

“Bread or Liberty: The Debate”

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"Any society that would give up a little liberty to gain a little security will deserve neither and lose both." - Benjamin Franklin.

Part I: The Idea of Liberty

One of the reasons why people in the state of nature consent to the idea of state is to ensure the protection of the weak against the strong in the society. But as the strongest man in the room, the state is both capable of and often also eager to prey on both the weak and the strong individual in the society. Thus, it becomes imminent to set limits to the power which the state can exercise over the people. The protection of the rights of the people and setting limits to the powers of the state are both important aspects of ensuring liberty. Constitutional checks and balances, and when necessitated protests and rebellions are part of protecting this liberty granted to the society. The concept of limiting the powers of the state was a rare idea amongst the political thinkers of Europe for a long period in history but aberrations like the French Revolution would routinely question the absolute powers of the state and usher discussions over the importance of liberties in society. A gradual global shift towards democracy as the preferred form of governance is eventually a result of people realizing the value of their liberties. Liberty goes to the core of enabling every individual in the society to achieve a position according to their interests and capabilities. Liberty is a necessary precondition for any kind of social security or social morality to exist. Liberty is once such virtue whose existence promotes many other virtues in society including economic prosperity, diversity, creativity, tolerance, understanding, respect etc. Liberty allows individuals to take responsibility for their choices but giving up these liberties foster a culture of dependency on the government and personal responsibility takes a backseat.

A society that prioritizes safety above everything ends up giving power in the hands of a government which concentrates maximum power in its hands in the garb of responding to prospective threats which are often non-existent. This has the tendency to lead to a full-blown authoritarian regime. Once established, authoritarian governments are notoriously difficult to dismantle, and the erosion of individual liberties becomes a long-term and entrenched reality. Over time, many infamous examples of the same have sprung up over time be it the erstwhile Nazi Germany or the contemporary Communist China.

In the aftermath of World War I and the economic turmoil of the Weimar Republic, many Germans were yearning for stability. Hitler came to power with the promise to restore order and provide safety and economic security, but his regime quickly dismantled democratic institutions, suppressed dissent, and imposed a totalitarian rule marked by violence and terror.

Under Xi Jinping, the Communist regime in China has implemented a complex system that assigns scores to individuals based on their behavior, online activities, and social interactions. Those with low scores have to face repercussions in various aspects of their life, including travel and access to certain services. The system is designed to promote compliance with government policies, but it raises significant concerns about privacy and freedom of expression.

Part II: The Emergency Period in India

In the background of the emergency, Minoo Masani was posed with the question whether economic prosperity or holding elections should be given priority to, he attempted to answer in his 1977 Article titled “Freedom First” rejected the antithesis that there is a clash at all between bread and freedom. He believed that the Constitution of India provided for both and made it the duty of the state to protect both. He pointed to how Communists and Fascists regimes led by the likes of Stalin, Hitler, Mao etc. have justified their dictatorship by posing the question of ‘Do you want bread or freedom?’ to the masses. They would sell a utopian idea to the people of how their dictatorship will lead to a time when the land will be flowing with milk and honey and the state would have withered away. But he highlighted how after so many years of that promise, the state has still not withered away and both social security and personal liberties are at a deplorable state manifested by the fact that bread queues in Moscow in 1977 are longer than they use to be at the time of the revolution in 1917. He gives the example of how the requirements of the bread i.e. consumer goods are actually best met in present day democracies which accommodate personal liberties and dissent. A person who has the liberty to change his government from time-to-time can expect his government to uphold social security and morality but a person who is at the mercy of his government can forget about either.

Writing in the aftermath of the emergency, Pillo Modi in his book titled ‘Democracy means Bread and Freedom’ discusses how despots who can’t directly advocate for a totalitarian rule do so by persuading people to barter away their liberties for a loaf of bread. This is often met with a sympathetic response where bread is scarce. Those desperate for their next meal don’t bother asking how their surrender of freedoms is linked to getting bread for their hungry bellies. The ultimate argument that the state shall wither away eventually never comes to fruition. The barter of freedom for bread is a bad bargain. Even in times of plenty, a man can go hungry because you have taken away the liberty to question the basis of distribution from him. Very basic everyday freedoms like a person’s right to choose his profession are actually inalienable for development of human dignity and upgradation of the self. The only restriction to an individual’s pursuits shall be his own capacity and efficiency.

