

Chapter Seven

CAPITALISM, FREEDOM, AND THE PROLETARIAT

1. IN CAPITALIST SOCIETIES everyone owns something, be it only his own labor power, and each is free to sell what he owns, and to buy whatever the sale of what he owns enables him to buy. Many claims made on capitalism's behalf are questionable, but here is a freedom which it certainly provides.

It is easy to show that under capitalism everyone has some of this freedom, especially if being free to sell something is compatible with not being free not to sell it, two conditions whose consistency I would defend. Australians are free to vote, even though they are not free not to vote, since voting is mandatory in Australia. One could say that Australians are forced to vote, but that proves that they are free to vote, as follows: one cannot be forced to do what one cannot do, and one cannot do what one is not free to do. Hence one is free to do what one is forced to do. Resistance to this odd-sounding but demonstrable conclusion comes from failure to distinguish the idea of being free to do something from other ideas, such as the idea of doing something freely.

Look at it this way: before you are forced to do *A*, you are, except in unusual cases, free to do *A* and free not to do *A*. The force removes the second freedom, not the first. It puts no obstacle in the path of your doing *A*, so you are still free to. Note, too, that you could frustrate someone who sought to force you to do *A* by making yourself not free to do it.

I labor this truth—that one is free to do what one is forced to do—because it, and failure to perceive it, help to explain the character and persistence of a certain ideological disagreement. Marxists say that working-class people are forced to sell their labor power, a thesis we shall look at later. Bourgeois thinkers celebrate the freedom of contract manifest not only in the capitalist's purchase of labor power but in the worker's sale of it. If Marxists are right, then workers, being forced to sell their labor

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power, are, in an important way, unfree. But it must remain true that (unlike chattel slaves) they are free to sell their labor power. Accordingly, the unfreedom asserted by Marxists is compatible with the freedom asserted by bourgeois thinkers. Indeed: if the Marxists are right, the bourgeois thinkers are right, unless they also think, as characteristically they do, that the truth they emphasize refutes the Marxist claim. The bourgeois thinkers go wrong not when they say that the worker is free to sell his labor power, but when they infer that the Marxist cannot therefore be right in his claim that the worker is forced to. And Marxists¹ share the bourgeois thinkers' error when they think it necessary to deny what the bourgeois thinkers say. If the worker is not free to sell his labor power, of what freedom is a foreigner whose work permit is removed deprived? Would not the Marxists who wrongly deny that workers are free to sell their labor power nevertheless protest, inconsistently, that such disfranchised foreigners have been deprived of a freedom?²

2. Freedom to buy and sell is one freedom of which in capitalism there is a great deal. It belongs to capitalism's essential nature. But many think that capitalism is, quite as essentially, a more comprehensively free society. They believe that, *if* what you value is freedom, as opposed, for example, to equality, then you should be in favor of an unmixed capitalist economy without a welfare sector. In the opinion I am describing, one may or may not favor such a purely capitalist society, but, if one disfavors it, then one's reason for doing so must be an attachment to values other than freedom, since, from the point of view of freedom, there is little to be said against pure capitalism. It is in virtue of the prevalence of this opinion that so many English-speaking philosophers and economists now call the doctrine which recommends a purely capitalist society "libertarianism."

It is not only those who call themselves "libertarians" who believe that that is the right name for their party. Many who reject their aim endorse their name: they do not support unmodified capitalism, but they agree that it maximizes freedom. This applies to *some* of those who call themselves "liberals," and Thomas Nagel is one of them. Nagel says that

¹ Such as Ziyad Husami, if he is a Marxist, who says of the wage-worker: "Deprived of the ownership of means of production and means of livelihood he is forced (not free) to sell his labor power to the capitalist" ("Marx on Distributive Justice," pp. 51–52). I contend that the phrase in parentheses introduces a falsehood into Husami's sentence, a falsehood which Karl Marx avoided when he said of the worker that "the period of time for which he is free to sell his labour power is the period of time for which he is forced to sell it" (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 415; cf. p. 932: "the wage-labourer . . . is compelled to sell himself of his own free will").

² For a more developed account of the relations between force and freedom, see *History, Labour, and Freedom*, pp. 239–47.

“libertarianism exalts the claim of individual freedom of action,” and he believes that it does so too much. He believes that it goes too far toward the liberty end of a spectrum on which he believes leftists go too far toward the equality end.³

Nagel-like liberals—and henceforth, by ‘liberals,’ I shall mean ones of the Nagel kind—assert, plausibly, that liberty is a good thing, but they say that it is not the only good thing. So far, libertarians will agree. But liberals also believe that libertarians wrongly sacrifice other good things in too total defense of the one good of liberty. They agree with libertarians that pure capitalism is liberty pure and simple, or anyway *economic* liberty pure and simple, but they think the various good things lost when liberty pure and simple is the rule justify restraints on liberty. They want a capitalism modified by welfare legislation and state intervention in the market. They advocate, they say, not unrestrained liberty, but liberty restrained by the demands of social and economic equality. They think that what they call a free economy is too damaging to those who, by nature or circumstance, are ill placed to achieve a minimally proper standard of life within it, so they favor, within limits, taxing the better off for the sake of the worse off, although they believe that such taxation interferes with liberty. They also think that what they call a free economy is subject to fluctuations in productive activity and misallocations of resources which are potentially damaging to everyone, so they favor measures of interference in the market, although, again, they believe that such interventions diminish liberty. They do not question the libertarian description of capitalism as the (economically) free society, the society whose economic agents are not, or only minimally, interfered with by the state. But they believe that economic freedom may rightly and reasonably be abridged. They believe in a compromise between liberty and other values, and that what is known as the welfare state mixed economy approaches the right sort of compromise.

