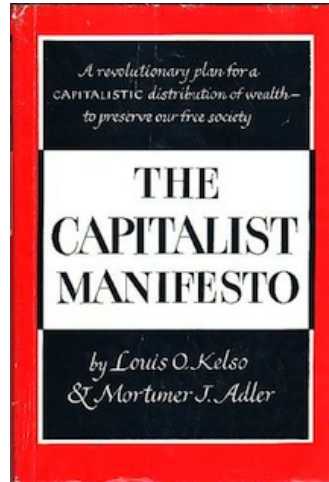


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ECONOMIC FREEDOM: PROPERTY AND LEISURE

The three elements of economic freedom

In all the slave societies of the past, human beings were divided into two classes. On the one hand, there were the owners of property—in land, animals, slaves, raw material and tools. They were the masters and as such they were economically free men. On the other hand, there were the toilers who had no property of the aforementioned sort. They were the slaves, men without any economic freedom.

Aristotle distinguished between two types of slavery: (1) the chattel slavery of those who were *the property of other men* and so were totally deprived of property, even of property in their own labor power; and (2) what he called the “special and separate slavery” of the meaner sort of artisan or mechanic who had no property beyond his own labor power and so was forced to lead a servile life.

What is true of the chattel slaves and servile artisans of ancient Greece and Rome is essentially true of the serfs in the agrarian

economies of feudal Europe, and of the wage slaves who formed the industrial proletariat in the middle of the nineteenth century. At no time in the past were the working masses economically free men. Nor, until the power of organized labor gave them some measure of the economic independence which property in capital always bestowed on the leisure class, were they admitted to suffrage and the political freedom of a voice in their own government.

Before the rise of industrial production and organized labor, the members of the ruling class were for the most part identical with the members of the leisure class. This is true of colonial America and of the first decades of our republic as well as of the republics of ancient Greece and Rome. The men of property were economically free men. Because they had through property a freedom which they wished to protect, they strove to safeguard it with the rights and privileges of political status and power. Their economic freedom was the basis of their claim to political liberty.

But their economic freedom was also the basis of their opportunity to lead a human as opposed to a subhuman life. In all the pre-industrial societies of the past, this opportunity was open only to those who could engage in the liberal activities of leisure because they obtained all they needed for subsistence and comfort from income-bearing property other than their own labor power.

To understand this, let us contrast the condition of the slave with that of the economically free man. We shall see that there are three elements in economic freedom, the most significant of which is freedom from toil or freedom for leisure. This is indispensable to leading a free, as opposed to a servile, life. The slave not only lacked such freedom, but also the economic independence and security without which political liberty cannot be effectively employed or enjoyed.

In the following threefold contrast between the conditions of economic slavery and freedom, the word "slave" is used in the broadest sense to cover not only men who belong to other men as their private chattels, but also all who are forced by lack of property to lead servile or subhuman lives.

1. The slave was a man who worked for the good or profit of another man, and worked as an instrument or tool of that other man as well as in his interests. He was exploited in the sense that the fruits of his labor were alienated from his good to that of another. In contrast, the economically free man engaged in no activity in

which he served as the instrument of another man, and did nothing which served any good except his own or the common good of his society.

2. The slave was a man who was dependent for his subsistence on the arbitrary will of another man, his master. In this condition, he was always threatened with economic destitution—starvation or worse. He had no economic security or freedom from want. In contrast, the master as an owner of property was an economically independent man. This is not to say that any man is ever wholly secure from misfortune. Since wealth is among the goods of fortune, it is always subject to accidents. But allowing for accidents, the economically free man is one who has enough property to be free from want without greater dependence on other men than they have upon him, and to be relatively secure against the threat of destitution.

3. The slave was a man who spent most of his time and energy in toil. Toil for him began in childhood and ended with his death, usually an early one; and it occupied almost all of his waking life, seven days a week. What time was left he needed for sleep and other basic biological functions in order to keep alive. In contrast, the man who obtained all the subsistence he needed, or much more than that, from the use of his property, including the labor of his slaves, had economic freedom in the most important sense of this term: freedom from toil. Only when such freedom is added to freedom from want, insecurity, or destitution—and to freedom from exploitation by another and from dependence on the arbitrary will of another—do we approach the ideal of liberty in the economic sphere of human life.

These three contrasts between the condition of masters and the condition of slaves, as men who are and are not economically free, can be summarized by the antithesis Aristotle draws between the servile and the free life. Some men, according to Aristotle, merely subsist; others are able, beyond subsistence, to live well, *i.e.*, to engage in leisure activities. The servile life consists in nothing but toil in order to subsist. Men who have the misfortune of being chattels or of being propertyless are forced to lead a servile life—a life of toil, insecurity, and dependence.

