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978-1-107-03470-9 - Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation

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## Freedom Rising

### *Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation*

This book presents a comprehensive theory of why human freedom gave way to increasing oppression since the invention of states – and why this trend began to reverse itself more recently, leading to a rapid expansion of universal freedoms and democracy. Drawing on a massive body of evidence, Christian Welzel tests various explanations of rising freedoms, providing convincing support for a well-reasoned theory of emancipation. The study demonstrates multiple trends toward human empowerment – a process through which people gain control over their lives. Most important among these trends is the spread of “emancipative values,” which emphasize free choice and equal opportunities. The author identifies the desire for emancipation as the single source of the various human empowerment trends and shows when and why this desire grows strong; why it is the source of democracy; and how it vitalizes civil society, feeds humanitarian norms, enhances happiness, and helps redirect modern civilization toward sustainable development.

**Christian Welzel** is chair of political culture research at the Center for the Study of Democracy, Leuphana University Lüneberg, Germany, and president of the World Values Survey Association. He is also special foreign consultant to the Laboratory of Comparative Social Research at the Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, Russia, and a permanent affiliate of the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California, Irvine. A repeated recipient of large-scale grants from the German Science Foundation, Welzel is the author of more than one hundred scholarly publications in international peer-reviewed journals in sociology, political science, and psychology. His recent books include *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* (with Ronald Inglehart, Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Democratization* (with Christian Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, and Ronald Inglehart, 2009); and *The Civic Culture Transformed* (with Russell J. Dalton, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

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CHRISTIAN WELZEL

*Leuphana University, Lüneberg, Germany*



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*To AMY,  
the Love  
and Inspiration  
of My Life*

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## Abbreviations

CRI	Citizen Rights Index
CW	Cool Water
EV	Emancipative Values
EVI	Emancipative Values Index
EVS	European Values Study
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
SMA	Social Movement Activity
SV	Secular Values
SVI	Secular Values Index
WA	Water Autonomy
WVS	World Values Surveys

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## Preface

This book is indebted to the lifetime work of Ronald Inglehart. Over the past fifteen years, I had the privilege of becoming one of Ron's closest collaborators and friends. Apart from our work on dozens of publications, Ron is a continuous source of inspiration in our frequent conversations about social change, human values, and the role of evolution in the civilization process. I know his work on postmaterialism since my days in college and followed the debate about this concept with fascination. Despite the criticism, I remain convinced that the basic logic holds: fading existential pressures open people's minds, making them prioritize freedom over security, autonomy over authority, diversity over uniformity, and creativity over discipline. By the same token, persistent existential pressures keep people's minds closed, in which case they emphasize the opposite priorities. I am equally convinced that the further implications of this logic hold as well: the existentially relieved state of mind is the source of tolerance and solidarity beyond one's in-group; the existentially stressed state of mind is the source of discrimination and hostility against out-groups.

These propositions assume a universal logic of how the human mind copes with existential conditions. This book describes this logic as the *utility ladder of freedoms*. The more existential pressures recede, the more does the nature of life shift from a source of threats into a source of opportunities. As this happens, societies ascend the utility ladder of freedoms: practicing and tolerating freedoms becomes increasingly useful to take advantage of what a more promising life offers. Since evolution favors utility-realizing capacities, it has "programmed" humans to seek freedoms – in as much as these are useful to thrive under given circumstances. Culture does not have the power to turn off this logic. Instead, the taboos that culture imposes and the choices that it tolerates are themselves selected by the utility of freedoms: when fading existential pressures make freedoms more useful, cultures shift from denying freedoms to guaranteeing them. This happens because people change their mind in this direction –

recognizing that improving living conditions move them up the utility ladder of freedoms. These individual adaptations reinforce each other through mutual recognition. Reciprocally reinforced adaptations generate mass trends that follow their own evolutionary logic; they are *not* the result of propaganda, indoctrination, and other elite-fabricated manipulations. As this book demonstrates, representative survey data from the World Values Surveys and European Values Study confirm an evolutionary logic of cultural change.

In a sense, this book is a sequel to my joint work with Ron in *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* (2005). The approach to analyze culture and development is basically the same, and various previous findings are updated with more recent data. Nevertheless, this book makes seven contributions that move our understanding of societal development ahead from where we were. To begin with, I explicate in a systematic way the *evolutionary theory of emancipation* that is implicit in our previous work (Chapter 1). Emancipation theory refers to everyone's freedoms; it is a theory of the utility of *universal* freedoms and the evolutionary origin of this utility. The theory explains when universal freedoms become useful and when people recognize this and begin to desire these freedoms, and when not. The logic behind this manifests itself in two opposing configurations, both of which shape the entire fabric of societies. Under existential pressures, universal freedoms have little utility, so people place little value on them. It is unlikely in this situation that elites would guarantee universal freedoms, and, when they do it against the odds, the guarantees are likely to be ineffective. This pattern describes where democracy does not take root or remains a façade of authoritarian practice. In contrast, fading existential pressures increase the utility of universal freedoms and people begin to value these freedoms accordingly. With the utility and value of freedoms rising, social pressures to guarantee them mount until the denial becomes too costly. Once guarantees are granted, pressures on elites to adhere to them continue, resulting in effective guarantees. This pattern describes where democracy emerges and thrives. Taken together, these propositions condense in the *sequence thesis* of emancipation theory: if freedoms grow, they grow in a chain of order from utilities to values to guarantees. Institutions that guarantee universal freedoms are the outcome, not the cause of this process – in contradiction to the prominent “institutions first” view.