3. I shall argue that libertarians, and liberals of the kind described, misuse the concept of freedom. That is not, as it stands, a comment on the attractiveness of the institutions they severally favor, but on the rhetoric they use to describe those institutions. If, however, and as I contend, they misdescribe those institutions, then a correct description of them might

³ “Libertarianism . . . fastens on one of the two elements [that is, freedom and equality—G. A. Cohen] of the liberal ideal and asks why its realization should be inhibited by the demands of the other. Instead of embracing the ideal of equality and the general welfare, libertarianism exalts the claim of individual freedom of action and asks why state power should be permitted even the interference represented by progressive taxation and public provision of health care, education and a minimum standard of living” (“Libertarianism without Foundations,” p. 192).

make them appear less attractive, and then my critique of the defensive rhetoric would indirectly be a critique of the institutions the rhetoric defends.

My principal contention is that, while liberals and libertarians see the freedom which is intrinsic to capitalism, they overlook the unfreedom which necessarily accompanies capitalist freedom.

To expose this failure of perception, I shall begin by criticizing a description of the libertarian position provided by the libertarian philosopher Antony Flew in his *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Flew defines 'libertarianism' as "whole-hearted political and economic liberalism, opposed to any social or legal constraints on individual freedom." Liberals of the Nagel kind would avow themselves *unwholehearted* in the terms of Flew's definition. For they would say that they support certain (at any rate) legal constraints on individual freedom. Indeed, after laying down his definition of 'libertarianism,' Flew adds that "the term was introduced in this sense by people who believe that, especially but not only in the United States, those who pass as liberals are often much more sympathetic to socialism than to classical liberalism."⁴

Now a society in which there are *no* "social and legal constraints on individual freedom" is perhaps imaginable, at any rate by people who have highly anarchic imaginations. But, be that as it may, the Flew definition misdescribes libertarians, since it does not apply to defenders of capitalism, which is what libertarians profess to be, and are. For consider: If the state prevents me from doing something I want to do, it evidently places a constraint on my freedom. Suppose, then, that I want to perform an action which involves a legally prohibited use of your property. I want, let us say, to pitch a tent in your large back garden, perhaps just in order to annoy you, or perhaps for the more substantial reason that I have nowhere to live and no land of my own, but I have got hold of a tent, legitimately or otherwise. If I now try to do this thing I want to do, the chances are that the state will intervene on your behalf. If it does, I shall suffer a constraint on my freedom. The same goes for all unpermitted uses of a piece of private property by those who do not own it, and there are always those who do not own it, since "private ownership by one person presupposes non-ownership on the part of other persons."⁵ But the free enterprise economy advocated by libertarians and described as the "free" economy by liberals rests upon private property: you can sell and buy only what you respectively own and come to own. It follows that the Flew definition is untrue to its *definiendum*, and that the term 'liber-

⁴ *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 188.

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, p. 812.

tarianism' is a gross misnomer for the position it now standardly denotes among philosophers and economists.

4. How could Flew have brought himself to publish the definition I have criticized? I do not think that he was being dishonest. I would not accuse him of appreciating the truth of this particular matter and deliberately falsifying it. Why then is it that Flew, and libertarians like him, *and* liberals of the kind I described, see the unfreedom in state interference with a person's use of his property, but fail to note the unfreedom in the standing intervention against anyone else's use of it entailed by the fact that it is that person's private property? What explains their monocular vision? (By that question, I do not mean: what motive do they have for seeing things that way? I mean: how is it possible for them to see things that way? What intellectual mechanism or mechanisms operate to sustain their view of the matter?)

Notice that we can ask similar questions about how antilibertarian liberals are able to entertain the description which they favor of *modified* capitalism. According to Nagel, "progressive taxation" entails "interference" with individual freedom.⁶ He regards the absence of such interference as a value, but one which needs to be compromised for the sake of greater economic and social equality, as what he calls the "formidable challenge to liberalism . . . from the left" maintains.⁷ Yet it is quite unclear that social democratic restriction on the sway of private property, through devices like progressive taxation and the welfare minimum, represents *any* enhancement of governmental interference with freedom. The government certainly interferes with a landowner's freedom when it establishes public rights of way and the right of others to pitch tents on his land. But it also interferes with the freedom of a would-be walker or tent-pitcher when it prevents them from indulging *their* individual inclinations. The general point is that incursions against private property which *reduce* owners' freedom and transfer rights over resources to non-owners thereby *increase* the latter's freedom. The net effect on freedom of the resource transfer is, therefore, in advance of further information and argument, a moot point.

