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Freedom Today



November 2012

Thinkpiece No. 75  
[www.compassonline.org.uk](http://www.compassonline.org.uk)

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## *Freedom Today*

by Nick Stevenson

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# Freedom Today

by Nick Stevenson

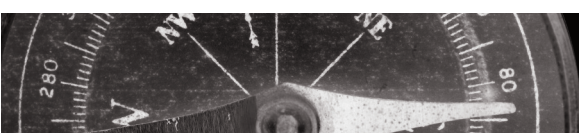
One of the curiosities of our time is the way that freedom has almost exclusively become the domain of the political Right. It is only markets that can make us free, or freedom is a life of our choosing without the state robbing us of our money or telling us how fast we can drive on the motorway. Of course freedom is coupled with security but this is usually against those undesirables like asylum seekers or the poor who would seek to erode 'our' freedom. In the modern imagination we are free if we have money to consume, live in a gated community and have global levels of mobility. This is of course not a democratic image of freedom which could be potentially shared by everyone in our increasingly class ridden and unfair society. The Left more recently has expressed more interest in questions of insecurity and of conserving the past than of freedom. Here the argument is that in an age of mobility, globalisation and change that many ordinary people lack a secure footing in our world. Where once working-class people had a sense of pride in the communities where they live and labour this has all been swept away. In these terms the political Right are the radicals wanting change and more freedom of choice, and the Left who seek to hang onto some of the securities of who we once were. The Left then speak up for the anxious and the uncertain, while the Right talk a more strident language of freedom. Of course you can't be free if your life is intolerably insecure, but equally we need to be careful of the drift into a form of cultural conservatism. The Left have a long and complex history in terms of thinking about the value of freedom that continues to have a role to play in how we imagine the future.

Not so long ago the story of the relationship between freedom and security

was different. After 1945 it was the Left who became associated with progressive change. Ideas of human rights, equality and emancipation were the emerging concepts of the liberal Left. A generation of post-war socialists following in the footsteps of intellectual giants such as R.H.Tawney and George Orwell argued that freedom and security were deeply intertwined. We needed a welfare state, progressive taxation and security against the misfortunes of life because without these features there could be no meaningful freedom. Liberal socialists of this period argued that there needed to be a liberalism for everyone. If previously a life of liberty could only be enjoyed by the relatively privileged then we needed to build a society where this was a common right. To make this meaningful we needed common liberal institutions that developed our minds (the BBC, comprehensive schools) and security so that we did not have to live anxiously looking over our shoulder fearing unemployment, ill-health or old age. Going back to this period after the experience of the mass unemployment and the rise of fascism of the 1930s it was collective security that would underpin the right of citizens to live their own lives. The desire not to return to the authoritarian politics of the 1930s stimulated later generations of liberal socialists not to build a utopia but a world where citizens could be free as well as secure. The recognition of the deep link between insecurity and the search for authoritarian solutions was widely recognised at this time. The antidote to this poison was found in rebalancing ideas of freedom and security and the attempt to bring liberal values to the wider community.

Today I think we need to rediscover the values of freedom, but to give it new meaning more suitable for our own time. In the context of a consumer society freedom today is less an Enlightenment virtue than it is the call to go shopping. As many people have recognised the market crash of 2008 has not led to rethinking the current state of our shared institutions, but has been better characterised as business as usual. Many of the failings of our institutions from the banking crisis to the MPs expenses