Second, the theory of emancipation situates value change in a framework that focuses on human empowerment as the lead theme. In so doing, the theory rises to a higher level of generalization. What were separate fragments in our prior theorizing are now integrated into a coherent framework in which every aspect derives from a single root principle: the utility ladder of freedoms. The pervasiveness of this principle surfaces in juxtaposition of two opposing cycles that shape the entire fabric of societies. For one, when universal freedoms have little utility, low value, and no effective guarantee, a society is trapped in a cycle of human disempowerment: ordinary people have little control over their lives and their society's agenda. Conversely, when universal freedoms have great utility, a



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high value, and effective guarantees, a society thrives in a cycle of human empowerment: ordinary people are in control.

Third, I identify “emancipative values” as the mindset that arises as human empowerment proceeds. The major thrust of emancipative values is an emphasis on freedom of choice and equality of opportunities. Emancipative values are reminiscent of “self-expression values” in our prior work. However, as I show in Chapter 2, the concept of emancipative values is theoretically better grounded, and more consistently operationalized, and it has better measurement quality than its precursor self-expression values.

Fourth, I document in more nuanced ways and with broader evidence how emancipative values emerge. Generally speaking, these values grow as ordinary people gain control over *action resources*. Action resources include tools, skills, and opportunities that enable people to do things at will (Chapter 3). Furthermore, the action resources that people have in common with most other members of their society strengthen their emancipative values much more than the resources that people have on top of others. Hence, the utility of freedoms resides in *joint* utilities, creating solidarity in values and actions among those who share these utilities. And because action resources tend to become more widely shared in all of the world’s culture zones, we see a ubiquitous rise of emancipative values over the generations (Chapter 4).

Fifth, this book demonstrates the consequences of emancipative values more broadly. As I show, emancipative values involve stronger intrinsic motivations (Chapter 5), nurture greater trust and humanism (Chapter 6), encourage social movement activity (Chapter 7), strengthen commitment to democratic norms (Chapter 10), and enhance environmental activism (Chapter 12). Quite naturally, values that radiate into so many domains have systemic consequences as well, most notably more extensive and effective guarantees of freedoms (Chapter 8), including those of specific subgroups such as women and homosexuals (Chapter 9). Moreover, the rise of emancipative values elevates a society’s overall sense of well-being (Chapter 5). Finally, rising emancipative values contribute to better environmental quality (Chapter 12), helping to make societies more sustainable.

Sixth, this book develops a theory that is “complete” in the sense that it situates human empowerment and emancipative values in the entire process of civilization. In Chapter 11, I describe the Great Redirection through which the process of civilization has been diverted from perfecting human exploitation to advancing human empowerment. I show that this diversion happened recently on the time scale of history, and I explain both the redirection itself and its recentness by the utility ladder of freedoms. Urban civilization matured late in areas in which universal freedoms *naturally* have higher utility, due to an environment that harbors an original form of existential autonomy: easy and permanent access to water resources for everyone (“water autonomy”). This is what I call the *source thesis* of emancipation theory. According to the source thesis, water autonomy is an exceptional feature of areas characterized by moderately

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cold temperatures and continuous rainfall over all seasons: the “cool-water zones” (CW zones). Across the globe, the first civilization to reach urban maturity in a CW zone was Western Europe in about 1450–1500 CE. This is when and where the human empowerment process started and from where it diffused to the other CW areas of the world, most notably North America, the southeast of Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. These are still the areas that are most advanced in human empowerment. Yet, the era of globalization shows signs of decoupling human empowerment from its confinement to CW areas. As societies in Asia, Latin America, and – more recently – Africa are catching up, the human empowerment process is globalizing. This is the *contagion thesis* of emancipation theory.

Seventh, as this happens, human civilization faces the challenge of sustainability: the life improvements that come with human empowerment inflict unprecedented damage on the environment. But even though human empowerment causes the sustainability challenge, it also holds the key to its solution: emancipative values. As Chapter 12 demonstrates, these values stimulate environmental activism, which helps to redirect human empowerment to a path of “green” technologies. Sustainable human empowerment becomes a real possibility.

In light of these new explorations, I hope the scientific community will consider this book a useful theoretical, conceptual, and empirical extension of the work on which it builds.

Christian Welzel  
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Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg  
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Over the past ten to fifteen years, I had the privilege of discussing my ideas with numerous colleagues, many of whom gave me important feedback. I am grateful for the time and energy that these colleagues have invested. These lines are written to acknowledge this.

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