Libertarians are against what they describe as an "interventionist" policy in which the state engages in "interference." Nagel is not, but he agrees that such a policy "intervenes" and "interferes." In my view, the use of words like 'interventionist' to designate the stated policy is an ideological distortion detrimental to clear thinking and friendly to the libertarian

⁶See n. 3 above.

⁷"Libertarianism without Foundations," p. 191.

point of view. It is, though friendly to that point of view, consistent with rejecting it, and Nagel does reject it, vigorously. But, by acquiescing in the libertarian use of ‘intervention,’ he casts libertarianism in a better light than it deserves. The standard use of ‘intervention’ esteems the private property component in the liberal or social democratic settlement too highly, by associating that component too closely with freedom.

5. I now offer a two-part explanation of the tendency of libertarians and liberals to overlook the interference in people’s lives induced by private property. The two parts of the explanation are independent of each other. The first part emerges when we remind ourselves that “social and legal constraints on freedom” (see p. 150 above) are not the only source of restriction on human action. It restricts my possibilities of action that I lack wings, and therefore cannot fly without major mechanical assistance, but that is not a social or legal constraint on my freedom. Now I suggest that one explanation of our theorists’ failure to note that private property constrains freedom is a tendency to take as part of the structure of human existence in general, and therefore as no social or legal constraint on freedom, any structure around which, *merely as things are*, much of our activity is organized. A structure which is not a permanent part of the human condition can be misperceived as being just that, and the institution of private property is a case in point. It is treated as so given that the obstacles it puts on freedom are not perceived, while any impingement on private property itself is immediately noticed. Yet private property, like any system of rights, pretty well *is* a particular way of distributing freedom *and unfreedom*. It is necessarily associated with the liberty of private owners to do as they wish with what they own, but it no less necessarily withdraws liberty from those who do not own it. To think of capitalism as a realm of freedom is to overlook half of its nature.

I am aware that the tendency to the failure of perception which I have described and tried to explain is stronger, other things being equal, the more private property a person has. I do not think really poor people need to have their eyes opened to the simple conceptual truth I emphasize. I also do not claim that anyone of sound mind will for long deny that private property places restrictions on freedom, once the point has been made. What is striking is that the point so often needs to be made, against what should be *obvious* absurdities, such as Flew’s definition of ‘libertarianism.’

6. But there is a further and independent and conceptually more subtle explanation of how people⁸ are able to believe that there is no restriction,

⁸This part of the explanation applies more readily to libertarian than to liberal ideological perception. It does also apply to the latter, but by a route too complex to set out here.

or only minimal restriction, of freedom under capitalism, which I now want to expound.

You will notice that I have supposed that to prevent someone from doing something he wants to do is to make him, in that respect, unfree; I am *pro tanto* unfree *whenever* someone interferes with my actions, whether *or not I have a right to perform them, and whether or not my obstructor has a right to interfere with me*. But there is a definition of freedom which informs much libertarian writing and which entails that interference is not a sufficient condition of unfreedom. On that definition, which may be called the rights definition of freedom, I am unfree only when someone prevents me from doing what I have a right to do, so that he, consequently, has no right to prevent me from doing it. Thus Robert Nozick says: "Other people's actions place limits on one's available opportunities. Whether this makes one's resulting action non-voluntary depends upon whether these others had the right to act as they did."⁹

Now, if one combines this rights definition of freedom with a moral endorsement of private property, with a claim that, in standard cases, people have a moral right to the property they legally own, then one reaches the result that the protection of legitimate private property cannot restrict anyone's freedom. It will follow from the moral endorsement of private property that you and the police are justified in preventing me from pitching my tent on your land, and, because of the rights definition of freedom, it will then further follow that you and the police do not thereby restrict my freedom. So here we have a further explanation of how intelligent philosophers are able to say what they do about capitalism, private property, and freedom. But the characterization of freedom which figures in the explanation is unacceptable. For it entails that a properly convicted murderer is not rendered unfree when he is justifiably imprisoned.

Even justified interference reduces freedom. But suppose for a moment that, as libertarians say or imply, it does not. On that supposition one cannot argue, without further ado, that interference with private property is wrong *because* it reduces freedom. For one can no longer take it for granted, what is evident on a normatively neutral account of freedom, that interference with private property *does* reduce freedom. On a rights account of what freedom is one must abstain from that assertion until one has shown that people have moral rights to their private property. Yet libertarians tend *both* to use a rights definition of freedom *and* to take it for granted that interference with his private property diminishes the owner's freedom. But they can take that for granted only on the normatively neutral account of freedom, on which, however, it

⁹ *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p. 262.

is equally obvious that the protection of private property diminishes the freedom of *nonowners*, to avoid which consequence they adopt a rights definition of the concept. And so they go, back and forth, between inconsistent definitions of freedom, not because they cannot make up their minds which one they like better, but under the propulsion of their desire to occupy what is in fact an untenable position. Libertarians want to say that interferences with people's use of their private property are unacceptable because they are, quite obviously, abridgments of freedom, and that the reason why protection of private property does not similarly abridge the freedom of nonowners is that owners have a right to exclude others from their property and nonowners consequently have no right to use it. But they can say all that only if they define freedom in two inconsistent ways.