scandal and from phone tapping to the build-up to the war in Iraq has been characterised by a kind of group think. In other words, our society has consistently put the desire for the accumulation of wealth above the more authentic values of freedom. Returning to the eighteenth century European Enlightenment we encounter a diversity of thinkers all insisting not only that we should learn to think for ourselves, but that we do so sceptically, in public and learn to listen to the voice of the other. We must learn then to speak collectively of questions of justice, democracy and human rights. As Kant (1784/1995: 1) famously urged his fellow citizens have the 'courage to use your own reason!' The dynamism of the post-war liberal Left argued that the dream of a relatively equal society and participatory democracy should indeed be built in a world where ordinary people (and not just professional philosophers) learned to think for themselves. At the time this vision was opposed by authoritarians on the Left and the Right who continued to believe in either the need for elites to maintain their positions of control or that the people were not capable of learning to govern themselves. Freedom then was not only a matter of civil liberties (which of course remain an important historic advance) but crucially involved questions of control, resources and of our capacity to develop a wider culture of critical questioning. Further living in freedom also meant learning to live your own life rather than someone else's. From Rousseau to modern psychoanalysis freedom meant the search for your own ways of seeing, your own authentic voice and vocation or simply a path of your choosing. It was the radical invention of the labour (and then the women's movement and black civil rights groups) to argue that this modern message should indeed apply to everyone within the community. The labour movement during the twentieth century took on the liberalism of the Enlightenment and suggested it should not only apply to the privileged. In these terms today we are seeing an enormous assault on any meaningful idea of freedom. The widening of class inequality, the cutting back of the welfare





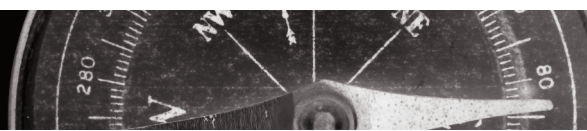
***“The poor and low paid then are literally being made responsible for the failings of capitalism. On the other hand, business elites now have considerable amounts of freedom to move capital, shift profits to low tax locations, and above all if they fail then the public is expected to bail them out. This is a scandal.”***

citizen's experiences. There is no going back to the Enlightenment philosophers in this sense as they not only come from a different time, but perhaps sought to impose their ideas of freedom from on high. In the context of our increasingly diverse and mobile lives freedom is less something imposed from on high, but more what we discover for ourselves. Today the Left needs to both rediscover and reinvent freedom for our own times. This however can-not be done without any sense of limits. Otherwise we will become stuck within narratives that will either seek to change society too quickly or ignore the fact that a consumer driven society is unsustainable over the longer term. Today in the context of global warming and increased scepticism about the market and the motivations of the private sector the liberal Left have the opportunity of not simply rediscovering freedom but reinventing it as well. Above all we need to learn to think about freedom as a collective idea and not simply one that attaches itself to individualism. It is not my freedom, but 'our' freedom that is at stake. If the labour movement of the past saw freedom as the battle for rights then we need not be any different. It became the mantra of the New Labour era that people had too many rights and we now need to talk about responsibility. This is a false dichotomy as rights and responsibilities necessarily go together. In thinking about freedom we need to argue that rights and responsibilities have become increasingly framed by inequality. It is the poor and the low paid who are paying for the banking crisis and not elites. If the rich have seen their taxes reduced we are currently living through an era where welfare rights are being attacked in an age of mass unemployment. The poor and low paid then are literally being made responsible for the failings of capitalism. On the other hand, business elites now have considerable amounts of freedom to move capital, shift profits to low tax locations, and above all if they fail then the public is expected to bail them out. This is a scandal. The rebalancing of rights and responsibilities that favour the freedom of the many rather than the few mean we should introduce higher rates of taxation, make avoidance more difficult and end the idea that private is always better

state, the rapid incarceration of the poor, the global mobility of capital, and the hike in university tuition fees is perhaps enough to suggest that freedom is for the already privileged rather than the down-trodden. Rather than simply seeing freedom in commercial terms the labour movement has a long tradition of suggesting that if freedom is to become meaningful it needs to be practiced in the context of our everyday lives. It is not only the rich and powerful who can benefit from a liberal education, and who want to live lives of meaning beyond the next shopping purchase. The value of freedom is less a

matter of atomised individuals than it is of learning how we live together autonomously.

