

Feel free to speak

Freedom.

I have to admit that this is quite a big word for a one-page essay. Therefore, I would like to narrow it down to 'freedom of speech'. I strongly believe that freedom of speech has a great influence on other forms of freedom, such as freedom of press or individual freedom. How can the media inform us correctly, if there is no freedom of speech? How free is a man to vote, if he did not have the chance to talk about his political preferences? Or how could a young lesbian feel free to love whoever she wants to love, if she was not taught to speak up and share her opinion?

Unfortunately, freedom of speech is still an ideal. The best example would be The United States of America. America, the land of hopes and dreams, but more importantly: the land of freedom. An American is free to vote, to trade, to consume and even to speak, one would say. Is he really? Isn't America the country where Bradley Manning is probably going to be sentenced to death, because he gave information to Wiki-Leaks? In which country are protesters who are fed up with the capitalistic system arrested and ignored? And let us not forget about the dozens of youngsters, who are simply told not to have sex, instead of taught to talk openly about it.

This all illustrates a huge problem that we, as a society, are faced with nowadays. We live in an illusion, in a plastic bubble. We are convinced that we are free to speak, and that others are not, but we do not realise that there is a limitation to the freedom of speech of every singly one of us. There is a theory, called the spiral of silence, that states that the public opinion always overshadows other opinions, and that as a result our horizon of opinions is narrowed down.

Take opinion A. A lot of people agree with A, and therefore A is commonly accepted in the news or in schools. Of course some people do not agree, let's call their opinion B. Because we hear a lot more about A, we tend to agree with it more, or at least question it less. After a few generations, opinion A will have completely overshadowed opinion B. The way we think about fundamental things is thus not only influenced by others, but even unconsciously determined by others. This is what we call the spiral of silence.

We, as Western citizens, like to believe that, unlike in China or certain states in Africa, we are free to say whatever we want to say. In a certain way this is true. I do get to express my opinion about politics without being arrested. And facts prove that this is not the case in other countries. But does this really mean that our society has accomplished freedom of speech?

I like new, creative and even provocative opinions, but I do not get to hear them a lot. In the past elections, every politician shared his thoughts on Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde. Yet no-one said anything about our view on carriers and happiness and no-one talked about the perception of possession. I do question those basics of our society, that have grown into non-questionable things of our daily lives. Yet I do not hear those questions on the news and I certainly have never heard my teachers asking them. This makes me believe that I am not free to question, and therefore not free to speak.

I am strongly convinced that people all over the world have the exact same questions that I have. But since they are not frequently asked, we feel as if we should not ask them as well. And if we dare to ask them, our questions will be considered crazy or stupid and we will be silenced, whether it is with a strange look or with imprisonment.

Albert Camus once said: the only way to deal with an unfree world, is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion. I do believe that we live in an unfree world, and I do believe that we should act as rebels. We can protest, we can fight, or we can go on a hunger strike. But those things have all been done, and we have still got a long way to go if we want to reach a better world. The best solution I can come up with, is living in a permanent state of questioning.

Dare to think outside the box and question the basics of our society, even if it gets you in trouble. If we would all collectively question everything we see, we might be able to find answers. And if those answers became ideas and actions, we could change the world. I am not sure that this world would be completely free, and I don't even know if complete freedom is a good goal. But for now, let's start asking ourselves that.

Any questions?

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