1. Individual and Collective Freedom

December 6, 1990. The General announced his resignation. The student revolt had finally blossomed into freedom. They rejoiced in their liberty. Do these words mean anything in Asia—or are they “only words”?

Before answering the question, let us note that the words do mean something: they connote collective freedom. When Rabindranath Tagore, in his celebrated Gitanjali cycle of poems, intoned

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; …
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake

he had collective freedom in mind. India’s colonial experience would explain the quest for collective freedom.

The Quiet American, the novel by Graham Greene, explores the consequences of trying to impose an alien view on another culture. A bizarre conversation on political philosophy takes place between Thomas Fowler, the narrator, and Arden Pyle, an
undercover OSS agent, in a tower amidst paddy fields, manned by two colonial,

Vietnamese soldiers:

I said to Pyle, “Do you think they know they are fighting for Democracy?”…
“And as for liberty, I don’t know what it means. Ask them.” I called across the
floor in French to them. “La liberté—qu’est ce que c’est la liberté?” They sucked
in the rice and stared back and said nothing.2

And yet the Viet Minh were fighting for freedom. Therefore, freedom does have meaning
in Asia. The Vietnam War, as one historian observes, was “fought to achieve a united,
independent country.”3 Freedom in Asia and Africa, thanks to colonial experience, means
collective freedom: “Pyle said, ‘Do you want everybody to be made in the same mould?
... You stand for the importance of the individual as much as I do….’”4 However, does
freedom mean individual freedom as well? Consider the sentiments expressed in these
words (more or less the same sentiments expressed by Arden Pyle in the preceding
paragraph):

The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel
called upon to be angry with our neighbour for doing what he likes, or even to
indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they
inflict no positive penalty.5

Is there any counterpart here to the privacy that was the boast equally of Pericles and of
Nicias:6 “he reminded them of their country, the freest of the free, and of the unfettered
discretion allowed in it to all to live as they pleased?”

To the Athenian citizen, this was the negative side of freedom; the positive side
was equally valuable, the other side of the same coin. As Aristotle observes, “He who has
the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by
us to be a citizen of that state.”7 Again:
One principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn, and indeed
democratic justice is the application of numerical not proportionate equality;…
This, then, is one note of liberty which all democrats affirm to be the principle of
their state. Another is that a man should live as he likes. This, they say, is the
mark of liberty, since, on the other hand, not to live as a man likes is the mark of a
slave. 

Does freedom in the sense of individual freedom have any meaning here—that is, is the
idea of freedom prevalent in Asia, or only its outward form: is freedom just a word? To
answer our question we must trace the career of another word: slavery.

2. Slavery and Literature

In Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812 – 1818), the words free and freedom occur
forty-eight times and slave twenty-four times.

When Byron was writing, Britain was busily importing more cotton than she
needed. Lancashire cotton mills were fed the negro-grown crop for export to Europe.
This export made Britain great in the nineteenth century: until 1860, she took at least half
the cotton crop of America. Lancashire, therefore, actively helped to settle the American
southwest with slave plantations. A civilisation solidly based on slavery was in the
making.

Fit retribution! Gaul may champ the bit,
And foam in fetters, but is Earth more free?
Did nations combat to make one submit;
Or league to teach all kings true sovereignty?
What! shall reviving thraldom again be
The patched-up idol of enlightened days?
Shall we, who struck the Lion down, shall we
Pay the Wolf homage? proffering lowly gaze
And servile knees to thrones? No; prove before ye praise!
If not, o’er one fall’n despot boast no more!
In vain fair cheeks were furrowed with hot tears
For Europe’s flowers long rooted up before
The trampler of her vineyards; in vain years
Of death, depopulation, bondage, fears,
Have all been borne, and broken by the accord
Of roused-up millions: all that most endears
Glory, is when the myrtle wreathes a sword
Such as Harmodius drew on Athens’ tyrant lord.10

These stanzas were written over “The grave of France, the deadly Waterloo!” For Byron, the defeat of Napoleon had been futile—for the Bourbons were back and monarchy triumphant in Europe (of course, he laments the fact that Napoleon himself had been crowned). “Thralldom” had been revived. Clearly, the kind of slavery he had in mind was different from the kind being practised on American plantations.