Part of the problem is the now powerful belief that a life of freedom is an unrestricted life. We are free to the extent to which we can do as we choose. This view is clearly not entirely false as if all of our choices were made for us then we would fail to be free. However I think freedom is more a matter of stories than it is of simply being left alone. The Left needs to be able to tell a story of freedom that is not only authentic but also connects to ordinary



than the public. The poorly paid and the unemployed should no longer be expected to pick up the tab for the rich and powerful. Freedom is for everyone and can-not meaningfully exist in societies that are so unequal. Here freedom should be seen as a shared community resource not a possession of the rich. R.H. Tawney (1961: 168) wrote that if 'to lead a life worthy of human beings is confined to a minority what is commonly called freedom would more properly be described as privilege.' The Left needs to attack the privileges of the very wealthy not out of a sense of envy, but because to do so enhances the freedom of the community. Whose freedom is being served when private schools make up so many of our elite professions, or what of the freedom of those citizens growing up in poor communities with little chance of making a better life for themselves? Further can the cause of freedom be served by imposing a vocational education on young working-class people? Here we need to talk about education less in terms of mobility (although this is likely to remain important) but in terms of its ability to open up questions, and the ability to think critically and independently. Such features are becoming lost in an age where youngest are taught to test, overly assessed and endlessly sorted and graded.

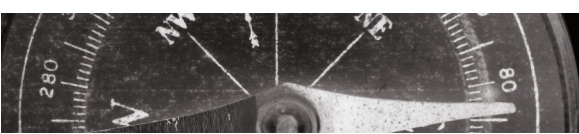
If the issues I have raised so far are familiar to many on the Left then next step in the argument is more difficult. Too few of the great liberal socialists of the past like Orwell and Tawney experienced a world of shopping malls, consumerism and celebrity. They were more familiar with the state regulated world than the global commons of international travel, the Internet and the global circulation of commodities. It would of course be a mistake to dismiss this world as all false offering only a shallow form of freedom. The development of mobile phones and individualised technology has at least on one level expanded the cause of human freedom in terms of our ability to be able to have a voice, connect with each other, and live our own lives. However as a later generation of liberal socialist's like Richard Hoggart (2004) warned that while many

working people have reacted positively to the new freedoms they have come at a price. Many of the developments that I have mentioned have been market driven and helped convert our common lives into consuming lives. This has increasingly turned our culture, leisure time, cities and schools into places of buying and selling. In the wake of the environmental crisis, the cult of privatisation and the banking crisis we need to ask whether our freedom is being served by these aspects. Here the Left needs to be wary of becoming moralistic about other people's pleasures, but equally it needs to foster a critical disposition towards the commodification of everything. It seems right and proper to ask whose interests are served by converting our towns and cities into retail space, what relationship our schools and universities should have with the private sector and whether the interests of freedom are best served by the domination of the rich and powerful over the media? The current failings of capitalism obvious to many should be an opportunity to enhance public scepticism in this respect. Finally the links need to be made between an entirely unsustainable way of life and the development of a pervasive consumer society. As many environmentalists have pointed out our ways to a more sustainable future will involve consuming less, but it is not clear how this can be achieved without it being experienced by many as an attack on their freedom to both gain status and enjoy themselves.

Finally if inequality and consumerism undermine the value of freedom then the same might also be said of the new austerity culture. The economist Paul Krugman (2012) has openly criticised the government for hiding a deliberately chosen political strategy (the imposition of massive public sector cuts) behind talk of necessity. Part of the conjuring trick being played by the government is that the austerity programme is one of freedom. Right-wing columnists can be heard daily through the media arguing the public sector had already grown too large and was crowding out the opportunities for business and investment. The cause of freedom then is best promoted by reducing the size of