7. Now, I have wanted to show that private property, and therefore capitalist society, limit liberty, but I have not said that they do so more than communal property and socialist society. Each form of society is by its nature congenial and hostile to various sorts of liberty, for variously placed people. And concrete societies exemplifying either form will offer and withhold additional liberties whose presence or absence may not be inferred from the nature of the form itself. Which form is better for liberty, all things considered, is a question which may have no answer in the abstract. Which form is better for liberty may depend on the historical circumstances.¹⁰

I say that capitalism and socialism offer different sets of freedoms, but I emphatically do not say that they provide freedom in two different senses of that term. To the claim that capitalism gives people freedom some socialists respond that what they get is *merely bourgeois* freedom. Good things can be meant by that response: that there are important particular liberties which capitalism does not confer; and/or that I do not have freedom, but only a necessary condition of it, when a course of action (for example, skiing) is, though not *itself* against the law, unavailable to me anyway, because other laws (for example, those of private property, which prevent a poor man from using a rich man's unused skis) forbid me the means to perform it. But when socialists suggest that there is no "real" freedom under capitalism, at any rate for the workers, or that socialism promises freedom of a higher and as yet unrealized kind, then, so I think, their line is theoretically incorrect and politically disastrous. For there is freedom under capitalism, in a plain, good sense, and if socialism will not give us more of it, we shall rightly be disappointed.

¹⁰For further discussion of that question, see "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom," pp. 232–35. [This discussion is included as an Appendix to this chapter.—Ed.]

If the socialist says he is offering a new variety of freedom, the advocate of capitalism will carry the day with his reply that he prefers freedom of the known variety to an unexplained and unexemplified rival. But if, as I would recommend, the socialist argues that capitalism is, all things considered, inimical to freedom *in the very sense* of 'freedom' in which, as he should concede, a person's freedom is diminished when his private property is tampered with, then he presents a challenge which the advocate of capitalism, by virtue of his own commitment, cannot ignore.

For it is a contention of socialist thought that capitalism does not live up to its own professions. A fundamental socialist challenge to the libertarian is that pure capitalism does not protect liberty in general, but rather those liberties which are built into private property, an institution which also limits liberty. And a fundamental socialist challenge to the liberal is that the modifications of modified capitalism modify not liberty, but private property, often in the interest of liberty itself. Consequently, transformations far more revolutionary than a liberal would contemplate might be justified on grounds similar to those which support liberal reform.

A homespun example shows how communal property offers a differently shaped liberty, in no different sense of that term, and, in certain circumstances, more liberty than the private property alternative. Neighbors *A* and *B* own sets of household tools. Each has some tools which the other lacks. If *A* needs a tool of a kind which only *B* has, then, private property being what it is, he is not free to take *B*'s one for a while, even if *B* does not need it during that while. Now imagine that the following rule is imposed, bringing the tools into partly common ownership: each may take and use a tool belonging to the other without permission provided that the other is not using it and that he returns it when he no longer needs it, or when the other needs it, whichever comes first. *Things being what they are* (a substantive qualification: we are talking, as often we should, about the real world, not about remote possibilities) the communizing rule would, I contend, increase tool-using freedom, on any reasonable view. To be sure, some freedoms are removed by the new rule. Neither neighbor is as assured of the same easy access as before to the tools that were wholly his. Sometimes he has to go next door to retrieve one of them. Nor can either now charge the other for use of a tool he himself does not then require. But these restrictions probably count for less than the increase in the range of tools available. No one is as sovereign as before over any tool, so the privateness of the property is reduced. But freedom is probably expanded.

It is true that each would have more freedom still if he were the sovereign owner of *all* the tools. But that is not the relevant comparison. I do not deny that full ownership of a thing gives greater freedom than

shared ownership of that thing. But no one did own all the tools before the modest measure of communism was introduced. The kind of comparison we need to make is between, for example, sharing ownership with ninety-nine others in a hundred things and fully owning just one of them. I submit that which arrangement nets more freedom is a matter of cases. There is little sense in one hundred people sharing control over one hundred toothbrushes. There is an overwhelming case, from the point of view of freedom, in favor of our actual practice of public ownership of street pavements. Denationalizing the pavements in favor of private ownership of each piece by the residents adjacent to it would be bad for freedom of movement.¹¹

8. Sensible neighbors who make no self-defeating fetish of private property might contract into a communism of household tools. But that way of achieving communism cannot be generalized. We could not by contract bring into fully mutual ownership those nonhousehold tools and resources which Marxists call means of production. They will never be won for socialism by contract, since they belong to a small minority, to whom the rest can offer no *quid pro quo*.¹² Most of the rest must hire out

¹¹ Editor's note: Cohen offered the following further remarks on pp. 237–38 of "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom":

But someone will say: ownership of private property is the only example of *full* freedom. Our practice with pavements may be a good one, but no one has full freedom with respect to any part of the pavement, since he cannot, for instance, break it up and put the results to a new use, and he cannot prevent others from using it (except, perhaps, by the costly means of indefinitely standing on it himself, and he cannot even do that when laws against obstruction are enforced). The same holds for any communal possessions. No one is fully free with respect to anything in which he enjoys a merely shared ownership. Hence even if private property entails unfreedom, and even if there is freedom without private property, *there is no case of full freedom which is not a case of private property. . . .*