In his use of the words freedom and slavery, Byron was harking back to ancient Greece. Here’s a line from Aeschylus’ The Persians:

Subject they are not unto any man:
They say “slave” sorts not with “Athenian.”11

The Persians, according to Aeschylus, were slaves because they had a king. To oriental ears, this equation must sound outré. But let us see things from the Greek point of view. In Periclean Athens, the ratio of slaves to free men was 3:2.12 Athenian democracy rested solidly on slavery.

For Aristotle, too, master, magistrate and king were identical: “...some are of the opinion that the rule of a master is a science, and that the management of a household,
and the mastership of slaves, and the political and royal rule, as I was saying at the outset, are all the same.” In this, he is merely echoing Plato:

“Well, then, there are to be found in other cities rulers and the people as in our city, are there not?”
“Of course.”
“Will not all these address one another as fellow citizens?”
“Saviours and helpers, he said.”
“Payers of their wage and supporters.”
“Slaves, he said.”

Again, in the *Statesman* we have:

STRANGER: The slavemaster and the master of a household are identical.
YOUNG SOCRATES: Yes.
STRANGER: Furthermore, is there much difference between a large household organisation and a small-sized city, so far as the exercise of the authority over it is concerned?
YOUNG SOCRATES: None. For Plato, then, king = master, subject = slave. In this, Plato was merely thinking like a typical Athenian.

And didn’t John Locke indite these words in the Fundamental Constitution of Carolina: “every free man of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over Negro slaves”? And wasn’t he a shareholder in the slave-trading Royal African Company? His defence of slavery is most illuminating. He observes:

freedom of men under government is, to have a standing rule to live by, common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it; a liberty to follow my own will in all things, where the rule prescribes not; and not
to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man: as freedom of nature is, to be under no other restraint but the law of nature.\textsuperscript{18}

Notice the similarity with Aristotle’s conception of liberty above: to rule and to be ruled in turn and to follow one’s inclinations in accordance with such rule. Clearly, this state of affairs implies its negative, as in Aristotle’s case: the loss of liberty. And the loss is justified as a state of war. Black slaves are held to be justifiably “subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man” because they have abandoned the state of nature for a state of war.

This is the perfect condition of slavery, which is nothing else, but the state of war continued, between a lawful conqueror and a captive: for, if once compact enter between them, and make an agreement for a limited power on the one side, and obedience on the other, the state of war and slavery ceases, as long as the compact endures...\textsuperscript{19}

What compact the hapless negro slave, kidnapped or bought on some African coast, had entered into with her white masters remains obscure; how she had violated it still more so: this piece of historic fiction proved very profitable, not only for Locke personally, but for Britain as a whole, as we have seen. “Europe’s most free country... was also the biggest slaving nation...”\textsuperscript{20}

But the most poetic contradiction must surely be that of James Thomson. In the *Seasons* (1726), he describes the shark that follows a slave ship:

\begin{quote}
Lured by the scent
Of steaming crowds, of rank disease, and death,
Behold! He, rushing, cuts the briny flood,
Swift as the gale can bear the ship along;
And from the partners of that cruel trade,
Which spoils unhappy Guinea of her sons,
Demands his share of prey—demands themselves!\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Yet he also penned that famous piece of jingoism, *Rule Britannia* (1740):
The nations, not so blest as thee,  
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall:  
While thou shalt flourish great and free,  
The dread and envy of them all.  
“Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;  
Britons never will be slaves.”

Other countries would be ruled by kings—dreadful fate!—but Britain would enjoy Lockean liberty, and enslave black people, while herself remaining free.

### 3. The Iberian Distinction

In 1856, George M. Stroud, an abolitionist, provided the following legal enchiridion of the master-slave relationship:

1. The master may determine the kind and degree, and time of labour to which the slave may be subjected.
2. The master may supply the slave with such food and clothing only, both as to quantity and quality, as he may think proper or find convenient.
3. The master may, at his discretion, inflict any punishment on the person of his slave.
4. All the power of the master over his slave may be exercised not only by himself in person, but by anyone whom he may depute as his agent.
5. Slaves have no legal rights of property in things, real or personal; but whatever they may acquire belongs, in point of law, to their masters.
6. The slave, being a *personal chattel*, is at all times liable to be sold absolutely, or mortgaged or leased, at the will of his master.
7. He may also be sold by process of law for the satisfaction of the debts of a living, or the debts and bequests of a deceased master, at the suit of creditors or legatees.
8. A slave cannot be a party before a judicial tribunal, in any species of actions against his master, no matter how atrocious may have been the injury received from him.
9. Slaves cannot redeem themselves, nor obtain a change of masters, though cruel treatment may have rendered such change necessary for their personal safety.
10. Slaves being objects of *property*, if injured by third persons, their owners may bring suit, and recover damages for the injury.
11. Slaves can make no contract.
12. Slavery is hereditary and perpetual.
Contrast the above with the laws and customs relating to domestic slavery which had grown up in Portugal and Spain—they were codified as early as 1263-5 in *Las Siete Partidas del Roy Alfonso*.

