de Doperkerk, Wageningen, 5 May 2016

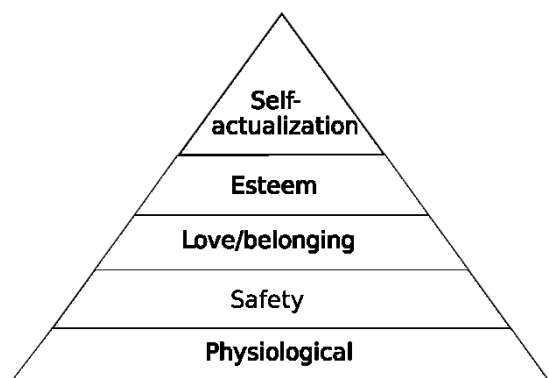
If you use any lingua franca of this world, a common language that is spoken across borders, to Google for the word 'freedom' (*liberté, libertad, Freiheit*), you will have no trouble getting a billion hits.

There is scarcely any other concept that is talked about, sought after, sung about, fought for, curtailed and restricted as freedom. Freedom is a goal. You will hardly find another political word that is so often used and misused for other, ulterior motives.

Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear and freedom from want: we all know that quartet of ideals expressed by Roosevelt.

There are so many freedoms, and so many kinds of freedom, that the sum total of those freedoms has a breadth and depth that also engenders its own problems and controversies.

We are all familiar with them: The problem of *limitations*, where the freedom of one is so great that it impinges upon the freedom of another. The problem of mutual *incompatibilities* between freedoms, such as freedom of expression restricting freedom of religion, or vice versa. The problem of *trade-offs*, where the specific freedom is so broad that it endangers the goals of safety and security, for instance the right of all citizens to bear arms, or the right of a scientist to publish a formula for avian flu in a medical journal. The problem of a *paradox*, embodied in phrases such as war of liberation, freedom fighter, liberation front. Or even in the name of one of our first jet fighters, which was called the *Freedom Fighter*. The problem of extension and *deepening*: freedom is never enough, the need for freedom keeps digging deeper into the bedrock of our existence and self-expression. You are probably all familiar with the pyramid of Maslow, starting with our needs in terms of being able to exist physically, then to provide security and safety for us, followed by scope for social interaction, or in the phase after that to be valued and acknowledged, and ultimately the freedom to express and develop ourselves.



When freedom is defined so inclusively, it becomes immeasurably large and deep – maybe too much so – and freedom becomes a commodity that is unique and desirable, like sunlight. And yet it is also scarce, not free, and has all the problems of equitable distribution.

It is something people fight for, unfortunately, both literally and figuratively.

A couple of years ago, the theme for this day was “Freedoms are agreed on”. Yes, that's the ideal result of the daily struggle for freedom throughout the world. Readiness to make agreements is thus a prerequisite, followed by readiness to implement and observe those agreements.

Intuitively, I have my doubts about that assumption. Freedom should not be something that the sides have to agree on. The principle should be that freedom is obvious. The biggest paradox is therefore that we often have to provide assurances for what is obvious by making solemn agreements with each other.

I suspect that I'm here because I'm associated with Clingendael, a think-tank that is involved with – among other things – security and freedom in international politics. Or because I write about such things, in a journal that appeared in the underground in the Second World War, took root, and became *Vrij Nederland* (Free Netherlands), a name it has retained ever since. So, given that endless palette of freedoms, you'll have to forgive me that I've chosen to say more about the bottom of the Maslow pyramid – the basic freedoms of physical existence, being free of the dangers and the need for certainty – rather than the top, the derived freedoms so ardently desired by all, for respect, acknowledgement and self-development.

There are lots of think-tanks in the world looking at ‘freedom’. It is all about giving grades or scores to each country. Not haphazard guesswork, but put together carefully from dozens of indicators. They are figures for whole countries, in other words averages, so they do not say everything about the relationships within that country. One of the best-known of such lists is issued by Freedom House, which recently published its overview for 2015. The key conclusion of that report, which has now appeared for more than thirty years, is that the world as a whole has steadily seen freedoms eroded somewhat over the past ten years. And that is a long period: such a trend has not occurred previously since the survey started.

There are nearly two hundred countries in the world. During the last ten years, freedom has gone backwards in seventy-two of them, twice as many as the countries in which advances were made. There were only forty-three of those. There is perhaps some reason to be pleased about those forty-three, but I think you have to be cautious: it's swings and roundabouts, there are gains and losses. But the number of countries that are becoming more free – those forty-three – has never been as low as it was last year. Overall, then, the situation in terms of countries is worsening. But there are big countries and little countries. You get a rather distorted picture if you weigh San Marino as heavily as China, so it is ‘fairer’ to look at the numbers of people. But even then, the picture does not change radically. We

live in a world in which 40% of people can be deemed to be free, one in three (36%) are not free, and the rest – about a quarter (24%) – are in a grey area in between. The chance of being free is higher if you live in a small country (San Marino, Liechtenstein, Iceland, Luxembourg). Scandinavia and the Netherlands do not do badly either, scoring close to the maximum of 100 points. Languishing at the bottom are Syria, Tibet, Eritrea, North Korea and Uzbekistan, scoring three or less.