The [italicized] thesis. . . . is a piece of bourgeois ideology masquerading as a conceptual insight. The argument for the thesis treats freedom fetishistically, as control over *material things*. But freedom, in the central sense of the term with which we have been occupied, is freedom to *act*, and if there is a concept of full freedom in that central sense, then it is inappropriate, if we want to identify it, to focus, from the start, on control over *things*. I can be fully free to walk to your home when and because the pavement is communally owned, even though I am not free to destroy or to sell a single square inch of that pavement. To be sure, action requires the use of matter, or at least space, but it does not follow that to be fully free to perform an action with certain pieces of matter in a certain portion of space I need full control over the matter and the space, since some forms of control will be unnecessary to the action in question. The rights I need over things to perform a given action depend on the nature of that action.

¹² Unless the last act of this scenario qualifies as a contract: in the course of a general strike a united working class demands that private property in major means of production

their labor power to members of that minority, in exchange for the right to some of the proceeds of their labor on facilities in whose ownership they do not share.

So we reach, at length, the third item in the title of this paper, and an important charge, with respect to liberty, which Marxists lay against capitalism. It is that in capitalist society the great majority of people are forced to sell their labor power, because they do not own any means of production. The rest of this paper addresses a powerful objection to that Marxist charge.

To lay the ground for the objection, I must explain how the predicate 'is forced to sell his labor power' is used in the Marxist charge. Marxism characterizes classes by reference to social relations of production, and the claim that workers are forced to sell their labor power is intended to satisfy that condition: it purports to say something about the proletarian's position in capitalist relations of production. But relations of production are, for Marxism, *objective*: what relations of production a person is in does not turn on his consciousness. It follows that if the proletarian is forced to sell his labor power in the relevant Marxist sense, then this must be because of his objective situation, and not merely because of his attitude to himself, his level of self-confidence, his cultural attainment, and so on. It is in any case doubtful that limitations in those subjective endowments can be sources of what interests us: unfreedom, as opposed to something similar to it but also rather different: incapacity. But even if diffidence and the like could be said to force a person to sell his labor power, that would be an irrelevant case here.¹³

9. Under the stated interpretation of 'is forced to sell his labor power,' a serious problem arises for the thesis under examination. For if there are persons whose objective position is standardly proletarian but who are not forced to sell their labor power, then the thesis is false. And there do seem to be such persons.

I have in mind those proletarians who, initially possessed of no greater resources than most, secure positions in the petty bourgeoisie and elsewhere, thereby rising above the proletariat. Striking cases in Britain are members of certain immigrant groups, who arrive penniless, and without good connections, but who propel themselves up the class hierarchy with effort, skill, and luck. One thinks—it is a contemporary example—of

be socialized, as a condition of their return to work, and a demoralized capitalist class meets the demand. (How, by the way, could libertarians object to such a revolution? For hints, see Nozick, "Coercion.")

¹³Except, perhaps, where personal subjective limitations are explained by capitalist relations of production: see *History, Labour, and Freedom*, pp. 278–79.

those who are willing to work very long hours in shops bought from native British petty bourgeois, shops which used to close early. Their initial capital is typically an amalgam of savings, which they accumulated, perhaps painfully, while still in the proletarian condition, and some form of external finance. *Objectively speaking*, most¹⁴ British proletarians are in a position to obtain these. Therefore most British proletarians are not forced to sell their labor power.

10. I now refute two predictable objections to the above argument.

The first says that the recently mentioned persons were, *while they were proletarians*, forced to sell their labor power. Their cases do not show that proletarians are not forced to sell their labor power. They show something different: that proletarians are not forced to remain proletarians.

This objection illegitimately contracts the scope of the Marxist claim that workers are forced to sell their labor power. But before I say what Marxists intend by that statement, I must defend this general claim about freedom and constraint: *fully explicit attributions of freedom and constraint contain two temporal indexes*. To illustrate: I may now be in a position truly to say that I am free to attend a concert tomorrow night, since nothing has occurred, up to now, to prevent my doing so. If so, I am *now* free to attend a concert *tomorrow night*. In similar fashion, the time when I am constrained to perform an action need not be identical with the time of the action: I might *already* be forced to attend a concert *tomorrow night* (since you might already have ensured that if I do not, I shall suffer some great loss).

Now when Marxists say that proletarians are forced to sell their labor power, they mean more than ‘*X* is a proletarian at time *t* only if *X* is at *t* forced to sell his labor power at *t*’; for that would be compatible with his not being forced to at time *t* + *n*, no matter how small *n* is. *X* might be forced on Tuesday to sell his labor power on Tuesday, but if he is not forced on Tuesday to sell his labor power on Wednesday (if, for example, actions open to him on Tuesday would bring it about that on Wednesday he need not do so), then, though still a proletarian on Tuesday, he is not then someone who is forced to sell his labor power in the relevant Marxist sense. The manifest intent of the Marxist claim is that the proletarian is forced at *t* to *continue* to sell his labor power, throughout a period from *t* to *t* + *n*, for some considerable *n*. It follows that because there is a route out of the proletariat, which our counterexamples traveled, reach-

¹⁴ At least most: it could be argued that *all* British proletarians are in such a position, but I stay with “most” lest some ingenious person discover objective proletarian circumstances worse than the worst one suffered by now prospering immigrants. But see also n. 15 below.

ing their destination in, as I would argue, an amount of time less than n ,¹⁵ they were, though proletarians, not forced to sell their labor power in the required Marxist sense.

