



Liberty and Democracy

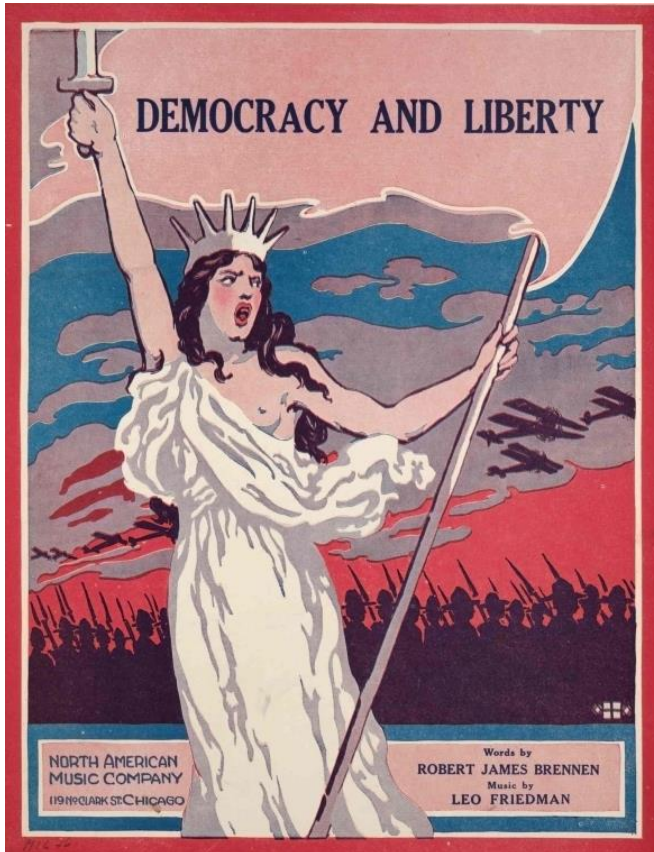
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Liberty and Democracy

Notes made for a talk to journalists in 1981



Cover of sheet music for 'Democracy and Liberty', 1918

PERSONAL LIBERTY means, at the very least, that I am not made to do or to be this or that by some external agency over which I have no control – the more control, the less free. Moreover, I am free to any degree only if I have a voice in determining what I am or am not allowed to do or not do. The fewer the obstacles before me, the more doors are open through which I can move in whatever direction I desire, the more freedom I have.

Obviously liberty is not the only ultimate value: justice, equality, knowledge, love, art, happiness, kindness, life itself are absolute values too. It may be impossible to realise them all, for they can

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clash. Absolute liberty is incompatible with absolute equality: if everybody was allowed to do what he or she wished, the strong would crush the weak, the wolves would kill the sheep. If there were absolute equality – whatever that may mean – restraints would have to be put on everybody to preserve this, and that would curtail liberty. Knowledge will not always be compatible with happiness, if what I know makes me miserable. Justice may not always be compatible with love and mercy. And so on. Moreover, no society can exist without rules and restraints which prevent collisions, chaos, mutual destruction. So in a civilised society uneasy compromises have to be kept going, continuously modified as circumstances require.

Nevertheless, to be a human being is to be able to choose: those who are unable to choose are not human but animals, caused to be and to act without ability to alter their conduct, to choose between goals. The wider the choice, the greater the liberty. To deprive men (and women) of this is literally to dehumanise them. A framework of laws within which alone men are permitted to act is plainly indispensable, but it must rest on wide consent, must not be imposed by an authority, however benevolent, and must leave a large area for individual choice. The most insidious enemies of liberty are those who tell us that they know us and our ‘true’ needs better than we do ourselves; that while we may yearn to do this or that – to choose this or that career, marry this or that person, read this or that book, utter or write these or those words, travel here or there, and so on – this will not do: they, and not we, know what we ‘truly’ want, for they are wise and we are foolish or blind or misled, and they alone can protect us against our own lower natures. One day, when, as a result of obeying their orders, we shall ourselves grow wise, we shall realise how foolish we were to resist, how right they were to coerce us in our own interest – and we shall be only too grateful.

