

The Myth of Political Freedom

Written by Carl Watner for The Voluntaryist, December 1988.

How is it that citizens of the Soviet Russia become imbued with the political ideas of the United States Constitution? Why are Americans knowledgeable about the political freedoms outlined in the Constitution of the U.S.S.R.? The answer to these two questions is relatively simple. In both countries, the concept of the State and the Constitution plays a similar role. The particular form they take on is of little or no consequence. The function of both constitutions is to legitimize State rule and to socialize the citizenry into their social and political roles. In the United States, the Constitution guarantees certain forms of political freedom – “particularly the idea that the ordinary people have the right to share in the formation and conduct of government, and to criticize and seek to change the policies of those in power.” This encompasses the right to vote, to run for office, to petition elected officials, the right to assemble and protest, and the right to express opinions to those holding political office. In the Soviet Union, the constitutional superstructure guarantees universal, equal, and direct vote by secret ballot, broad civil and human rights of citizens, including the right to work, rest, education, and religious freedom.

From whence do these political rights originate – whether they be American or Soviet? In every case, they are derived from or found to be embraced in some governmental legislation or constitutional document. Political rights are not derived independently of the State; rather political freedom is something the government grants its citizens.

The great problem of obedience – why the many obey the few, when numerical strength is on the side of the many – has been the subject of endless study. Any accurate appraisal of the situation recognizes that such obedience depends upon 1) the formation of governmental decisions which willingly obtain the allegiance of the governed (i.e., policies which the majority of the governed would ordinarily follow even if there were no government (for example, the great majority of people would not murder or steal, even in the absence of the State)) and 2) the discovery of political mechanisms which make possible the widest participation in those decisions with the least possible impact.

The myth of political freedom is tied to the second of these points. If people think that their activities influence the outcome of elections, of policy-making, etc. they are complacent in accepting the outcome. Many commentators have noted that this is essentially a process of co-optation, in which the governed falsely imagine that their input is desired, valued, and necessary; when in fact the actors themselves are being deluded. The appearances do not match the reality. The appearance is that political freedom gives power to the people to direct their own political destiny, when in reality they are being manipulated by a system

which has been designed to minimize the effects of their input, insulate the decision-making process from those on the street, etc. Elections are among the primary mechanisms by which governments regulate mass political control and maintain their own authority.

Voluntaryists realize that political freedom is no freedom at all. The term “political freedom” is actually self-contradictory. Politics and freedom do not mix. Political rights do not exist in the state of nature because – there – there is no politics. The only legitimate meaning of the terms *freedom* or *liberty* refer to spiritual freedom (the ability and power of each individual to exercise self-control over him or her self) and physical liberty (the absence of coercive, physical molestation to one’s carcass and one’s physical property), neither of these concepts allow for any inter-meddling of coercion (politics) and voluntarism.

The only true freedom and liberty are the rights to own property and control it one’s self. One does not need a State in order to do this or to guarantee that property rights be protected. Such ownership rights are not created or granted by the State. They necessarily precede the State and are superior to it. In fact, every State by its very existence negates the primacy of property rights because they gain their revenues by means of taxation rather than via voluntarism on the free market.

So the next time you hear the much touted expression, “political freedom” – beware! Political freedom is hazardous to your health.