Proletarians who have the option of class ascent are not forced to continue to sell their labor power, just because they do have that option. Most proletarians have it as much as our counterexamples did. Therefore most proletarians are not forced to sell their labor power.

11. But now I face a second objection. It is that necessarily not more than a few proletarians can exercise the option of upward movement. For capitalism requires a substantial hired labor force, which would not exist if more than just a few workers rose.¹⁶ Put differently, there are necessarily only enough petty bourgeois and other nonproletarian positions for a small number of the proletariat to leave their estate.

I agree with the premise, but does it defeat the argument against which it is directed? Does it refute the claim that most proletarians are not forced to sell their labor power? I think not.

An analogy will indicate why I do not think so. Ten people are placed in a room, the only exit from which is a huge and heavy locked door. At various distances from each lies a single heavy key. Whoever picks up this key—and each is physically able, with varying degrees of effort, to do so—and takes it to the door will find, after considerable self-application, a way to open the door and leave the room. But if he does so he alone will be able to leave it. Photoelectric devices installed by a jailer ensure that it will open only just enough to permit one exit. Then it will close, and no one inside the room will be able to open it again.

It follows that, whatever happens, at least nine people will remain in the room.

Now suppose that not one of the people is inclined to try to obtain the key and leave the room. Perhaps the room is no bad place, and they

¹⁵This might well be challenged, since the size of n is a matter of judgment. I would defend mine by reference to the naturalness of saying to a worker that he is not forced to (continue to) sell his labor power, since he can take steps to set himself up as a shopkeeper. Those who judge otherwise might be able, at a pinch, to deny that most proletarians are not forced to sell their labor power, but they cannot dispose of the counterexamples to the generalization that all are forced to. For our prospective petty bourgeois is a proletarian on the eve of his ascent when, unless, absurdly, we take n as 0, he is not forced to sell his labor power.

¹⁶“The truth is this, that in this bourgeois society every workman, if he is an exceedingly clever and shrewd fellow, and gifted with bourgeois instincts and favoured by an exceptional fortune, can possibly convert himself into an *exploiteur du travail d'autrui*. But if there were no *travail* to be *exploité*, there would be no capitalist nor capitalist production” (Marx, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” in *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 1079). For commentary on similar texts, see my *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 243.

do not want to leave it. Or perhaps it is pretty bad, but they are too lazy to undertake the effort needed to escape. Or perhaps no one believes he would be able to secure the key in face of the capacity of the others to intervene (though no one would in fact intervene, since, being so diffident, each also believes that he would be unable to remove the key from anyone else). Suppose that, whatever may be their reasons, they are all so indisposed to leave the room that if, counterfactually, one of them were to try to leave, the rest would not interfere. The universal inaction is relevant to my argument, but the explanation of it is not.

Then whomever we select, it is true of the other nine that not one of them is going to try to get the key. Therefore it is true of the selected person that he is free to obtain the key, and to use it.¹⁷ He is therefore not forced to remain in the room. But all that is true of whomever we select. Therefore it is true of each person that he is not forced to remain in the room, even though necessarily at least nine will remain in the room, and in fact all will.

Consider now a slightly different example, a modified version of the situation just described. In the new case there are two doors and two keys. Again, there are ten people, but this time one of them does try to get out, and succeeds, while the rest behave as before. Now necessarily eight will remain in the room, but it is true of each of the nine who do stay that he or she is free to leave it. The pertinent general feature, present in both cases, is that there is at least one means of egress which none will attempt to use, and which each is free to use, since, *ex hypothesi*, no one would block his way.

By now the application of the analogy may be obvious. The number of exits from the proletariat is, as a matter of objective circumstance, small. But most proletarians are not trying to escape, and, as a result, *it is false that each exit is being actively attempted by some proletarian*. Therefore for most¹⁸ proletarians there exists a means of escape. So even though necessarily most proletarians will remain proletarians, and will sell their labor power, perhaps none, and at most a minority, are forced to do so.

In reaching this conclusion, which is about the proletariat's *objective* position, I used some facts of consciousness, regarding workers' aspira-

¹⁷For whatever may be the correct analysis of 'X is free to do A,' it is clear that X is free to do A if X would do A if he tried to do A, and that sufficient condition of freedom is all that we need here. (Some have objected that the stated condition is not sufficient: a person, they say, may do something he is not free to do, since he may do something he is not legally, or morally, free to do. Those who agree with that unhelpful remark can take it that I am interested in the nonnormative use of 'free,' which is distinguished by the sufficient condition just stated.)

¹⁸See nn. 14, 15 above.

tions and intentions. That is legitimate. For if workers are objectively forced to sell their labor power, then they are forced to do so whatever their subjective situation may be. But their actual subjective situation brings it about that they are not forced to sell their labor power. Hence they are not objectively forced to sell their labor power.