Of course, some men who are fortunate enough to have sufficient property to live well actually degrade themselves to the level of the servile life by using all their time and energy in accumulating wealth and even by engaging in toil to do so. While men without

property cannot live well, not all men with property do live well, but only those who, understanding the difference between labor and leisure, direct their activities to the goals of the free life.

Labor, leisure and freedom

The distinction between labor and leisure is generally misunderstood in twentieth-century America. Leisure is misconceived as idleness, vacationing (which involves “vacancy”), play, recreation, relaxation, diversion, amusement and so on. If leisure were that, it would never have been regarded by anyone except a child or a childish adult as something morally better than socially useful work.

The misconception of leisure arises from the fact that it involves free time—time that is free from the biological necessity of sleep, and of labor to obtain the means of subsistence. Such time can, of course, be filled in various ways: with amusements and diversions of all sorts, or with the intrinsically virtuous activities by which men pursue happiness and serve the common good of their society. Leisure, properly conceived as the main content of a free, as opposed to a servile, life, consists in activities which are neither toil nor play, but are rather the expressions of moral and intellectual virtue—the things a good man does because they are intrinsically good for him and for his society, making him better as a man and advancing the civilization in which he lives.

In all the pre-industrial societies of the past, when only a few were exempt from grinding toil, the activities of leisure were as sharply distinguished from indulgence in amusements or recreations as they were from the drudgery of toil. Husbandmen, craftsmen, and laborers of all sorts provided society with its means of subsistence and its material comforts. They had little or no time free for leisure or for play. Ample free time belonged only to those who obtained their subsistence from the property they owned and the labor of others. If these men had frittered away their free time in frivolity and play, the civilization to which we are the heirs would never have been produced; for civilization, as opposed to subsistence, is produced by those who have free time and use it creatively—to develop the liberal arts and sciences and all the institutions of the state and of religion.

Play, like sleep, washes away the fatigues and tensions that result from the serious occupations of life, all the forms of labor which produce the goods of subsistence and all the leisure activities

which produce the goods of civilization. Play and sleep, as Aristotle pointed out, are for the sake of these serious and socially useful occupations. Since the activities of leisure can be as exacting and tiring as the activities of toil, some form of relaxation, whether sleep or play or both, is required by those who work productively.

As play is for the sake of work, so subsistence work is for the sake of leisure activity. To confuse leisure either with idleness or amusement is to invert the order of goods which gave moral significance to the class divisions in all the pre-industrial societies of the past. Those among our ancestors who were men of virtue as well as men of property would find it difficult to understand how any self-respecting man could regard indulgence in amusements as the goal of life. They looked upon the labor of slaves and artisans as the means which provided them with the opportunity to engage in leisure, not in play. To expect the masses to labor from dawn to dusk and throughout life so that a small class of men could waste their free time in idleness, amusement, or sport would express, in their view, a degree of childishness or immorality that could be found only in the most depraved or vicious members of their class.

Since the confusion of leisure with idleness or amusement is rampant in our industrial society, when, for the first time in history, it has become possible for all men to have enough free time to engage in leisure, it may be difficult for our contemporaries to understand that labor and leisure are the two main forms of human *work*, and that the first is for the sake of the second. Unless they do understand this, however, they will not see the ultimate moral significance of the capitalist revolution. It may increase human freedom and strengthen the institutions of a free society, but freedom itself is only a means. Freedom can be squandered and perverted as well as put to good use.

Only if freedom from labor becomes freedom for leisure will the capitalist revolution produce a better civilization than any so far achieved, and one in the production of which all men will participate. Only if men thus use their opportunity for leisure will the capitalist revolution result in an improvement of human life itself, and not merely in its external conditions or institutions. As labor is for the sake of leisure, so freedom and justice for all are the institutional means whereby the good life that was enjoyed by the few alone in the pre-industrial aristocracies of the past will be open to all men in the capitalistic democracies of the future.

The current misuse of the word "leisure" requires us to find other words for expressing the basic distinction which is so essential to

the understanding of the capitalist revolution. We may not always be able to avoid using that word, but at least we can try to correct misunderstanding by the employment of other words or phrases for expressing its meaning.

