

The Search for Freedom:
Lessons for the 21st Century

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The larger goals of this symposium are stated directly enough: what message do we, the survivors of the twentieth century, wish to pass on to our children and our children's children who will inhabit and must manage this globe in the next century? Specifically, in consideration of freedom and oppression, what lessons have we learned that might help human freedom to survive and flourish under the inevitably competing requirements of change, stability, and justice which will mark humanity's passage into the twenty-first century?

In the search for such lessons, history offers us some useful parallels. Nineteenth-century Europe, in post-Napoleonic times, witnessed a widespread surge for freedom which culminated in the emergence of a number of nation-states. Later in the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, the struggle for equity in these new nation-states began - and a central dilemma of our time emerged: how to balance the demands for equity and freedom. The liberal welfare state evolved as one of a number of responses to that quest. Today the welfare state is in the throes of crisis, and we are forced to redefine the even more complex balance between freedom, equity, economic growth and technological advance.

In the twentieth century, the years after the Second World War witnessed a similar surge toward freedom, but on a worldwide scale as nation after nation gained its independence from colonial bonds. As the century comes to a close, we are engaged in a new struggle for equity, now on a global scale, within and among nations. The struggle is unresolved - indeed, our failure to overcome the profound structural dualism in the world is, I fear, one of our most tragic legacies to the twenty-first century. It must somehow be solved or the precious freedom gained through independence will be lost. It is within this general context, I believe, that we must seek lessons to pass on to succeeding generations.

The earlier struggles for equity, in Europe and North America, were bound up in the great ideologies - and here again history can be instructive for it demonstrates that in the twentieth century these ideologies have run their course. One important lesson of this century, I believe, is that freedom is not the product of any one specific ideological construct. I think

we have also found that no ideology can sustain itself as a motive force for more than one or two generations. Ideology has many functions, to be sure, one of which is to provide the drive toward specific perceptions of a more desirable society. But the grandsons and granddaughters of any revolution simply see things differently and act differently. The complexity of real life turns out to be too heavy for any ideological scaffolding to uphold. Moreover, the rapidity and scale of the change we are now undergoing leads to profound and qualitative generational jumps.

The lesson in this is the need for a considerable humility of mind in the face of these enormous complexities of life - we must learn to leave room for the unexpected. We began this century confident of our capacity to uncover the certainties of the laws of nature and society. We are ending it in growing recognition that, beyond a few limited truisms, there are no certainties - complexity, vulnerability and unpredictability are inevitable companions of modern life.

New ideologies will undoubtedly continue to emerge as part of the yearning for a sense of direction and the search for understanding of the unfathomable. But we must recognize the limitations of ideologies - life is vastly more intricate and richer in its complexity, both more terrible and more beautiful, than any scenario we can imagine.

Linked to this, I believe, is the lesson for each human being of how important it is to retain a sense of self. Inner life is man's ultimate sanctuary where he can find himself and his centre. It can be the final refuge from adversity and oppression, and from the pressures of an increasingly populated world buffeted by rapid and deep change.

Inner freedom, we have learned, can survive even in the midst of oppression - as we have seen in the case of political prisoners or others who have decided as much as possible not to relate to their political environment except where it is absolutely necessary to sustain their right to life. To be sure, the inner life can also be an escape route from social responsibility. But at its most sublime, we have also witnessed the power of the concept of inner exile - a notion that lies at the heart of the civil disobedience that inspired Gandhi and others and changed so many lives in this century as part of the struggle for freedom.

Our world today, particularly in consumer-oriented societies, is one where many forces and distractions work to dissipate the strength of our inner selves. We are caught up in an unending stream of trivial entertainment, packaged by sophisticated and cynical experts. Through the power of the media, vicarious and real life experiences are reduced to images. The overall impact is disassociation, non-involvement and a numbing of the senses and of judgement.

Similarly, the political process is distorted and alienated from the people by the impact of packaged political messages and synthesized political personalities. If we want to reduce the chances of greater oppression in the

twenty-first century, society must learn to develop unadulterated and less manipulative channels for political information, participation, and action.