12. One could say, speaking rather broadly, that we have found more freedom in the proletariat's situation than classical Marxism asserts. But if we return to the basis on which we affirmed that most proletarians are not forced to sell their labor power, we shall arrive at a more refined description of the objective position with respect to force and freedom. What was said will not be withdrawn, but we shall add significantly to it.

That basis was the reasoning originally applied to the case of the people in the locked room. Each is free to seize the key and leave. But note the conditional nature of his freedom. He is free not only *because* none of the others tries to get the key, but *on condition* that they do not (a condition which, in the story, is fulfilled). Then *each is free only on condition that the others do not exercise their similarly conditional freedom*. Not more than one can exercise the liberty they all have. If, moreover, any one were to exercise it, then, because of the structure of the situation, all the others would lose it.

Since the freedom of each is contingent on the others not exercising their similarly contingent freedom, we can say that there is a great deal of unfreedom in their situation. Though each is individually free to leave, he suffers with the rest from what I shall call *collective unfreedom*.

In defense of that description, let us reconsider the question why the people do not try to leave. None of the reasons suggested earlier—lack of desire, laziness, diffidence—go beyond what a person wants and fears for himself alone. But sometimes people care about the fate of others, and they sometimes have that concern when they share a common oppression. Suppose, then, not so wildly, that there is a sentiment of solidarity in that room. A fourth possible explanation of the absence of attempt to leave now suggests itself. It is that no one will be satisfied with a personal escape which is not part of a general liberation.

The new supposition does not upset the claim that each is free to leave, for we may assume that it remains true of each person that he would suffer no interference if, counterfactually, he sought to use the key (assume that the others would have contempt for him, but not try to stop him). So each remains free to leave. Yet we can envisage members of the group communicating to their jailer a demand for freedom, to which he could hardly reply that they are free already (even though, individually, they are). The hypothesis of solidarity makes the collective unfreedom evident. But unless we say, absurdly, that the solidarity creates the

unfreedom to which it is a response, we must say that there is collective unfreedom whether or not solidarity obtains.

Returning to the proletariat, we can conclude, by parity of reasoning, that although most proletarians are free to escape the proletariat, and, indeed, even if everyone is, the proletariat is collectively unfree, an imprisoned class.

Marx often maintained that the worker is forced to sell his labor power not to any particular capitalist, but just to some capitalist or other, and he emphasized the ideological value of that distinction.¹⁹ The present point is that although, in a collective sense, workers are forced to sell their labor power, scarcely any particular proletarian is forced to sell himself even to some capitalist or other. And this, too, has ideological value. It is part of the genius of capitalist exploitation that, by contrast with exploitation which proceeds by “extra-economic compulsion,”²⁰ it does not require the unfreedom of specified individuals. There is an ideologically valuable anonymity on *both* sides of the relationship of exploitation.

13. It was part of the argument for affirming the freedom to escape of proletarians, taken individually, that not every exit from the proletariat is crowded with would-be escapees. Why should this be so? Here are some of the reasons.

- i. It is possible to escape, but it is not easy, and often people do not attempt what is possible but hard.
- ii. There is also the fact that long occupancy, for example from birth, of a subordinate class position nurtures the illusion, which is as important for the stability of the system as the myth of easy escape, that one’s class position is natural and inescapable.
- iii. Finally, there is the fact that not all workers would like to be petty or trans-petty bourgeois. Eugene Debs said, “I do not want to rise above the working class, I want to rise with them,”²¹ thereby evincing an attitude like the one lately attributed to the people in the locked room. It is sometimes true of the worker that, in Brecht’s words,

He wants no servants under him
And no boss over his head.²²

¹⁹ See *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, p. 223, for exposition and references.

²⁰ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, p. 926.

²¹ And Tawney remarked that it is not “the noblest use of exceptional powers . . . to scramble to shore, undeterred by the thought of drowning companions” (*Equality*, p. 106).

²² From his “Song of the United Front.”

Those lines envisage a better liberation: not just from the working class, but from class society.²³

APPENDIX ON WHETHER SOCIALISM OR CAPITALISM
IS BETTER FOR FREEDOM²⁴

I am here separating two questions about capitalism, socialism, and freedom. The first, or *abstract* question, is which form of society is, just as such, better for freedom, not, and this is the second, and *concrete* question, which form is better for freedom in the conditions of a particular place and time.²⁵ The first question is interesting, but difficult and somewhat obscure. I shall try to clarify it presently. I shall then indicate that two distinct ranges of consideration bear on the second question, about freedom in a particular case, considerations which must be distinguished not only for theoretical but also for political reasons.

Though confident that the abstract interpretation of the question, which form, if any, offers more liberty, is meaningful, I am not at all sure what its meaning is. I do not think we get an answer to it favoring one form if and only if that form would in all circumstances provide more freedom than the other. For I can understand the claim that socialism is by nature a freer society than capitalism even though it would be a less free society under certain conditions.