The slave might marry a free person if the slave status was known to the other party. Slaves could marry against the will of their masters if they continued serving him as before. Once married, they could not be sold apart, except under conditions permitting them to live as man and wife. If the slave married a free person with the knowledge of his master, and the master did not announce the fact of the existing slave status, then the slave by that mere fact became free. If married slaves owned by separate masters could not live together because of distance, the church should persuade one or the other to sell his slave. If neither of the masters could be persuaded, the church was to buy one of them so that the married slaves could live together. The children followed the status of their mother, and the child of a free mother remained free even if she later became a slave. In spite of his full powers over his slave, the master might neither kill him nor injure him unless authorised by the judge, nor abuse him against reason or nature, nor starve him to death. But if the master did any of these things, the slave could complain to the judge, and if the complaint were verified, the judge must sell him, giving the price to the owner, and the slave might never be returned to the original owner.24

The *Las Siete Partidas del Roy Alfonso*, although regulating only domestic slavery, was transferred to the wider ambit of the colony. The code clearly reflects a background where the slave was not a thing—returns from which had to be maximised—but an unfree person. Slave families and slave marriages were protected by law to some extent, and the laws relating to slavery were upheld by the church, to a degree. Contrast Justice Taney’s famous observation (March 6, 1857) that Negroes had “no rights which any white man was bound to respect,”25 with the fact that the Iberian slave had access to the courts. The code defined conditions for manumission, which was frequent. The Iberian slave could earn, save and purchase his freedom. Children of slave women and white fathers were often freed; even, on occasions, inducted into the white family. Slaves who were redundant on their masters’ estates could go into town and earn a living, part of which
had to be remitted to their owners, but the remainder often sufficed to purchase their
freedom. The spectacle of a free Negro was no novelty when legal abolition took place in
1888.

Thus, a strong, centralised state prevented a slave from slipping into mere thinghood.
Correspondingly, the Iberian world—the peninsula and its colonies—developed a marked
tolerance, rather, a passion, for strong, centralised rule. The caudillo is an ancient
institution, a beloved father figure.

4. Slavery in the East

The Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary gives the historical meaning of “slave” as
“someone owned by and acting as servant to another, with no personal freedom.”
Presumably, the description is meant to fit the Sumerian, the Greek, the Roman, the
Jewish, the American and the Spanish slave. In fact, there is no word for slave in the
Sumerian or the Hebrew languages. The Greek word for slave was doulos—the word
erected a clear linguistic boundary between slaves and free men. No such boundary
existed in the East. In the Sumerian cuneiform sign for slave, the word means “a man
from the mountains,” that is, a captive from an alien land. This vagueness infects the
Egyptian word b’k. The Hebrew word ebed denotes anyone from “slave,” “servant of the
lord” in the phrase ebed Jahwe to ebed al malek, to “the servant of the king.”

Even slaves—the word mamluk meant a male of slave origins—had been rulers in
the Muslim world when they had had sufficient military power to do so. Qutb-ud-Din
Aybak had been a slave ruler; the Delhi Dynasty had been a dynasty of slaves. How
different from Greek and Roman Republican slavery, where a slave was regarded as
hardly human. (Incredibly enough, Diodotus, a royal slave in the Seleucid household, seized power in the kingdom of Syria and was accepted—albeit temporarily—as a ruler; the episode highlights the level of tolerance under Hellenistic absolutism, discussed below.)

5. Freedom and Slavery

What, then, of the antonym of slavery—freedom? The meaning of this word too must be inextricably connected to the historical experience of the people. Thus, freedom and democracy have tended to mean little in the Iberian world—Spain and Portugal were both dictatorships until the other day, and Latin America, as noted, has the perpetual caudillo—whereas some form of participatory government and the associated idea of liberty persisted throughout Greek, Republican Roman and Western European history as the reflex of slavery and exclusion.