Ours is an age in which ever-larger organizations - whether bureaucracies, political parties, trade unions or corporations - have tended to dehumanize actions and concerns. Participatory social and political organizations have been correspondingly eroded. What is needed are organizations more commensurate with the human scale, that is to say the scale at which people can be fully engaged as human beings in public affairs. The implications for political organizations, political processes and the role of the media are considerable. What is required are more meaningful mechanisms capable of mediating between large-scale problems on the one hand and the human scale of daily life to which the average man or woman can relate with understanding, empathy and compassion on the other. This is essentially a problem of governance and tests our capacity to make crucial decisions and choices that will determine the shape of human society in the twenty-first century.

The problems that we will face in the future - such as increased population pressure, long-term structural unemployment, and, above all, continuing and expanding poverty - will challenge our ability to put science and technology to better use than we have been able to do so far. In principle, science and technology have made possible the elimination of poverty; and the fact that so many more people today are better fed and housed and in better health than in the past demonstrates this potential. Yet poverty continues and lies at the root of so many of the world's problems, and it is increasing. Poverty is the prime generator of today's huge migrations, which are bound to change the ethnic and cultural geography of the globe as hundreds of millions of people leave their villages and homelands in search of jobs, food, freedom and security.

An important and sobering lesson from this century is that technology can just as easily be used to enslave as to liberate humankind. The seeds for more democratic and compassionate use of science and technology are there. But the danger is that these powerful tools will be employed to enlarge the political control by the few rather than to increase participation by the many.

Advances in science and technology raise yet another caution for future generations: how do we avoid the rule of experts? A classic example of the dangerous path such rule can put us on is the arms race. There the scientific expertise has been used to increase and accelerate the arms race and to develop more and more destructive weapons rather than to disarm.

Reliance on military force, and thereby military experts, as the way to solve our problems has led to the militarization of whole societies - despite the overwhelming evidence we have of how, in light of the growing destructiveness of weapons, increasingly self-defeating the military solution generally proves to be. We simply must devise better ways of settling conflict more peacefully in this crowded and competitive world.

While military oppression is open in its resort to naked violence, another form of subjugation is structural in nature and invisible - the oppression of women, of minority groups, of various castes and sects and tribes passed over by history. Particularly troubling in today's pluralistic world is the tyranny that the majority can impose on those who are different and weak. It is well to emphasize that freedom and oppression are not necessarily polar opposites, unable to exist in each other's presence. One person's pursuit of happiness may easily trample upon another person's life and liberty.

In far too many places in the third world, of course, it is the majority who are the oppressed and the marginalized - the vast numbers of the rural and urban poor and the marginalized whose needs and aspirations are ignored by the urban elites bent in pursuit of affluent life styles. Increasingly, the poor are displaying a new assertiveness and demanding to be heard. They are no longer willing to accept a daily life of squalor, misery and injustice. Ways will have to be found to integrate them fully into the national life of their societies, before violence and oppression becomes inevitable. This will be one of the great challenges confronting the twenty-first century.

The road to freedom has been a long and difficult one marked by war and revolution. Freedom has only really been in reach of many segments of society within this century, and the process is still unfinished, especially in the third world. The more than 130 wars which have been fought in the developing countries since the end of the Second World War need to be seen as an expression of the tremendous and profound social change occurring there accompanied by violence and revolution. It demonstrates just how fragile social structures are in the face of change. We live in an economy that has become a single world economy. The interdependence of the globe's politics and security means that any small war can turn into a major conflict. How are we to make sense of this swift process of chaotic global transformation and emerge in freedom and equity? That is the central problem of our age.

With many countries still experiencing high fertility rates, population pressures will intensify well into the twenty-first century. Before these pressures become too great, thereby complicating all other problems, we will need to come to terms with the urgency of liberating and empowering the many still marginalized groups - lest the problems become unmanageable.

Faced with the record of the twentieth century thusfar, and in light of the unprecedentedly rapid change we are now undergoing, many futurologists have assumed, explicitly or otherwise, that some kind of worldwide authoritarian rule will be unavoidable if the human race is to survive. We need to keep constantly in front of us two tough questions: Is a democratic scenario of the future possible? What must we do to make it possible?

The matter takes on particular urgency in light of the growing and intensified political assertiveness from outside the mainstream. The conventional structures and organizations of democracy may not necessarily be able to take into account the various ways in which the democratic impulse

will manifest itself in the densely-populated nations of the third world. How does one manage freedom on a scale of one billion people? The search for democratic government, under different demographic configurations, may take different forms and stages than those with which we are now familiar. This search may take place in a different civilizational context, during the course of which we may witness the emergence of reinvigorated and hopefully democratic non-Western civilizations which will insist on taking their rightful place alongside Western societies. The lesson to be taken here is that the shape of freedom is always changing, it is never static or inflexible.

