



Propaganda and Ideology in Everyday Life

The Communist Vision of Freedom - video transcript

'The Communist Manifesto', first published in London (but in the German language) in 1848, is one of the most famous works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It finishes with a ringing call to arms: 'Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries unite!'

The proletarians, note, have 'nothing' to lose but their chains – this implies that the proletarian under conditions of capitalism is in a position of complete unfreedom. If they have nothing to lose but their chains, then they have nothing but chains. Not wealth or justice or well-being, just unfreedom. And it is the job of communism to render such proletarians free – or at least to equip them to grab freedom for themselves.

This presentation will look at how freedom has been conceived in Marxist thought and at how Marxism, and the communist regimes inspired by it, have understood both freedom, and, equally importantly, the unfreedom that they believe accompanies capitalist forms of production, distribution, and exchange.

We can begin then, by looking at the critique of existing capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto* as it relates to freedom. 'By freedom', say Marx and Engels, 'is meant, under the present bourgeois conditions of production, free trade, free selling, and free buying.' Freedom under capitalism is the freedom to buy and sell in the marketplace - but buying and selling requires resources. 'You are horrified at our intending to do away with

private property; they say, 'But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population'. All that this 90% have to bring to the labour market is their labour power, which they will sell to the highest bidder. And so begins an exchange between the propertied and the propertyless, where the former can take advantage of their privileged position to exploit the latter. The owner of capital can do without any particular labourer amongst millions, but labourers are critically dependent upon selling their labour and their choice set of potential buyers is much smaller. So the labourers put up with conditions in which they give more labour power than they get back in reward, they are then exploited as owners of capital extract so-called 'surplus value' from them. The path to freedom is escape from this condition of exploitation, and united action against capital is 'the first condition for the emancipation of the proletariat.'

Contemporary Marxist thinkers have also expressed the contention of the relationship between freedom and capitalism, one of the most interesting of whom was the late Gerry Cohen. Cohen pointed out that all types of property regime distribute various specific freedoms, and various specific constraints on freedom, capitalism included. This is the grounding of his objection to a certain kind of justification for libertarianism, one that claims that an unfettered form of capitalism will 'maximise freedom'. Suppose, he says, that under such conditions 'I want to pitch a tent in your large back garden', perhaps because I have no home of my own, although I do have a tent. If I try to do such a thing without your permission, the chances are that you can have the state intervene on your behalf and remove me from your property. Whatever the moral rights or wrongs of this, you should not deny that this *is* a restriction on my liberty, and so it is wrong to say the libertarianism maximises liberty, it merely distributes certain freedoms and unfreedoms, and that distribution stands to be justified. A communist distribution would allocate different freedoms and unfreedoms differently, such as a right to pitch a tent on land that you live on, as that land is taken to be collectively owned – this would take away the freedom you previously had to evict people from

'your' property. We can at least ask which distribution of particular liberties is morally preferable.

For Marxist thinkers, then, communism brings about the freedom of the worker from exploitation under capitalism. Such thinkers generally showed little interest in the 'bourgeois' freedoms of conscience, of association, of speech etc. such freedoms were subordinate to the overriding need to free workers from their alienated servitude. The idea of freedom must apply not merely to the political sphere, as it tends to under liberal political orders, but also to the economic sphere, as Marx puts it in *On the Jewish Question*:

"*Political* emancipation is certainly a big step forward. It may not be the last form of general human emancipation, but it is the last form of human emancipation *within* the prevailing scheme of things. Needless to say we are here speaking of real, practical emancipation."

The full form of 'real' emancipation will occur when freedom stretches beyond the merely political to include the economic realm, and when society itself is freed from religious and superstitious bases. Liberalism separates the ideal of a moral citizen from the egoistic and selfish actor in the economic marketplace. Only when society and the individual are fully in harmony with each other will emancipation be achieved. To quote Marx and Engels again 'Only when the real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when...social force is no longer separated from him in the form of political force, only then will human emancipation be completed. '

In achieving this, mankind will also free itself from ideology, which for Marx and Engels consists, roughly, of ideas that serve to legitimise the rule of the historically dominant ruling class at any moment over the dominated classes – in the case of capitalism this means the rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. 'The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class', as they put it in *The Communist*

Manifesto. However, humankind cannot so free itself merely by revolutionising its ideas (this is Marx's point against the Hegelians), but rather the change to the material conditions will bring with it a revolutionary change in thinking. 'When people speak of ideas that revolutionise society, they do but express the fact that, within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence'. Always for Marx and Engels changes to the material 'base' of society have explanatory primacy over changes to the ideational 'superstructure'.

So, to summarise for Marx and Marxists the freedoms offered by what they considered bourgeois liberalism never offered more than partial, political freedom. To fully overcome the unfreedom that capitalism imposes on the working classes, full economic freedom, which requires the abolition of private ownership of the means of production is necessary, and this in turn requires a proletarian revolution. When this occurs and classes are abolished, and the springs of material production flow abundantly, the very problem of freedom will stand abolished.

For liberals such as Berlin, this view is highly dangerous, as Marxism depicted a determinate historical trend toward proletarian emancipation, and those who placed themselves in opposition 'to the juggernaut of history...are behaving suicidally, which proves they are irrational, blind, mad, not worth listening to, and indeed a nuisance and, if incurably set on their paths, to be swept away as an obstacle to progress.' For Berlin the gulags and the terror of Stalin's Soviet Union were a direct consequence of the Marxist conception of proletarian freedom and how this could be brought about. We can ask ourselves if he was right in this view.