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Conditions of Freedom

Solidarity Federation

Summer 1998

Throughout history, people have fought and died for “freedom”, often only to exchange one form of slavery and oppression for another.

Yet, freedom is a goal we continue to strive for. It is fundamental to our very humanity. Its opposite, oppression, stunts and distorts human nature and restrains, if not prevents, progress. That we don’t have a society in which freedom is fully realised arises as much from confusion as to exactly what freedom is, as from the effectiveness of repression.

There are two aspects to what we call “freedom”, a negative one and a positive one — a “freedom from” and a “freedom for”. There is also the nature of the individual or people seeking freedom. These factors are mutually dependent. Because our history has been one of struggle against tyranny, freedom is usually only conceived of in the negative sense, namely the absence or minimising of such tyranny. However, “freedom from” some restriction must be in order to achieve “freedom to do or to be”. Freedom does not produce a vacuum.

It could be said that the degree to which one person interferes with another’s activity is a measure of the amount of free-

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dom someone has. Political freedom, therefore, is viewed as people living how they choose, unobstructed by others. However, because we live in society, this must be qualified. If the well-being of everyone in society is to be assured, then it is not acceptable that the psychopath, for example, be “free” to exploit, use or bully others. Therefore, freedom is value-laden, and entails responsibilities towards others. This implies that the cultural values of the society as well as the nature of the individual enter the equation.

Beyond a certain point, preventing people from doing what they would choose is coercion, the deliberate interference by the powerful in the activities of those within that power. In modern society, based on an ideology of power, overt coercion limits people’s “freedom”. However, imposing the will of the dominant does not merely depend on overt coercion alone, for this would promote rebellion among the coerced. Rather, compliance is sought through “legitimacy”, through inducing people to believe that authority is necessary “for their own good”. Once this is indoctrinated in people’s minds, they can contribute to their own repression. In a capitalist society, where the privilege of the ruling class is based upon the exploitation of labour, this is the all-important factor for its continuation. People are made to believe they are already free within the confines of a social necessity.

John Stuart Mill, in his famous work “On Liberty”, recognised that there must exist an area of personal freedom which on no account must be violated. Such violation restricts the development of the individual’s natural faculties, which make it possible to conceive of and pursue the ends which humans hold to be good and necessary for their well-being.

Those who justify such violation claim that legal restraints are necessary due to the evil that is basic to human nature. This myth, originally proposed by the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, upholds the interests of the privileged. Such reactionary thinkers argue that, if we are not to resort to “the law of

the jungle”, we must be controlled by the law of government. This becomes ironic considering the slaughter that has been perpetrated by governments and how they preside over a system that threatens all life on the planet. Furthermore, those who govern are not ethically different to those who are governed. In fact, due to their privileged position they are often more corrupt.

Libertarians do not advocate licence, that is, freedom at the expense of others. This is a feature of today’s society, where the values are those of robbery and domination, where getting the better of someone else is a virtue, where the greatest liberty is limited to the fewest number. Furthermore, such behaviour, as exhibited by our “betters”, is emulated by the so-called “lower classes” through daily indoctrination by the media and advertising.

Economic slavery has, during this century, given rise to the idea of economic freedom. Freedom to possess bread is pointless if people lack the economic freedom to buy it. This inability to obtain the necessities of life by means other than those authorised by law has resulted in widespread deprivation, poverty and insecurity among working class people. It makes freedom under capitalist constraints an illusion and a mockery, considering that capitalism produces commodities that many are not free to obtain. Through a set of unfair arrangements and relationships the ruling elite has been able to plan, impose, and maintain this status quo.

This, however, is not to advocate a society of mediocrity, but one of increasing diversity. What we have now is a society which threatens people with deprivation and persecution, unless they submit to a lifestyle that withers their capacities and the contribution which their uniqueness as an individual could enable them to make, a society which results in hide-bound individuals, cramped and warped in their relationships with each other. For human society to thrive, there must be respect for one another’s rights and freedoms, based on equal-

ity, which certainly isn't the case in a society based upon privilege, exploitation and domination. A society built around its people's needs would see greater experimentation in lifestyles. This concept is sometimes called "permanent revolution", an on-going, ever-developing society in which people are not restricted by conformity in order to survive. In such an open and free society, mutual respect would naturally evolve, because there would be no privilege to be gained at the expense of others.

Every plea we make for civil liberties and individual rights; every protest against exploitation, humiliation and oppression; every rebellion against the encroachments of authority, springs from this evaluation of human beings. Libertarians have always stressed freedom to create, freedom to achieve, freedom of self-determination, freedom to participate in the decisions affecting our lives, freedom to add colour and diversity to life.

So what is this condition we call freedom, this horizon which constantly eludes us? Fundamentally it is the capacity to be your own master, to determine your own destiny, to have your life and the decisions affecting it firmly in your own hands. It is the right to be a person, not an object or statistic or tool to be used or abused, discarded or destroyed. It is the ability to be a rational creature, responding to rational argument, exhibiting compassion, formulating conscious rational purposes, and not simply responding to outside causes. It is the facility to be a unique individual, yet with the ability to co-operate for the mutual benefit of all, and not to be considered as a thing, animal or wage slave incapable of such rational behaviour. For it is this rationality which distinguishes us from other species.

We can think and behave in rational, social ways. We are responsible for the choices we make, and can refer to knowledge and experience to explain them. We can reach consensus with our fellows. As Michael Bakunin once said, "No man is good enough to be another man's master".