Part III: The Animal Farm Example

To what extent people can actually buy the idea of the regime postponing their liberties for upholding social security and morality is very-well exemplified in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The character of Boxer who represents that section of the working class in Stalin's regime who really believed in his utopian ideas and were willing to toil away their lives in order to make it a reality. The fate which awaited such people is well-known. The manipulation of the seven commandments demonstrates how those in power can use propaganda to rewrite history and control the narrative. The inability of the animals to challenge these linguistic alterations underscore the pervasive influence of the ruling class in justifying their dictatorship over subjects whose personal liberties have been trampled upon. The idea of 'Napoleon is always right' is propagated to ensure subservience and obedience of the masses in the wake of growing injustices on the farm. The story made you wonder what's more terrifying about human nature - a group of people who are afraid to say that things could be otherwise or a group of people who don't even know it could be better?

The state of such a society is very appropriately summed up in the quote, "They had come to a time when no one dared speak his mind, when fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere, and when you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing to shocking crimes."

Part IV: Reflections from the West

French Nobel Laureate Albert Camus in his essay "Bread and Freedom" rejects the idea of postponing freedom for the sake of the bread. For him, freedom is a precondition for justice without which justice would make no sense. For him, food and shelter are far from adequate manifestations of freedom. Things ranging from our plans for the future, our choice of meal, our choice of person to hang out with to more complex ideas like right not to be oppressed by others, right to change the government etc. are all important indications of the self's sense of freedom. He also warns of the scenario when even if a person has willingly given up his liberties for the sake of bread, his supply of bread is not ensured in the absence of liberty. In a scenario where a slave is made to toil in inhumane conditions and he is supposed to not raise his voice about his deplorable state as his supply of bread is at the whims of his master. In this scenario, not only has he lost his liberties but the supply of bread is also not guaranteed. As the slave willingly let go of his liberties, he cannot complain about it in the future even if the master stops his supply of bread. This is why the idea of liberty has to precede bread and is a precondition of justice.

American Historian Wilfred McClay in his article "Reflections on Liberty" emphasizes on how more than its collateral benefits, liberty is valued for its own sake. It's an essential component of human dignity and worth. It's not possible to subject liberty to a cost-benefit

analysis. He hails the 1st amendment of the U.S. Constitution which prohibits any legislation infringing upon the fundamental liberties of citizens as “the most important addition to the US Constitution”. Lack of liberty kills public discourse and leads to a society which is ignorant towards social issues not by choice but because they don’t have the option to exercise their choices to the fullest. It can lead to a society where the state is not on speaking terms with the people.

Part V: The Arab Spring – A Contemporary Instance

Marwan Muasher, the former foreign minister of Jordan wrote a book in 2009 titled “The Arab Center”. This was the year when events which directly culminated into the Arab Spring were starting to take place. He pointed out how the governments in the Arabic countries have been using different excuses to delay the freedoms of people ranging from maintaining peace, ensuring economic well-being to the issue of Palestine. The rulers would argue that it was premature and dangerous to introduce political reform before supplying basic needs to the citizens. In the post-colonial era, a number of countries including India have proven this hypothesis wrong.

He mentions about the lack of or complete absence of liberties in most Arabic societies. The ruling regimes are despotic. No system of checks and balances or political diversity is present. The ruling establishment would use religion as a tool of fear to stall political progress. But in the absence of parallel political reforms, it was witnessed that ensuring inclusive growth or addressing economic abuse by key political players became impossible leading to ever increasing corruption and widening gap between the rich and the poor. Ideologies are imposed on people regardless of whether people believe in them or not. Referring to economic reforms, he presents the example of Egypt and Jordan who adopted a series of economic reforms for sustained growth of their economies but despite this the citizens of these countries remained frustrated by the process which facilitated this progress as it lacked any system of checks and balances and did not allow them to question the fact that they were unable to gauge this progress in their everyday lives.

The most popular slogan of the Arab Spring in Tunisia was “We'll live on water and bread but we will not accept Ben Ali anymore.” He had ruled Tunisia for 25 years. It speaks volumes about how much more significant liberties are to the existence of the human self than mere assurance of bread. No society can thrive without embracing multidimensionality, granting liberties to its people and addressing the issues of its citizens.

To conclude, I would like to quote Dwight D. Eisenhower, “If all that Americans want is security, they can go to prison. They’ll have enough to eat, a bed and a roof over their heads. But if an American wants to preserve his dignity and his equality as a human being, he must not bow his neck to any dictatorial government.”