It may be helpful to observe that where Aristotle drew a sharp line between labor and leisure, Adam Smith made the same distinction in human activities by drawing an equally sharp line between what he called “productive labor” and “non-productive labor.” His use of the word “labor” shows that he had socially useful work in mind in both cases, and not idleness or play. By “non-productive labor,” he meant the activities of the clergy, statesmen, philosophers, scientists, artists, teachers, physicians and lawyers. He called these activities “labor” because, like the forms of work that are productive of wealth, they are not playful but serious, and serve a socially useful purpose. And he called such labor “non-productive” because, unlike other forms of work, the socially useful purpose they serve is not the production of wealth or the goods of bodily subsistence, but the production of civilization, or the goods of the human spirit.

We think it is better to use the term “work” for both forms of activity. We shall speak of “subsistence work” when we mean the activities that are productive of wealth (*i.e.*, the necessities, comforts and conveniences of life); and we shall speak of “liberal work” or “leisure work” when we mean the activities that are productive of the goods of civilization (*i.e.*, the liberal arts and sciences, the institutions of the state and of religion).

Whenever we revert to the use of the words “labor” and “leisure” without qualification, we hope it will be understood that labor is identical with subsistence work and leisure with liberal work. The fact that leisure is equated with one of the two principal forms of human work should help to prevent anyone from confusing it with play or idleness. The fact that the goods which it produces are so different from the goods produced by subsistence work should also help to preserve the distinction between labor and leisure, which is so necessary for all that follows.

The form and character of human work

So far we have distinguished two main forms of human work solely by reference to what they produce, or the ends they serve: on the one hand, the goods of the body, the biological goods of subsistence, the necessities, comforts and conveniences of life; on

the other hand, the goods of the soul, the goods of civilization or of the human spirit, such things as the arts and sciences, the institutions of the state and of religion.

Work can be differentiated by reference to its human quality as well as by reference to its end or purpose.

Certain forms of work are mechanical in quality. They involve repetitive, routine operations which call for little or no creative intelligence upon the part of the worker. They also involve bodily exertion, or at least some manual dexterity; but it is the mechanical character of the task to be performed, not the physical character of the performance, which makes such work stultifying.

The materials on which the worker operates, but not his own nature, are improved by his efforts. After he has acquired the minimum skill required for doing it, he learns nothing more. He may increase the store of useful goods in the world, but he does not himself grow in stature as a man. The Greek word *banausia* expressed the degrading quality of the mechanical work done by slaves—the dullness of the repetitive which is most intense in the kind of toil we call “drudgery.” Because of its repetitiveness, the person who is engaged in it does not grow mentally, morally, or spiritually. On the contrary, drudgery stunts growth.

Because it is intrinsically unrewarding, such work must be extrinsically compensated. It is done under compulsion—the need for subsistence. Anyone who could secure his subsistence from other sources would try to avoid it, or do as little of it as possible. Hence such work is normally done for extrinsic compensation of some sort, whether in the shape of immediately consumable goods, or wages, or the meager subsistence meted out to a slave.

At the opposite extreme from work that is mechanical in quality as well as done to produce and obtain subsistence, there is work that is creative in quality as well as liberal in the end at which it aims. All leisure activities constitute work of this sort. The creative aspect of such work is signified by the Greek word for leisure, which was *scholé*. Like our English word “school,” it connotes learning—mental, moral, or spiritual growth.

Such work is, therefore, intrinsically rewarding. It is something which every man *should*, and any virtuous man *would*, do for its own sake. If he has sufficient property to secure for himself and his family a sufficiency of the means of subsistence, the virtuous man gladly engages in liberal work without extrinsic compensation.

Like virtue itself, such work is its own reward.

We have just seen that the forms of human work can be differentiated by reference to their human quality, or the effect they have on the worker, as well as differentiated by reference to the goods they produce for society as a whole. We must now observe that these distinctions can be compounded.

At one extreme in the scale of human work, certain socially useful activities combine having the production of wealth as their aim with being mechanical in quality. At the opposite extreme are the highest activities of leisure, which combine being creative in quality with having as their aim the production of the goods of civilization and of the human spirit. In between these extremes, there are the mixed forms of work: on the one hand, subsistence work which, while it aims at the production of wealth, is creative rather than mechanical in quality; on the other hand, work which, while mechanical in quality, nevertheless serves a purpose which is identical with the aim of liberal work.

This fourfold division of the kinds of work is of critical significance when we come subsequently to consider the variety of tasks to be performed in our modern industrial society. For the present, we shall use it in order to call attention to a widely prevalent misunderstanding about the dignity of human work.