Consider a possible analogy. It will be agreed that sports cars are faster than Jeeps, even though Jeeps are faster on certain kinds of terrain. Does the abstract comparison, in which sports cars outclass Jeeps, mean, therefore, that sports cars are faster on *most* terrains? I think not. It seems sufficient for sports cars to be faster in the abstract that there is some

²³ See *History, Labour, and Freedom*, chapter 13 [entitled “The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom”—Ed.], for a fuller and more nuanced presentation of Sections 8–13 of this paper. See, too, Gray, “Against Cohen on Proletarian Unfreedom,” which criticizes the material presented above. What Gray says against the claims developed in Sections 1–7 strikes me as feeble, but his critique of the idea of collective proletarian unfreedom demands a response, which I hope in due course to provide.

²⁴ [See n. 10 above.—Ed.]

²⁵ One may also distinguish not, as above, between the capitalist form of society and a particular capitalist society, but between the capitalist form in general and specific forms of capitalism, such as competitive capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and so on (I provide a systematic means of generating specific forms in *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, chapter 3, sections 6 and 8). This further distinction is *at* the abstract level, rather than between abstract and concrete. I prescind from it here to keep my discussion relatively uncomplicated. The distinction would have to be acknowledged, and employed, in any treatment which pretended to be definitive.

unbizarre terrain on which their maximum speed exceeds the maximum speed of Jeeps on any terrain. Applying the analogy, if socialism is said to be freer than capitalism in the abstract, this would mean that there are realistic concrete conditions under which a socialist society would be freer than *any* concrete capitalist society would be. This, perhaps, is what some socialists mean when they say that socialism is a freer society, for some who say that would acknowledge that in some conditions socialism, or what would pass for it,²⁶ would be less free than at any rate some varieties of capitalism.

There are no doubt other interesting abstract questions, which do not yield to the analysis just given. Perhaps, for example, the following intractably rough prescription could be made more usable: consider, with respect to each form of society, the sum of liberty which remains when the liberties it withholds by its very nature are subtracted from the liberties it guarantees by its very nature. The society which is freer in the abstract is the one where that sum is larger.

So much for the abstract issue. I said that two kinds of consideration bear on the answer to concrete questions, about which form of society would provide more freedom in a particular here and now. We may look upon each form of society as a set of rules which generates, in particular cases, particular enjoyments and deprivations of freedom. Now the effect of the rules in a particular case will depend, in the first place, on the resources and traditions which prevail in the society in question. But secondly, and distinctly, it will also depend on the ideological and political views of the people concerned. (This distinction is not always easy to make, but it is never impossible to make it.) To illustrate the distinction, it could be that in a given case collectivization of agriculture would provide more freedom on the whole for rural producers, were it not for the fact that they do not *believe* it would, and would therefore resist collectivization so strongly that it could be introduced only at the cost of enormous repression. It could be that though socialism might distribute more liberty in Britain now, capitalist ideology is now here so powerful, and the belief that socialism would reduce liberty is, accordingly, so strong, that conditions *otherwise* propitious for realizing a socialism with a great deal of liberty are not favorable in the final reckoning, since the final reckoning must take account of the present views of people about how free a socialist society would be.

²⁶Which way they would put it depends on how they would define socialism. If it is defined as public ownership of the means of production, and this is taken in a narrowly juridical sense, then it is compatible with severe restrictions on freedom. But if, to go to other extreme, it is defined as a condition in which the free development of each promotes, and is promoted by, the free development of all, then only the attempt to institute socialism, not socialism, could have negative consequences for freedom.

I think it is theoretically and politically important to attempt a reckoning independent of that final reckoning.

It is theoretically important because there exists a clear question about whether a socialist revolution would expand freedom whose answer is not determined by people's beliefs about what its answer is. *Its* answer might be "yes," even though most people think its answer is "no," and even though, as a result, "no" is the correct answer to the further, "final reckoning" question, for whose separateness I am arguing. Unless one separates the questions, one cannot coherently evaluate the ideological answers to the penultimate question which help to cause the ultimate question to have the answer it does.

It is also politically necessary to separate the questions, because it suits our rulers not to distinguish the two levels of assessment. The Right can often truly say that, all things considered, socialism would diminish liberty, where, however, the chief reason why this is so is that the Right, with its powerful ideological arsenal, have convinced enough people that it is so. Hence one needs to argue for an answer which does not take people's conviction into account, partly, of course, in order to combat and transform those convictions. If, on the other hand, you want to defend the status quo, then I recommend that you confuse the questions I have distinguished.

The distinction between concrete questions enables me to make a further point about the abstract question, which *form* of society provides more freedom. We saw above that a plausible strategy for answering it involves asking concrete questions about particular cases. We may now add that the concrete questions relevant to the abstract one are those which prescind from people's beliefs about their answers.

I should add, finally, that people's beliefs about socialism and freedom affect not only how free an achieved socialist society would be, but also how much restriction on freedom would attend the process of achieving it. (Note that there is a somewhat analogous distinction between how much freedom we have in virtue of the currently maintained capitalist arrangements, and how much we have, or lose, because of the increasingly repressive measures used to maintain them.) Refutation of bourgeois ideology is an imperative task for socialists, not as an alternative to the struggle for socialism, but as part of the struggle for a socialism which will justify the struggle which led to it.