



CALL FOR PAPERS

Freedom of the seas and freedom of the individual: a critical appraisal

School of Oriental and African Studies University of London

21st May 2026, 9.00-18.00

What is the relationship between the sea, humans, and freedom? Is freedom of the seas strengthening human freedom, or is it curtailing it? These are the foundational questions that guide this call, aimed at selecting papers to be presented and discussed at a 1-day, in-person workshop, organised at SOAS on 21st May 2026. The workshop is jointly organised by Professor Irini Papanicolopulu (SOAS), Professor Gina Heathcote (Newcastle University), and Dr Matilde Rocca (SOAS) as part of the activities funded by the British Academy under project GP/400339 “Freedom of the Seas and Human Rights Protection”.

BACKGROUND

Freedom of the seas is a time-honoured principle of international law and the dogma of old and new maritime powers. Traditionally associated with Western-dominated legal doctrine and imperialist mindset, freedom of the seas allowed European states to expand and engage in direct trade with East and West, eventually leading to imperialism and colonisation. Conceptually, its genesis is generally attributed to the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius and his advocacy in favour of Dutch trade interests in the Indian Ocean in the early XVII century. This relation continues to date, whereby freedom of the seas is still linked to trade interests and globalisation. However, this narrative seems to overlook forms of State practice and customs developed in different regions of the world, let alone critical scholarship that tries to move beyond the traditional understanding.

Traditional legal scholarship has portrayed freedom of the seas in a generally positive light. While it is recognised as an inherent right of states, freedom of the seas, it is argued, has also benefitted peoples and individuals. Many people oppressed on land have turned to the sea in an effort to leave war and discrimination and to seek refuge and a better future. Migration by sea has been a constant in human history. The free seas have always been the means for trying to reach safety and protection and a way to be able to freely pursue one’s opinions and beliefs, ultimately furthering societal change and visions of a fairer world.

In the last years, however, critical scholars have started unpacking the ambiguous relationships between freedom, domination, and the sea. They have started drawing parallels between old and new state practices to limit free use of the seas by individuals, while allowing slavery and forced

labour, which constitute negation of freedom. On the one hand, attention has been drawn by states efforts to limit freedom of the seas for migrants, furthering securitisation of the sea and the de facto limitation of movement therein. Moreover, scholars are considering how the principle has underpinned colonial domination and has allowed the slave trade in the Atlantic Ocean and other seas to thrive. Other less known aspects have often remained unresearched, including the relationship between freedom, exclusive flag state jurisdiction, and serious breaches of fundamental human rights at sea, including forced labour and modern slavery in the fisheries and shipping sectors.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Taking account of the current state of the art, this call for papers invites legal scholars to critically engage with the concept of freedom of the seas and its relationship to the freedom of persons. Submissions may address contemporary dimensions of freedom of the seas or examine it through historical lenses, provided they include a clear critical appraisal.

Thematically, we invite participants to critically dissect the concept of freedom of the sea, dealing with aspects relating to the following topics:

- Who is empowered by the legal concept of freedom of the seas? Who is not?
- How has the framing of rights and duties at sea, across states, non-state actors and individuals, served to legitimise power structures or hierarchies?
- How does the concept of freedom of the seas reproduce or obscure patterns of inclusion/exclusion in international law, both historically and in the present?
- Can the principle of freedom of the seas be critically reimagined to reflect values beyond those rooted in dominance or colonial expansion?
- Have there been conceptual or legal articulations of freedom of the seas that challenge or resist Eurocentric norms? How have these been marginalised or silenced in mainstream discourse?
- What legal and normative mechanisms have allowed selective access to the seas, privileging certain actors while constraining others?
- Which actors have exercised the most influence or power over maritime space? How do public/private distinctions play a role to legitimise or conceal these forms of control?
- What structural interests underpinned the legal activism of some empires or states in defending their maritime claims?
- What does lack of engagement among early modern European legal scholars on the transatlantic slave trade reveal about the development of international law?
- Which aspects of the freedom of the seas remain underexplored or neglected in current scholarship?

We welcome proposals that address the concept from any critical theoretical standpoints, including, but not limited to, TWAIL (Third World Approaches to International Law), feminist theory, Marxist critique and post-humanist perspectives. We particularly encourage papers from young scholars based in the Global South.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

Abstracts of 800-1000 words, addressing the theme and methodology of the proposed paper, and accompanied by an academic CV, are to be submitted using [this online form](#) by 18 March 2026.

Selected candidates are expected to attend the workshop in person and must submit a draft paper by 21 April 2026. The draft papers will be then distributed to the discussants and will be presented and discussed in the course of the Workshop on 21 May 2026. The organisers are considering the publication of papers from the workshop as a special issue in a leading peer-reviewed international journal.

Thanks to funding by the British Academy, there is a limited number of scholarships to cover travel and accommodation expenses for participating in the workshop. Scholars from the Global South, at early career stage, or belonging to underrepresented groups in Higher Education will be prioritised for the scholarship. The awarding of a scholarship is subject to the timely submission of the draft paper by 21 April 2026 and the participation in person at the workshop.

Key Dates

- 18 March 2026: deadline for the submission of abstracts. **Extended to 25 March 2026.**
- 21 April 2026: deadline for the submission of draft papers
- 21 May 2026: workshop

For further information please contact Dr Matilde Rocca at mr1@soas.ac.uk.