

# On freedom | The Express Tribune

*Abbas Moosvi April 18, 2023*

This brand of 'freedom' functions as a sleight of hand to manufacture consent for opportunistic political objectives

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Mainstream economists define freedom in a purely negative sense i.e. the absence of constraints to action — particularly in the commercial domain. This may refer, for instance, to the 'freedom' to seek out employment, resign from one's job, set up a business venture, engage in cross-border trade, etc while facing minimal (ideally none) intervention by external parties, particularly the 'government'. Regulation of any sort, therefore, in the form of tariffs, taxation, paperwork, customs duties, antitrust measures, quality standard checks, environmental protection laws and so on are rejected on hand. The reasoning here is that 'competition' ought to be ensured, which is seen to function as a kind of great equaliser of the playing field: elevating the most talented, productive and innovative players to the top and ensuring the 'customer' ultimately emerges as the biggest winner in the situation. Of course, all this is merely on paper.

In the real world, corporations are run no differently to dictatorial regimes: in which orders are passed down various hierarchical levels with the simple expectation of swift execution, 'or else'. This threat of dismissal isn't a trivial one, to be brushed aside with the retort of 'if you don't like it, leave' — because more often than not, particularly in the developing world, unemployment is just a few steps away from starvation. 'Choices' are only real if the potential costs associated with failing to pick any one from a given set aren't catastrophic. Suppose a robber were to place a pistol on your neck, asking you to empty out your pockets. Technically you can 'choose' not to do so — in which case you likely end up at the graveyard soon afterwards. But is that how we would like to conceive of freedom?

Philosopher Isaiah Berlin outlines in his book, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, the other — equally important — side of this discussion, that of positive freedom. This refers to a situation where conditions are set in a manner that allows, and indeed fosters, genuinely autonomous action by individuals. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argued for something similar in his 'development as freedom' thesis: pinpointing five different kinds of freedom that had to be ensured at all times in

order for societies to adopt the path of progress and economic prosperity. These constituted political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. Sen was of the opinion that if any one of these were compromised, it would signify a net loss in terms of societal advancement.

When neoclassical economists argue against social protection in favour of 'generating employment opportunities', what they are essentially doing is promoting economic precarity: whereby people are forced to stay in hyper exploitative, dead-end jobs simply due to the absence of a cushion to fall back on. This naturally leads to a situation where the vast majority of workers are dragging their feet and simply doing the bare minimum: which is terrible for productivity. Hypothetically, if basic sustenance related concerns weren't a factor, people would experience a much higher degree of 'freedom' when choosing which jobs to opt for. There would be a sense of organic, genuine enthusiasm about work. Furthermore, if they were actually paid what they contributed (technically impossible under capitalism), they would also be a lot more willing to embrace mundane, tedious, and difficult jobs such as janitorial duties, construction work, industrial operations, etc.

This brand of 'freedom' functions as a clever sleight of hand to manufacture consent for opportunistic political objectives: after all, who would dare argue against such a noble notion? The number of wars the US-led imperial machine has waged on vulnerable countries across the globe on its basis is a case in point, the closest to home being the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan in which Pakistan functioned as an incubation centre for the mujahideen, commonly referred to in the Pentagon as 'freedom fighters'. Comedian George Carlin once famously remarked the following about them: "Well, if crime fighters fight crime and fire fighters fight fire, what do freedom fighters fight? They never mention that part to us, do they?" Another proponent of this kind of 'freedom' was Margaret Thatcher, nicknamed TINA for her constant deployment of the phrase 'there is no alternative' while referring to her economic policies of privatisation, deregulation and trade liberalisation. So much for freedom!

Economic reforms in Chile under military dictator Augusto Pinochet, brought into power via a coup backed by domestic business elites, were led by the 'Chicago Boys' — a group of economics carefully trained under a state-funded programme in the United States with the specific objective to counteract left-wing ideas and influences in Latin America. During this period, violent repression of social movements was seen across the country. Markets were 'freed' of all external influences: most importantly trade unions, which were viscosly clamped down upon across the board. In Iraq, following the US invasion in 2003, intentions were made painfully clear by the Coalition Provisional Authority. These were, "the full privatization of public enterprises, full ownership rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, full repatriation of foreign profits ... the opening of Iraq's banks to foreign control, national treatment for foreign companies and ... the elimination of nearly all trade barriers". As this was unfolding, the global community was expected to believe this was in the best interests of the Iraqi citizenry rather than a systematic transfer of key assets to opportunistic foreign elites: all in

the name of 'freedom'. The consequences are obvious today.

There are three central questions developing nations in particular face today with regard to freedom: a) What is its nature? b) Who it is for? And c) What function does it serve? All three of these have received little critical attention from local intellectuals, almost as if their answers were self-evident — leading to major catastrophes. Within the capitalist modality, freedom has come to mean the variety of choices one faces at the mall while looking for shoes to purchase — with no questions asked about the working conditions under which they were produced. Indeed, most multinational corporations are perfectly fine with deploying child labour in the Third World to minimise costs. Is this freedom? Or does 'freedom' only belong to those with pre-existing access to financial capital, whereby all facets of the state apparatus are structured to serve their needs?

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