In the ancient world—in fact, in all the pre-industrial societies of the past—no one made the mistake of supposing that equal dignity attaches to all human activity. Human dignity was thought to reside primarily in those activities which are specifically or characteristically human, *i.e.*, activities which have no counterpart whatsoever in the life of brute animals or in the operations of machines.

Brutes as well as men struggle for subsistence. Though the subsistence activities of brutes are largely instinctive, while those of men usually involve some employment of intelligence or reason, the goal or end of such activities is the same in both cases. Human life has its distinctive worth or dignity only insofar as it rises above biological activities and involves activities which are not performed by brutes, or at least not performed in the same way.

Man's special dignity lies in goods which no other animal shares with him at all, as other animals share with him the goods of food, shelter, and even those of sleep and play. Hence man has no special dignity as a producer of subsistence or wealth, but only as a

user of wealth for the sake of specifically liberal activities productive of the goods of the spirit and of civilization.

It follows, therefore, that the only dignity there is in working to produce subsistence comes from such creative use of intelligence or reason as may be involved in the performance of tasks that are non-mechanical in quality. Even so, they have less dignity than non-mechanical or creative work which is liberal in its aim. Work which is not only mechanical in quality but also has the production of subsistence as its only aim is lowest in the scale. Such dignity as attaches to any work productive of subsistence, whether mechanical or creative, derives from the fact that the production of wealth, rightly understood, serves to support the leisure activities that constitute the dignity of human life.

It may be thought that St. Paul preaches a Christian message to the contrary when he says of those who do not work, neither shall they eat. But it should be remembered, in the first place, that the toil by which man eats in the sweat of his face is a punishment for sin, not an honor or a blessing. And, in the second place, it should be observed that the word St. Paul uses, in making this remark, means any form of socially useful activity, and not labor in the narrow sense of toil for the sake of subsistence. What he is saying, in short, is that all men are under a moral obligation not just to work for a living, but to work in order to deserve a living. In the Christian sense, those who, having the means of subsistence, do not try to live well by doing liberal work enjoy a living they do not deserve.

The image of an economically free society

So far we have seen how the life of a master in a slave society contains all the elements of economic freedom, and therewith the opportunities for leading a good life, which he will use well only if he is a man of virtue.

The possession of sufficient productive capital property enables a man to be economically free, but by itself it cannot make him lead a free and liberal life rather than a life devoted to the production or consumption of subsistence. He may engage in toil or trade even if he does not have to, because he does not have the virtue to rise above it; or, worse than that, he may squander his time and energies in indolence, or in pastimes which, no matter how innocuous, corrupt him precisely because he has elevated them to the level of ends. It should be added that pastimes seldom remain innocuous

when they have to fill most of a man's waking time.

In the pre-industrial aristocracies of the past, only the fortunate few possessed all the elements of economic freedom; and of these, fewer still—those who were virtuous as well as fortunate—employed that freedom to do the work of leisure to the benefit of themselves and their society. These advantages were bought at the terrible price of slavery and misery for the masses who toiled not merely for their own meager subsistence, but to provide the wealth that supported the pursuit of happiness and the development of civilization by those who had economic freedom and used it well.

Freedom built upon slavery, the leisure of a privileged class supported by the unremitting toil of the masses, the opportunity for the few to lead a decent human life as the flower of a civilization whose roots lay in the submerged and subhuman lives of the toiling masses—this was the accepted order in all the class-divided societies of the pre-industrial past.

We now know what our ancestors did not know: that, under conditions of industrial production, and with the promise of capitalism fulfilled, it is possible for a whole society to be economically free and for all men to have the opportunity to live like human beings.

From the Egyptians, the Chaldeans, the Jews, and the Greeks down to the middle of the nineteenth century, or even to the end of it, it was generally supposed that slavery, or the equivalent of it in grinding toil and drudgery, was the necessary price that mankind had to pay for the advancement of civilization itself, as contrasted with the static and rudimentary culture of primitive life. If all men had to work for a living, that is, if every one had to spend most of his time in subsistence work in order to support himself and his family, no one would be left free for leisure or non-subsistence work—the liberal work of civilization itself.

Prior to the industrial revolution, it was almost impossible to conceive a practicable division of labor which, while securing enough wealth to provide the means of liberal work as well as subsistence for a whole society, would also permit all members of the society to engage in liberal activities as well as in subsistence work. The only practical solution seemed to be slavery or slave labor in one form or another. The enslavement of the many, in lives occupied almost entirely with toil, emancipated the few for the pursuits of civilization. Prior to this century, the achievements of Western civilization—all its fine arts, pure sciences, all its political and religious institutions—were the product of the liberal work done by the virtuous members of its leisure class, just as obviously as all its

economic crafts and goods were the product of the subsistence work done by its toiling masses.

