



Liberty Then and Now

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ONE DOES NOT hear very much about "liberty" these days. The great questions which revolved around this concept are not the questions in the forefront today.

In the not distant past it was still possible for serious thinkers to expound on the subject. In the 1930's appeared two leading books: *Liberty* by Everett Dean Martin, an American writer, in 1930; and *Liberty Today* by C. E. M. Joad, an English writer, in 1935.

In 1930 the impact of the Great Depression had not yet fully registered. Martin seemed more concerned with the effect of prosperity on dulling people's perception of liberty. He warned against such things as conformity and censorship, the tyranny of the masses and the deification of democracy, intolerance and dogmatism. Two different philosophies are rivals for our attention, he said. One is the notion that freedom is an "absolute," a "social contract." The other is the more realistic idea that specific freedoms have to be gained one by one. He favours this latter view, feeling that freedoms must be earned; it is thus a more mature philosophy.

One must concede a great deal to this viewpoint. If one preaches a vague and general freedom one will get a vague and general agreement, and nothing will be done. Propose a specific measure to advance freedom and then the fur will fly, pros and cons will be vehemently argued, and hopefully something will be done. Yet each advance on behalf of freedom surely must be sought in some context with a goal of freedom — absolute if you will — toward which each gain is a step.

Joad's book appearing in 1935 already had five more years of history and disaster as a background. The depression was a grim reality and the Nazis had risen to power in Germany.

He begins by quoting Prof. Bury who wrote in 1913: "The struggle of reason against authority has ended in what appears now to be a decisive and permanent victory for liberty. In the most civilised and progressive countries, freedom of discussion is recognised as a fundamental principle." Joad of course points out that in the world of the 1930's one cannot endorse this view. He enumerates all the factors then

hostile to liberty — the depression, the growth of centralization, the atmosphere of crisis, the creation of the mass mind.

So, between these two thinkers, we find that liberty is hard put to survive either prosperity or depression! But Joad is perceptive enough on the subject of "the paradox of poverty in potential plenty." He says: "Unless, then, men can use the liberty which democracy gives them to resolve the paradox by discovering a means of distributing what science has enabled man to produce, the paradox will destroy democracy. It is in this sense that we must use political liberty to introduce a greater measure of economic equality or economic inequality will destroy political liberty." A penetrating observation of which we have since seen a great many examples.

Of the two, depression is surely a greater menace to liberty than prosperity. But it is true that a fictitious "prosperity" based on a greedy grab for wealth and power rather than the rights of man can pose problems.

However, both writers dwell mostly on civil liberties, freedom of speech, etc., and accord great respect to John Stuart Mill's definitive statement on the subject in his essay *On Liberty*. They hardly mention Communism which has since proved to be such a troublesome challenge to what is known as "the free world" precisely because the free world has neglected the extension of liberty into the economic world.

The economic issues which have arisen since the 1930's have unfortunately not been in context with the problems of preserving and extending liberty. They have rather been struggles for slices of the pie, exploitations, deceptions, demands for security, and other developments far removed from the classic questions of liberty. The encounters of the free world with communism and other authoritarian regimes have been perplexing and indecisive.

Indeed, the various turmoils in the world today suggest that questions of liberty are the wrong questions. But they are not. The liberties we take so lightly have been won with much toil and agony and we would miss them dreadfully if we lost them. The current diverting of attention to economic issues should not cloud the need for greater, not less attention to liberty — for the extension of liberty to the economic domain.

Political democracy and civil rights have hitherto been the main concerns of advocates of liberty. The initiative on economic reform has gone to socialists and communists. The possibility of economic reform with liberty is our only hope — otherwise we will get lost in a maze of ever-increasing stultification. Let us look to it.