the state, slashing welfare budgets and of restoring control to the head teachers of our schools through the abolition of local authority involvement. This is not simply a matter of economics but also one of power and authority. Under the guise of freedom the Right are actually seeking to deliver a world where the power of elites are considerably enhanced. Here we might consider the response to the riots which was both fast justice for many of our fellow citizens caught up in the disturbances and calls for families and schools to re-impose discipline making it easier to exclude troublesome people. This is less freedom, but more the creation of a new class of disposable citizens. The already poor and disadvantaged become increasing vulnerable in a world where basic levels of security are removed from under their feet and daily life becomes the scramble for survival. Further look at the cuts to arts budgets and the debates around the privatisation of higher education where the language of freedom has been used to disguise an unashamed class elitism. Libraries can be shut down, university fees increased and arts projects slashed because they are only ever utilised by the middle-classes. While there have been many protests in this regard the idea that this is actually an assault upon the common liberty of our fellow citizens has been missing. The ability of citizens to learn and live creatively has all been influenced by these cruel initiatives.

Here we need to think how the liberal Left might regain the initiative on freedom? We do so clearly by reaffirming our connection to the idea of human rights and civil liberties more generally. Occasionally New Labour sounded as if these were simply the concerns of a middle-class metropolitan elite and a long way from the lives of so called 'hard working families'. Further a considerable amount of space is now taken up in the tabloid press with stories about the abuses of human rights by would be terrorists, prisoners and asylum seekers. A different story could re-position these questions somewhat differently by pointing to the fact that the spread of human rights around the world is one of the genuinely progressive features about living in the 21st





century. From the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement concerns about the rights of humans has emerged as a genuinely global movement. Here despite attempts by the globe's super power to present itself as bringing human rights to dark continents this venture has failed in the full view of millions of citizens. Abu Ghraib, extraordinary rendition and Guantanamo Bay have all dented the image that many people across the world have of the moral credibility of the United States and Britain. Despite the popularity of more home based campaigns for our troops this has not been able to silence the culture of questioning in terms of human rights abuses. The liberal Left needs to become a human rights and civil liberties Left ending the idea that ordinary people are not concerned about these ideas or that they are removed from more fundamental concerns. The basic concern that many citizens have that we live up to our own values (especially under difficult circumstances) is one that the liberal Left needs to champion in the 21st century. However, as I have argued throughout, a culture of liberty and freedom is more than support for legalistic norms and basic freedoms. As liberal socialists have long recognised the culture of freedom needs to become a practice rooted in the routines of daily life as much as it is a feature of more legal practice.

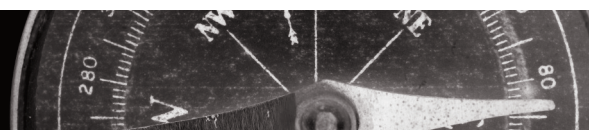
Further we might add here some of the successes of multiculturalism. The increasingly pluralistic and complex society that Britain has become was to some extent grasped within the concerns of multiculturalism. Since 9/11 and 7/7 the British (along with other European societies) have progressively abandoned the inclusive language of multiculturalism. For all the talk of community cohesion or even 'the big society' what is notable is that none of these alternatives has offered a convincing story as to how we might imagine our collective identities. This suggests not only do we need collective narratives to live by, but if the cause of freedom is to be served these need to be grounded in both hope and optimism. Multiculturalism now seems to be widely

understood as having failed because it ended in the segregation of cultures. Here multiculturalism offers a model of culture as being about living in ring-fenced camp. While this model is evident in some thinking on the subject more prevalent was the far more sensible notion that in the midst of a pluralistic society we might be able to dialogue with one another about our cultural differences. Multiculturalism suggested a kind of human freedom that was open to the Other and suggested and the possibility of learning rather than the fearful use of force. This was a significant historical advance in European societies that have nationalistic and violent histories. However this moment now seems to have passed although it is notable that much popular culture continues to work through the often joyful exploration of difference refusing any easy language of ethnic separation. Within our global world the ability of peoples and cultures to cross borders still offers a significant force in terms of how we might re-imagine ourselves more progressively in the future.