We said a moment ago that no one prior to our own time could conceive of any practical solution other than one which involved slavery, or at least a life for the masses devoted to the mechanical work of producing subsistence, upon which all men might live and some might, in addition, live well. This amounts to saying that no one could conceive an *economically free society*, *i.e.*, an economically classless society in which all men, not just a few, would be economically free and would live like human beings if they were virtuous enough to use their economic freedom well. The statement is literally true if by “conceive” we mean thinking out in detail a practicable plan for the economic organization of a society that would make all its members economically free.

But one man, more than 2,300 years ago, was able to imagine, even if he could not practically conceive, an economically free society. His was the kind of fantasy that it takes a genius to dream. Though it was only a dream for him, the image he conjured up is no dream for us. It is the quite practicable ideal of a classless society of economically free men, with slavery or its equivalents abolished, and with the mechanical work of producing subsistence reduced to a minimum for all.

Though Aristotle did not and could not dream up the capitalist revolution in concrete practical terms, he did, in a single sentence, imagine a possibility that capitalism, and capitalism alone, can realize. He said:

If every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others...if the shuttle could weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves.

Since we are dealing with a dream, let us indulge ourselves in one more moment of dreaming. In that single sentence, Aristotle projected in his imagination a society which has gone beyond the industrial revolution to a state of *complete* automation: a thorough substitution of automatic machines for slaves, *i.e.*, for human beings doing subsistence work of a purely mechanical sort.

It is important to realize that machines can be substituted for men only where men perform tasks that are mechanical in quality; *i.e.*, repetitive tasks performed by rote or rule, and without any involvement at all of creative thought. What men do mechanically,

machines can do as well, and usually much better. The task (for example, extended calculation) may be mechanical, even though the end for which it is performed is liberal.

With this clearly in mind, we can see that the dream of *complete* automation envisages all work that is mechanical in quality (whether or not its end is subsistence) being done by automatic machines, including the production of the machines themselves. The invention or improvement of these machines and the management of the productive processes in which they are engaged is work that aims at the production of subsistence, but it is liberal in character. Though its end is subsistence, it is creative; being non-mechanical, it cannot be done by machines. In our dream of complete automation, we must, therefore, be careful to exclude the *technical* work involved in the invention or improvement of machines, and the *managerial* work involved in the organization and administration of the productive process as a whole.


Even with these two significant exclusions in the sphere of subsistence work, we know that *complete* automation is impossible, but we also know that within the next hundred years progressively increasing automation will achieve a remarkable approximation of the dream. Hence, by analyzing the dream as if it were real, we can learn something about an ideal that it will be practicable for us to realize approximately.

Let us, then, for one more moment of projection, imagine a society in which machines do all or most of the mechanical work that must be done to provide the wealth necessary both for subsistence and for civilization. Let us imagine, further, that in this society, every man, or every family, has a sufficient share in the private ownership of machines to derive sufficient subsistence from their productivity. In this automated industrial society, each man, as an owner of machines, would be in the same position as an owner of slaves in a slave society. As a capitalist, he would be an economically free man, free from exploitation by other men, free from destitution or want, free from the drudgery of mechanical work—and so free to live well if he has the virtue to do so.

Such a society would be a truly classless society, and the very opposite of the class-divided society of the socialist state, in which a despotic bureaucracy constitutes a ruling and owning class as against the mass of the workers who have no economic independence or any effective political power. Even were we to accept at its face value the claim that the dictatorship of the proletariat creates a “classless society,” it would be a classless society of propertyless

workers. In contrast, the classless society of capitalism, the image of which we have projected from Aristotle's extraordinary fantasy, would be a classless society of masters not slaves, of propertied men able to enjoy leisure, not of propertyless men still engaged in toil.

Such a classless society fulfills the ideal of economic democracy. All its members would be economically free and equal, even as in a political democracy all men enjoy political freedom and equality. Just as the status of citizenship conferred upon all has achieved political democracy, so the individual and private ownership of capital by all households would achieve economic democracy.

This ideal can become a practical reality to whatever extent an actual society is able (1) to reduce human toil to the minimum through a proper use of automation; (2) to approximate a universal diffusion of private property in the capital instruments of production; and (3) to educate its members to devote themselves not only to the wise management and productive use of their productive property, but also to the pursuits of leisure and the production of the goods of civilization. 

Excerpted from his co-authored book, *The Capitalist Manifesto*.

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