Centralised, absolutist states are more “free” than democratic, decentralised polities. Where you cannot lose your freedom, the concept cannot arise. And a strong, “despotic” state precludes slavery for it would entail loyalty of slaves to private persons, rather than, as observed, to the “despot.”

Freedom, in Greece and in subsequent European history, always required its opposite—slavery. The antithesis of freedom and slavery and the identity of master and sovereign, on the one hand, and subject and slave, on the other, are inevitable in a democracy, republic or any system of representative government.
The very meaning of freedom derived from its antithesis—slavery. In Asia, large-scale chattel slavery had never been practiced. Egypt, as we have seen, had no concept of slavery, and slaves, in any recognisable form, never appeared until the Egyptian Empire—yet even then were only a minuscule part of the labour force; household slaves were easily assimilated. In China, slaves comprised only 1% of the total population and had a very different status from that of Roman slaves. The corresponding ratio for Attica around 431 BC is between 25-33%. However, in Greece, too, Hellenistic despotism entailed the disappearance of slavery—and its re-emergence with the Roman Republic and, again, its disappearance with the Empire. Freedom has no meaning unless the possibility of losing it is real.

The idea of freedom had been born, then, of the experience of slavery. An idea, however, travels, without the baggage of attendant experience. In the process it becomes a word, disconnected, dislocated. The connotation changes; and there emerged two connotations, a Western and an Asian sense.

6. A Philosophical Aside

I owe the distinction between idea and word to Descartes, who made such a distinction in a few telling cases. He said there is no idea corresponding to the words “nothing” or “rest” or “darkness.” These ideas are mere negations of their positive counterparts.

Descartes was groping towards a sense-reference distinction, first made explicit in his seminal essay “On Sense and Reference’ by Gottlob Frege. We understand what “darkness” means, but the word does not correspond to anything—it has sense, but no reference. However, Frege also made a third distinction:
The reference and sense of a sign are to be distinguished from the associated ideas.... The idea is subjective: one man’s idea is not that of another. There result, as a matter of course, a variety of differences in the ideas associated with the same sense. A painter, a horseman, and a zoologist will probably connect different ideas with the name ‘Bucephalus.’ This constitutes an essential distinction between the idea and the sign’s sense, which may be the common property of many and is therefore not a part of a mode of the individual mind. For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted form one generation to another.39

The unfortunate emphasis on “mankind” in the last sentence has been de-emphasised by Willard Van Orman Quine. According to Quine, nothing can count as the unique meaning of a word or expression; meaning is indeterminate. Why? Because meaning is inextricably connected with behaviour, which in turn is connected to a world-view. Thus, words acquire meaning only in relation to their place in the language and the world-view: “…people feel drawn to a mentalistic account of language, despite the conspicuous fact that language is a social enterprise....”40 Thus we cannot translate the English words slave or free into other languages: the differing world-views, that is, historical experiences, would not permit such translation.

The same conclusion is reached via the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Wittgenstein’s stress on the connection between linguistic activity and a “way of life.”41 The great Platonic scholar Gregory Vlastos wrote: “Plato idealised the institution of slavery, the contract theorists the institution of democracy. Their conflicting idealism mirrored the real contradiction in Athenian society: a free political community that rested on a slave economy.”42 In this, he was superbly mistaken. The supposed contradiction dissolves when we consider the “way of life” that generates the contradiction: slavery and freedom, far from being contradictory terms, are, in fact, complementary.
7. Democracy in Asia and Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Democracies</th>
<th>Free people of the world (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How then do we account for the first paragraph of the essay and the table above? How do we explain the spread of democracy to Asia and Africa? The upshot of our discussion so far has been that democracy—in the sense of individual liberty—can have no place outside western Europe. As Harvard anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah has noted, “A social and cultural anthropologist of my sort will necessarily advocate that a collectivity’s cultural practices are historically rooted…..”

In Bangladesh, it is indeed true that students spearheaded a movement that toppled a dictator. But an even more vigorous student movement in 1987 had failed to topple him. Why? Because the General was still needed by donor countries as a bulwark against communism. And communism was the western ideology promising, not individual, but collective freedom: precisely what would go down well in Asia and
Africa. Only when the Berlin Wall collapsed did donors feel safe enough to allow multi-party elections, as in Africa. Donors, not students, removed the General.

Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, in their book *Africa Works*, astutely observe: “It cannot simply be a coincidence, that, now that the West ties aid to democratisation under the guise of multi-party elections, multi-party elections are taking place in Africa.”45 Similarly, *The Economist* notes: “the cold war’s end prompted western donors to stop propping up anti-communist dictators and to start insisting on democratic reforms.”46 Furthermore, Chabal and Daloz say:

> Indeed, the wholesale adoption of a political vocabulary issued from the Western democratic experience is eminently misleading: the words do not correspond to the realities which they are supposed to embody…. The vote is not primarily a token of individual choice but of a calculus of patrimonial reciprocity based on ties of solidarity.47 (Emphasis added.)

Again: “Democracy... simply has no proper role for political losers in Africa....

Politicians are expected to represent their constituents properly, that is, to deliver resources to them. It is, therefore, comprehensively useless to be an opposition politician....”48

The individual is part of the patron-client nexus.

Stanley J. Tambiah makes similar observations of South and South-East Asia:

> “Ethnic equalisation, rather than freedom and equality of the individual, is the principal charter of participatory democracy in many of the plural and multi-ethnic societies of our time. It has been the experience in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia....”49
8. The Freedom Industry

We still have to explain why so many African and Asian countries have adopted multiparty democracy, in the teeth of opposition from their culture and their history. Let us go back to the quotation from Chabal and Daloz: “It cannot simply be a coincidence, that, now that the West ties aid to democratisation under the guise of multi-party elections, multi-party elections are taking place in Africa.” Donors want democracy; they are willing to pump money and prestige into the idea. Therefore, a “freedom industry” has developed: indeed, Chabal and Daloz devote many pages to articulating how “Africa works”—how Africans are systematically using the resources of their donors. Take civil society and NGOs:

The political significance of such a massive proliferation of NGOs in Africa deserves closer attention. Our research suggests that this expansion is less the outcome of the increasing political weight of civil society than the consequence of the very pragmatic realisation that resources are now largely channelled through NGOs. It would thus be naive to think that the advent of NGOs necessarily reflects a transition from the ponderous world of state bureaucracy to that of more flexible ‘civic’ associations operating beyond the clutch of the state. In our view, it is rather the reflection of a successful adaptation to the conditions laid down by foreign donors on the part of political actors who seek in this way to gain access to new resources.50

They observe that “there is today an international ‘aid market’ which Africans know how to play with great skill. Indeed, there is very little doubt that NGOs spend an excessive proportion of their budget on furnishing their members with sophisticated and expensive equipment (from computers to four-wheel drives), leaving all too little for the development projects which justify the work of the NGOs in the first place.”51 This observation can be made of Bangladesh verbatim.
It has been estimated that only 25% of donor money reaches the poor in Bangladesh. According to The Economist: “There are about 20,000 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh, probably more than in any other country.” The implications for our present discussion are quite disturbing. Freedom has been reduced to cash. Perhaps no other word in history has seen such an ignominious reduction as has the word freedom. Freedom is not an idea: it is a commodity. Furthermore, instead of individual slavery, today we witness the spectacle of collective slavery. Entire societies, states and peoples are dominated by means of financial and military aid.

In his book The Arms Bazaar In The 90s, Anthony Sampson takes western governments to task for helping firms sell arms to promote strategic interests and as an extension of foreign policy. He observes, “The speed with which Saddam (Hussein) had first built up his arsenal, and then turned it against his suppliers, made nonsense of the diplomats’ justification for selling arms: that they are an extension of foreign policy which could bring influence to bear on the recipients, and that they could bring stability to unstable regimes.” Given our analysis of the word freedom, these are not surprising revelations. Freedom was once bought and sold with great violence. John Locke, as observed, was a shareholder in the Royal African Company. The only exception is that it is the collective that is in the market, not the individual.

Were he alive today, Rabindranath would have uttered the same prayer.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; ...
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.
Notes

1 Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, http://gutenberg.net/gitnj10.zip
4 Graham Green, *The Quiet American*, p. 97
6 Thucydides, VII.69.
8 Politics, 1317b1-13.
17 Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, 199, 201.
21 Quoted ibid., 453.
22 www.poemhunter.com/james-thomson/poet-6883/
24 Ibid., 166.
32 Westermann, *Slave Systems*, 47.
36 Ibid., 39-41.
37 Ibid., 63, 101-102, 113-117.
48 Ibid., 56.
51 Ibid., 23.