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The Relativism of Freedom

by Rubén Martínez

I recently had a series of conversations with a graduate student who visited Finland this past summer through a study abroad course here at MSU. His focus was on learning about differences in social policies between Finland and the United States. Finland is noted for its social protection policies while the U.S. is noted for its neoliberal policies. The student visited me to discuss the respective approaches of the two countries' criminal justice policies. In our discussion the student pointed out that freedom in Finland has a specific meaning, namely, freedom from want.

That is, that individuals should be free from the demands of basic needs, which means that individuals should have access to free or affordable social program services, including education, physical and mental health, employment assistance, infant care, aging, and supplemental income assistance. In criminal justice, that view promotes the rehabilitation and personal development of prisoners, whereas the American model is a punitive model that emphasizes punishment. Those conversations caused me to think about the meaning of freedom here in the U.S.

Rooted in the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment, the U.S. Government provides for formal freedom and equality. The Declaration of Independence, for example, holds that "all men are created equal" and have inalienable rights to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Additionally, the Bill of Rights secures and specifies the freedoms of citizens by prohibiting the state from infringing on those freedoms. For example, the First Amendment states that Congress will not pass laws that prohibit the exercise of religion or limit the freedom of speech or the freedom to assemble. At the same time, it prohibits government from officially favoring any religion.



The concept of freedom is not only complicated, it is defined and interpreted differently across time and space. Today in the United States there is much talk about freedom, but seldom is it defined. It is typically used to refer to political freedom, as in the Bill of Rights, but it is also used to refer to economic freedom. Under neoliberalism the primary meaning of freedom refers to freedom from state intervention in the economy so that individuals are free to pursue their interests without government regulation.

These views on freedom lead to critical questions about the meaning and exercise of freedom in this country. Is formal freedom enough or should government by the people provide a minimum level of well-being, a material platform if you will, from which individuals can pursue better lives? Is economic freedom absolute such that economic actors pursue their economic interests and profits even at the expense of the commonweal? These are difficult questions to address.

In Finland, although neoliberal views are gaining ground, it is clear that material freedom, that is, freedom from want, is critically important in the organization of that society. In the U.S., on the other hand, the view of freedom

holds that individuals should be free from hindrance. That is, individuals should not be hindered in their freedoms by government. At the same time, however, they should not be hindered in their freedoms by others. The exercise of freedom by some persons should not negatively impact the freedom of others to pursue a better life. The underlying basis of this view of freedom is grounded in the "right to pursue" a better life and a better society, as presented in the Declaration of Independence.

However, how likely is it that the trampling of the freedoms of some by others can be prevented in a society characterized by immense economic inequality, as is the case in the U.S.? And if so, which freedoms, and how are they defined? In the U.S. the trend over the past four decades has been to limit the functions of government in a context wherein corporations have considerable power and influence.

A similar situation occurred at the turn of the 20th century. In 1909, John Graham Brooks, President of the Consumers' League, argued that the powers of private monopoly undermined democracy and subordinated politics to business interests by corrupting officials and legislators. The solution, he argued, is government regulation of private corporations. He further argued that officials and legislators should act on behalf of the social whole. This does not occur, however, where private monopolies have more power than government.

The view that private monopolies can have greater power than government is illustrated by the unwillingness of private monopoly leaders in the 1880s to participate in congressional hearings focused on their abusive practices in the economy. Further, some years later, David Rockefeller, Jr. rebuffed President Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to settle labor strikes in Colorado's coal mines, where there existed a history of armed conflict between capital and labor over working conditions and the rights of workers. Democracy, argued Graham Brooks, was undermined by the power of private monopolies to circumvent the law through "secrecy, cunning, and unscrupulousness." Similarly, George West, who reported on the conditions of the Colorado Strike, held that citizens who are economically subservient and must depend on the favor of the few for their well-being cannot be politically free.

Today, many argue that the U.S. has become a plutocracy; that is, a country ruled by the wealthy, implying that it is ruled for the wealthy rather than the commonweal. To practices of secrecy has been added a powerful force since Graham Brooks made his comments, that of intentionally shaping public opinion through the tactical use of mass media. Instead of the media actively functioning to promote an informed citizenry and thereby enhancing democracy, it has become one of the chief tools

used by corporations to replace social democratic values (government for the public good) with neoliberal values (limited government based on the view that government in general is bad).

Ironically, that shift in values involves the use of government to accomplish the desired market-oriented changes. This shift points to the intense struggle occurring over the control of government, related societal values and competing visions for a better society. For example, we have seen over the past decade the passage of laws to limit the voting rights of selected segments of the electorate by making it more difficult to vote. Where does the idea to limit voting rights come from and what values are represented through these efforts? And relatedly, who benefits from stricter restrictions to voting rights? Moreover, why do so many voters accede to such efforts even after the courts have repeatedly ruled that such laws are unconstitutional?

Despite the emphases given by Americans to the ideals of freedom, democratic rights and equality, their views and sentiments can be shaped so as to allow the undermining of democracy and its processes. In such a context, what role do corporations, or rather the wealthy class that owns and manages them, have in the shaping of the policies and practices of government today? Graham Brooks argued that government regulation of private monopolies was needed to curb their abuses in the economy and in the public arena. He understood that government is not inherently bad; rather its utility is linked to regimes. That is, linked to the ruling interests of a particular societal period which have the greatest control over government. To protect democracy, he argued, corporations should be regulated by government. Regulating corporations, he argued, was based on a view that looked beyond the possible dividends of the next few months or years. It was a view that held that democratic politics should favor the commonweal and not the privileged few because they are strong and successful.

Today, the American citizenry faces political issues similar to those faced by their ancestors at the turn of the 20th century. It is clear that the government of the United States was established as a democratic institution, one intended to promote and protect individual rights and freedoms, but also the common good. Citizens, argued Graham Brooks, ought to shape and direct the conditions that give rise to justice and equal opportunity and shun those that make a mockery of democracy. The next stage of American civilization, he would argue, should promote the realization of freedom from want rather than the freedom to exploit. Only then can individuals realize their potential and make full their contributions to society and human progress. 