

JOHN DEWEY

The Political Writings

Edited, with Introduction, by
Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro

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Liberty and Social Control

from Social Frontier 2

Today there is no word more bandied about than liberty. Every effort at planned control of economic forces is resisted and attacked, by a certain group, in the name of liberty. The slightest observation shows that this group is made up of those who are interested, from causes that are evident, in the preservation of the economic status quo; that is to say, in the maintenance of the customary privileges and legal rights they already possess. When we look at history in the large we find that the demand for liberty and efforts to achieve it have come from those who wanted to alter the institutional set-up. This striking contrast is a stimulus to thoughtful inquiry. What does liberty mean anyway? Why should the cause of liberty have been identified in the past with efforts at change of laws and institutions while at the present time a certain group is using all its vast resources to convince the public that change of economic institutions is an attack upon liberty?

Well, in the first place, liberty is not just an idea, an abstract principle. It is power, effective power to do specific things. There is no such thing as liberty in general; liberty, so to speak, at large. If one wants to know what the condition of liberty is at a given time, one has to examine what persons can do and what they cannot do. The moment one examines the question from the standpoint of effective action, it becomes evident that the demand for liberty is a demand for power, either for possession of powers of action not already possessed or for retention and expansion of powers already possessed. The present ado in behalf of liberty by the managers and beneficiaries of the existing economic system is immediately explicable if one views it as a demand for preservation of the powers they already possess. Since it is the existing system that gives them these powers, liberty is thus inevitably identified with the perpetuation of that system. Translate the present hullabaloo about liberty into struggle to retain powers already possessed, and it has a meaning.

In the second place, the possession of effective power is always a matter of the distribution of power that exists at the time. A physical analogy may make clear what I mean. Water runs down hill and electric currents flow because of difference in potentials. If the ground is level, water is stagnant. If on the level ocean, there are dashing waves, it is because there is another power operating, that of the winds, occasioned

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ultimately by a difference in the distribution of temperature at different points. There is no such thing physically as manifestation of energy or effective power by one thing except in relation to the energy manifested by other things. There is no such thing as the liberty or effective power of an individual, group, or class, except in relation to the liberties, the effective powers, of other individuals, groups, and classes.

Demand for retention of powers already possessed on the part of a particular group means, therefore, that other individuals and groups shall continue to possess only the capacities in and for activity which they already possess. Demand for increased power at one point means demands for change in the distribution of powers, that is, for less power somewhere else. You cannot discuss or measure the liberty of one individual or group of individuals without thereby raising the question of the effect upon the liberty of others, any more than you can measure the energy of a head water at the head without measuring the difference of levels.

In the third place, this relativity of liberty to the existing distribution of powers of action, while meaning that there is no such thing as absolute liberty, also necessarily means that wherever there is liberty at one place there is restraint at some other place. The system of liberties that exists at any time is always the system of restraints or controls that exists at that time. No one can do anything except in relation to what others can do and cannot do.

These three points are general. But they cannot be dismissed as mere abstractions. For when they are applied either in idea or in action they mean that liberty is always a social question, not an individual one. For the liberties that any individual actually has depends upon the distribution of powers or liberties that exists, and this distribution is identical with actual social arrangements, legal and political—and, at the present time, economic, in a peculiarly important way.

Return now to the fact that historically the great movements for human liberation have always been movements to change institutions and not to preserve them intact. It follows from what has been said that there have been movements to bring about a changed distribution of power to do—and power to think and to express thought is a power to do—such that there would be a more balanced, a more equal, even, and equitable system of human liberties.

The present movement for social control of industry, money and credit, is simply a part of this endless human struggle. The present attempt to define liberty in terms of the existing distribution of liberty is an attempt to maintain the existing system of control of power, of social restraints and regimentations. I cannot go here into the nature and consequences

→ NB ENDLESS!

of this system. If one is satisfied with it, let him support the conception of liberty put forth by, say, the Liberty League which represents the present economic system. But let him not be fooled into thinking that the issue is liberty versus restraint and regimentation. For the issue is simply that of one system of control of the social forces upon which the distribution of liberties depends, versus some other system of social control which would bring about another distribution of liberties. And let those who are struggling to replace the present economic system by a cooperative one also remember that in struggling for a new system of social restraints and controls they are also struggling for a more equal and equitable balance of powers that will enhance and multiply the effective liberties of the mass of individuals. Let them not be jockeyed into the position of supporting social control at the expense of liberty, when what they want is another method of social control than the one that now exists, one that will increase significant human liberties.

It is nonsense to suppose that we do not have social control now. The trouble is that it is exercised by the few who have economic power, at the expense of the liberties of the many and at the cost of increasing disorder, culminating in that chaos of war which the representatives of liberty for the possessive class identify with true discipline.

The Need for a New Party

from The New Republic (1931)

THE PRESENT CRISIS

There is a deep-seated reason why the common man is convinced that neither the Democratic nor the Republican party represents him or his interests. The Republican party has played the role of Providence. It has told the people that its leaders in alliance with big business are the guardians of that general prosperity which is attained under the direction of organized capital. It has declared that when big capitalists were made prosperous, a general state of welfare would seep down and be enjoyed by the masses. It was not for the masses to do anything; they had only to wait, hold out their hands and receive what the gods above would give them. The masses did not exactly believe this gospel, but they saw nothing that they could do—and so they waited. The conviction that prosperity begins above and then descends has been the underlying doctrine of every Republican policy since the War. It is typified in every utterance and every act of that representative of the Messiahship of big business—Secretary Mellon.

President Hoover is a willing and to all appearances a sincere believer in the gospel. There were those who thought the "engineering mind" would effect some healthful regeneration. They forgot that the engineer at present looks two ways. On the one hand, he looks to the efficient use of materials and processes: he is the servant of technological progress. But on the other hand, he is the servant of capital employed for private profit. He is used to thinking in the same terms and speaking the same language as his masters. And when his engineering ability has been employed, not in actual engineering enterprises, but in some eminently profitable undertaking, he is completely identified with the gospel current among men of large business and wealth, who have to rationalize their behavior by making themselves believe that it is in the interest of general welfare. However, this gospel begins to be questioned when the income of the majority of the people falls below a decent subsistence level, as it has during the present depression. Providence can maintain itself securely only when it provides. A self-professed Providence which not only does not provide, but shakes the very structure of economic society and endangers the elementary securities of life, is a self-confessed fraud.

the mind of the engineer

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