Despite the role of human rights and multiculturalism in promoting ideas of freedom the most important task in this regard today is reviving the democratic imagination. The Left has long stood for an idea of democracy that has included but cannot be reduced to the cycles of parliamentary elections. Here we urgently need to revive ideas as to what a democratic school would be like, how the media might be democratised and even how workers can have more control over their work-places. A popular democracy rooted within social movements and attempts by citizens to gain control over society from below are the most important features in terms of how we think about freedom. Here freedom to think, criticise and ultimately dissent from the dominant society all point in the direction of lives of self and collective criticism. The ability to live a life of restless questioning will not of course appeal to everyone, however, this is a better prescription for a good life than many currently on offer through market capitalism. Further this has implications for the so called happiness debate. Some of

this material has been really interesting but too much of it seemed to suggest that if citizens joined a civil organization or spent more time with their families then as a consequence they would be happier. Here I would argue that freedom is more troublesome than happiness. A free life is not necessarily a happy one, but it is ultimately a more authentic way of living that offers a different understanding of success in distinction from either consumer oriented ideas or indeed the communal warmth of clubbish associations. The Left need to be able to demonstrate that they are on the side of citizens who wish to lead self-critical lives who engage in different levels of civic participation. Freedom is a practice that can be learned within schools, through civic participation, or indeed through simply learning to understand ourselves better. To talk of freedom then removes us from bland reassurances of a risk free life, but suggest that our greatest virtue is less happiness, but more personal meaningfulness. A life lived in freedom is a life of possibility and uncertainty but also one where we can learn to understand ourselves while creatively participating in democratic institutions. Ultimately such a vision that continues to give me hope is a life beyond the warm assurances of communitarianism or the aggressive competitiveness required by neoliberalism.

*Raymond Williams* (1962) in the 1960s coined the phrase 'the long revolution' by which he meant the historical possibility of living in an educated and participatory society. This society could emerge in the future, but was being held back by the dominance of capitalism and social elitism that presumed that the masses could never learn to govern themselves. Williams never gave up on the vision of what constituted a good society, but did not expect it to come about without difficulty and complexity, and certainly did not think there could be any short cuts along the way. That we might learn to live together in a much more autonomous society guided much of his thinking, as it should ours today. The story of freedom is central to the identity of European societies and it is far from



finished. The Left in this regard are urged to find an exciting and above all convincing tale to tell that both connects with and disrupts the popular sensibilities of the 21st century. The best place to begin this venture is both in the context of our own lives, but also within the traditions of social liberalism that are shared by both the Labour and Liberal parties. There is a considerable possibility that the next government will be a coalition government but this time lead by social liberals. A liberalism with a social face is likely to appeal to both activists and politicians within both parties. It is time that the political agenda was moved decisively away from authoritarianism so that a more progressive social liberalism can emerge. Such a change in direction could yet be welcomed by a broad alliance of citizens in the UK. This would connect the Britain of the 21st century to the great progressive causes of the past like the struggle for union rights, feminism, anti-racism and human rights and thereby offer contemporary citizens the possibility of fighting for a more positive self-identity beyond either consumerism or communalism.

**Dr Nick Stevenson** is a Reader in Cultural sociology at Nottingham University and first became a Labour member in the early 1980s.

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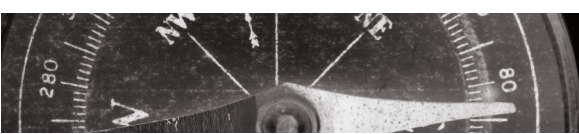
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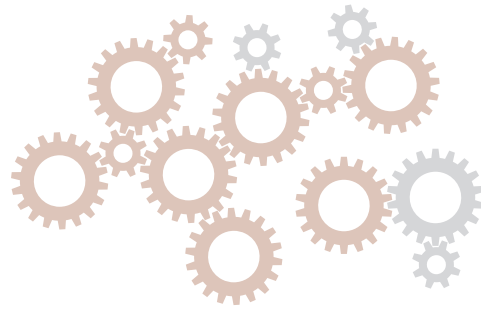
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