This is the argument used by every tyrant in history, especially those who have persuaded themselves of their own infallibility. Nothing destroys liberty more rapidly than the assumption that most men are foolish, immature children, and only the governing elite, being mature, is entitled to complete power over them.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that ‘Nobody may compel me to be happy in his own way’, and that paternalism ‘is the greatest *despotism* imaginable’. To treat men as malleable human material,

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which I, the benevolent reformer (or wicked power-seeker), can mould in accordance with my, not their, purposes, is to degrade them to the role of objects, bricks in a building to be constructed by the infallible architect: and if the bricks do not fit, they must be eliminated – ‘re-education’, slavery, the Gulag are not far behind. That is the prospect that the great Russian radical Herzen called the ‘galley-slaves’ of communism, even before he knew of Marxism.

The doctrine is perfectly simple: there is only one truth about how to live, and we, the elite, know it; either you see it too, in which case you will obey us willingly, or you question it, in which case you must be made to see the light, by force if need be, or else be ‘neutralised’ (a dreadful euphemism). Journalists know better than anyone what this trampling on basic human rights leads to, whether it is done by the right or the left. They know better than anyone that a degree of freedom to speak, question, travel, investigate, write and publish – indeed, if need be, to shock public opinion – is indispensable to any decent society. That is why every tyrant, whether of the left or the right, always begins by curtailing or suppressing the freedom of the press, so that the controlled press becomes the voice of the ruling group, and writers must dance to tunes called by the organs of party or army or government or Ayatollahs, and everyone is clear who is master and who is slave. The twentieth century knows what this means only too well.

It is sometimes said that so long as the press is privately owned, journalists do not have complete freedom of utterance; and maybe there are cases of arbitrary interference – I do not want to pretend that even in Britain we are enjoying conditions of ideal freedom. But so long as proprietors and editors are many and various, and differ from each other, and love to disagree, so long as many opinions – responsible and irresponsible – are openly expressed, so long is there a free market in news and ideas; and conformity, suppression of the truth, is very difficult to achieve.

The best definition of democracy that I can think of is ‘any political order in which the government has to suck up to the electors’; it may do so honestly or by corrupt means, by decent methods or by demagogic tricks, but so long as it has to please the electors for fear of being turned out, there will be genuine self-government, control of power by the people. It is where the government is safe from the mass of the people, protected by men’s fear of heresy or by sheer force, that there is no democracy. In such

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a case it makes little difference whether the government means well or badly: in fact, *all* power, as Lord Acton said, tends to corrupt; no government with dictatorial powers, however virtuous its original intentions, has ever failed to do ghastly things. Where there is a single, irremovable authority in power, kept there by force or ideological fanaticism, be it an oligarchy, a party, an army, a revolutionary elite, without answerability to the electorate, there can be the knock at the door at 3 a.m., the search and arrest and the security police and imprisonment without trial. Even if the Russians were bullying the Poles not, as we all know, in their own interest but in what they conceived to be that of the Poles themselves, this would still be a monstrous invasion of Polish liberty; and if the Poles desperately resist, does anyone in the world really believe that they are doing so because they have been corrupted by Western capitalism, or even misled by wicked or stupid agitators, blind leaders of the blind whose eyes must be forcibly opened? This is true whether it be in Poland or in South Africa or in unhappy republics in Asia or Latin America.

There are plenty of faults in our society – excessive inequalities of wealth, lack of opportunity for leading a satisfactory life on the part of sections of our people, even now. But at least there is the power of protest – governments are turned out, people by and large can say what they wish, censorship is a pejorative word, public opinion exists, anyone can make a fuss without fear of punishment – these are blessings whose value is fully and painfully appreciated only by those who have lost them, when it is too late. I need not enumerate the countries in which liberties are suppressed in peacetime in the name of security, or progress, or, by a bitter irony, liberty. You all know what I mean.

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