Related to this is the question of freedom and the rule of law. The present international legal system has been called into question by the emergence of new actors who did not participate in the consensus on which that system was constructed. A new consensus is needed involving all the relevant actors which could form the basis for a new global system of international law.

One of the most important lessons of this century has been the recognition of the limits of this planet. We began the twentieth century with a sense of power and certainty, bordering on arrogance, that the earth was ours to exploit and that man was the measure of all things. But the state of our resource base - even when balanced against human creativity and innovation - tells us that nature is not at the command of the human race. Rather the human race is part of nature and must respect it.

We have come to know - or certainly should have by now - how wrong it is to attempt to define our problems and their solutions only in material terms; that is a dead-end street. We must take into account the moral dimensions to our problems and deal with them in that context. This will demand from each individual a redefinition of his or her own humanity as a moral being. Here, I believe, we are coming to see how important is the role of religion and spirituality. This century has seen that the long historical process of secularization seems to have come to an end. It is becoming increasingly clear that men and women cannot live in a totally secularized world; they need some meaning to life that reaches beyond themselves. This realization is, I believe, very much a part of the "return of the sacred" of which Daniel Bell speaks. This also is what I think André Malraux meant by his remark that the twenty-first century would be a religious century - or there would be no twenty-first century.

The sense of the transcendental can express itself in other ways as well. One is through art and the appreciation of beauty which can be pointers to other dimensions of life, leading us to those inner spaces of which I spoke where the human spirit can find solace, shelter, and strength.

We have seen in this century that when disparities between rich and poor within a country grow too great, democratic government becomes impossible. The search for equity now is worldwide and must confront the fact of structural dualism rooted in the international system itself. This is the biggest unresolved problem that the twenty-first century faces: How can

humankind organize and manage an interdependent, fragile and competitive world in which there are such enormous gaps between the rich and poor? How can we overcome the danger that science and technology will simply continue to perpetuate and widen those gaps? How do we devise a democratic international system, one which respects pluralism and is not under the control of the powerful few?

Such a system will have to work to reduce disparities not increase them. It will need to be one in which we manage the global economy in more rational fashion. It will have to pay heed to the urgency of better care of the global commons - our seas and our skies and those other parts of the planet where humankind has a common heritage.

Beyond its enormous practical tasks, such a system must allow freedom to flourish. Freedom is a fragile flower, with many predators, which needs constant tending. It is still all too easily reversible. We have seen how quickly newly-independent countries, after gaining their freedom from external oppressors, have slipped into internal authoritarianism and repression. Freedom is based on the strength of institutions - but it is also rooted in the attitudes and hearts of people. Its maintenance will be based on the human capacity for reason, love, compassion, empathy and respect for the freedom of others - even our adversaries. We must therefore develop a new consensus on international morality on which, despite all our differences, new systems of international governance can be based.

As for the present international organizations, let us be candid: they have not been able to cope very well with the enormous complexities in the problems of our modern world. What is called for really is a second generation of international organizations - where, somehow, national governments can be held accountable for their international acts, of commission or omission, by the peoples of this pluralistic global society.

Finally, it should be realized that this new international system we so badly need will have to be built not by us who have lived our lives in this century but by those who must manage the next - the young. These lessons, therefore, need to be addressed to them.

To be sure, youth today is in large part disaffected and disillusioned with grandiose schemes. Many of the young have not been socialized into the political process - and who really can blame them for their lack of interest when so many of them, in the North as well as the South, are without jobs or any real prospect of a better life? In the third world alone, some one billion new jobs will be needed by the year 2000 to employ new entrants to the work force. In the jargon of the young, that figure is mind-blowing - and whose mind might not well be blown apart at the prospect of a life without any regular work, emptied of all inspiration by daily misery and poverty, and even without the certainty of living out a regular life span in a world poised on the brink of nuclear self-destruction?

Our children, I fear, don't have a lot to thank us for. Perhaps our best hope is that they will determine for themselves how to build a better world. Having failed to do it ourselves, we can't presume to tell them how. But we owe them at the very least an honest assessment of our mistakes.

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