My story is not pleasant reading so far.

The Freedom report also speculates on the causes of the 'falling' level of freedom. It says that the number one cause now is reduced acceptance of democracy as the most desirable form of government. Democracy is under pressure more than ever before in the last twenty-five years, since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Until recently, the report says, authoritarian regimes also paid lip service to democracy, reasonably fair elections, and human rights. You could tackle them about it and they joined in reluctantly, but they have now also discarded that half-hearted compliance. I quote, "Today they argue for the superiority of what amounts to one-party rule, and seek to throw off the constraints of fundamental diplomatic principles."

The number two cause for the retrograde step in freedom is given as the rise of terrorism. From West Africa to South Asia, we see dozens of countries that we could by now better refer to as failing states, where the central authorities are not able to cope with jihadists and local radicalised groups who perpetrate violence, impose local control and ways of life that have nothing to do with freedom but (on the contrary) are based on fundamentals such as repression of women, enforcement of religious beliefs, slavery and criminal activities such as kidnapping and trading in drugs and raw materials. Incidentally, I most certainly do not want to claim that these roughly one hundred failing states in the world would not contain any bad triangles of failing control (corruption, criminality and civil war in particular) if there was no terrorism there.

I think that the conclusions of the Freedom researchers are correct. They could also be better substantiated, by looking at other data as well and not basing anything on vague feelings or opinions. If freedom is something worth fighting for, statistics about wars should teach us something about it.

My first remark on that is indeed that there seems (from a distance) to be an inverse relationship between war and freedom in the world. It can hardly be a coincidence that freedom has kept going backwards over the last ten years, and the number of wars has been increasing for a decade (or eight years to be precise). But if that is true, it should be possible to see it if we put those wars under the microscope, in other words if we look at the reasons for those wars. For that, I refer to the Conflict Barometer from the University of Heidelberg. Every year, they record how many conflicts there are in the world, where they are taking

place, what those conflicts are about and how they are progressing (because there is no hard and fast rule stating that conflicts always involve violence).

At the moment – at any rate in 2015 – over four hundred conflicts are raging throughout the world. Four hundred and nine to be precise, but I'll round it down. There are of course almost infinitely more if you include minor disputes between neighbours that a simple local court should be able to solve, but I'm talking about the conflicts that make the front pages. The good news is that this number of four hundred-plus has been reasonably constant over recent years. More good news is that weapons have not been used in nearly half of them. In just over half, though, 223 conflicts, the search for a solution has not been amicable and has involved weapons. If I break them down further, you can say that there are maybe twenty cases where those conflicts have genuinely led to war. That's one in ten. There are another twenty-five cases where there is a bit of fighting. That makes forty-five cases where you can say there is a major or minor war going on. One in five conflicts means warfare.

Are they all about freedom, or do other values play a part as well? I'm not going to keep spouting numbers, because you'll soon get bored of that. About one in three conflicts (155) are about the question of which political system should be in control, for instance a democracy, a theocracy or autocracy (for example in Afghanistan: the Taliban or a secular government? Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood or an old-fashioned autocracy? Or closer to home, Hungary: a liberal or an illiberal democracy?) I would call those freedom conflicts. If we zoom in on the forty-five wars, the proportion is much the same: one in three (15) of wars both large and small are about the regime, the question of freedom.

A further hundred conflicts are about a different kind of freedom, about secession or separation or greater autonomy (for example in Spain there is Catalonia, or the struggle for a more independent Kurdistan in the Middle East). These conflicts do not necessarily have to be violent either. Of the forty-five wars, nine are about this kind of freedom. If you add it all together, you can therefore say that there are four hundred conflicts in the world, of which two hundred and fifty are about freedom. If you narrow it down to conflicts that are wars, large and small, there are then forty-five, of which twenty-four are about freedom. Or to put it more simply, over half of all wars in the world are about freedom, the regime you live under, or your desire for genuine independence. There is no other factor that is so important: wars between countries about territory, or resources or who has power within a system... they all score less than freedom, the question of 'the regime'.

That is the bitter conclusion. Freedom in the world has been curtailed over the last ten years. More wars are being fought, and half of those wars are about freedom.

We can take some comfort from the fact that it was much worse twenty-five years ago, when the Wall fell. There were about half as many wars again back then. During the Cold War, it was structural – not that we noticed it much. Freedom may have been cold, but we felt pretty safe despite it all. The certainty of the Cold War gave us a comfortably safe

feeling: only one in five people thought the world was unsafe. Ten years ago it was the other way round: there were only half as many wars, but twice as many people – two out of five – felt that the world was unsafe. There seemed to be a perversely irrational link: the safer the world was, the less safe you felt. Everything is now clear again. Warfare has become more widespread over the last ten years, we feel less safe, and there is less freedom in the world. Only to a small extent in each case, but nevertheless true. One thing seems certain: freedom is precious to us and we are ready to fight for it if we must.