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## Liberty of the Press under Socialism

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This selection was excerpted from *Social Philosophy & Policy* 2, no. 6 (spring 1989): 211–34. This article is especially relevant to proposals to give Congress the power to legislate limitations on campaign contributions and spending.

The basic point is that control of resources is a fundamental means of censorship; indeed, it is all that is necessary. Socialist regimes, which control the resources—the newsprint, the ink, the broadcast towers, the studios—essential to communications, often do not explicitly censor. Blue-pencil censorship is by their own admission unnecessary.

Instead they control the press and speech by controlling the resources used to publish and communicate. Evers cites evidence primarily for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In some Latin American countries as well, sometimes the press, formally privately owned, has been controlled by reducing government advertising (and thus important revenues) and by calling loans made to newspapers, even loans made by supposedly private banks.

In describing the controls over the press in existing socialist societies, it is wrong, for example, to speak simply of censorship. In a centrally planned economy in which the means of production have been nationalized, the resources used by the communications media are completely under the economic control of the government. As Paul Lendvai points out, in existing socialist societies “literally everything” needed by the publishing industry, from “the printing plant, working capital and newsprint” to “the typewriters, stationery and waste paper baskets,” must be provided by government departments.<sup>1</sup>

Manes Sperber emphasizes the effect of economic dependency when he writes that “everything belongs to these omnipotent regimes—the streets, the cities, the workshops, the factories, everything that is produced. Plus all printing presses, periodicals, and publishing houses. They

1. Paul Lendvai, *The Bureaucracy of Truth* (London: Burnett Books, 1981), p. 19.

do not even require censorship, for nothing can be printed that does not suit them.”<sup>2</sup>

Sperber perhaps overstates the case, since some socialist governments have found direct coercion and censorship useful as ways of double-checking. On the other hand, the fact that the socialist government in Hungary has never set up a formal censorship apparatus supports Sperber’s point. Socialist Romania abolished its censorship in 1977 but still controls the press.<sup>3</sup>

An officially approved Hungarian account of the institutions of the press says, in effect, that, because the state owns the equipment, because the state distributes the paper supplies and so forth, censorship by the police is not needed:

The effective provisions of Hungarian press law do not insist on the submission of manuscript for the purpose of licensing (i.e., prepublication censorship). This is in charge of the competent specialized agencies or institutions of an economic character, and not of the police authorities. Consequently these provisions governing licensing are not of a policing character, and rely on the fact that the printing offices, publishing companies, and so forth are in public ownership, and that governmental organs are in charge of paper or newsprint.<sup>4</sup>

The Bolsheviks’ own analysis of the press under existing socialism focuses on control of resources. I maintain that the history of the press

2. Manes Sperber, *Man and His Deeds*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 45. See also Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (New York: Praeger, 1957), p. 143; Dragoljub Jovanovic, quoted in Vojislav Kostunica and Kosta Cavoški, *Party Pluralism or Monism*, East European Monographs, no. 189 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 161.

3. Lendvai, *Bureaucracy of Truth*, pp. 30, 119–24.

4. Peter Schmidt, “The Citizens’ Freedoms,” in Imre Szabo et al., *Socialist Concept of Human Rights*, Series in Foreign Languages of the Institute for Legal and Administrative Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, nos. 1 and 2 (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1966), pp. 256–57.

in the Soviet Union shows that, under socialism, economic structure and economic policy decide the fate of freedom of the press.<sup>5</sup>

During the Bolshevik-led Soviet seizure of power in late October 1917,<sup>6</sup> Soviet forces seized or shut down approximately twenty nonsocialist newspapers.<sup>7</sup> On October 27, only two days after the successful Soviet revolution, in its Decree on the Press—the first law issued by the new Council of People’s Commissars—the government gave itself the authority to close down all newspapers that printed false information or promoted resistance to Soviet power. The text of the decree described these measures as temporary.<sup>8</sup> Some non-Bolshevik newspapers continued to publish under censorship.

Ten days later, the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets passed a resolution confirming the government’s Decree on the Press. This resolution, drafted by Trotsky and backed by the Leninist Bolsheviks, took a further step. It stated that restoring seized printing facilities to nonsocialist owners would constitute “capitulation to the will of capital” and was “indubitably counterrevolutionary.” This resolution also stated that the “next measure” should be Soviet expropriation of all private printing facilities and supplies of newsprint.

On November 15, the Council of People’s Commissars decreed that all paid advertising was henceforth to be a monopoly of government publications. That meant that no private advertising could appear in

5. For an excellent brief discussion of why the Soviet Union is the appropriate existing socialist society on which to concentrate in considering the socialist project, see Peter Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp. 174–76.

6. For Russian history before February 1/14, 1918 I use the Julian calendar, rather than the Gregorian one.

7. Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 38; N. N. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution 1917*, ed. and trans. Joel Carmichael (1955; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 649–51; Albert Resis, “Lenin on Freedom of the Press,” *Russian Review* 36, no. 3 (July 1977): 285–86.

8. James Bunyan and H. H. Fisher, eds., *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934), p. 220; Yuri Akhapiin, ed., *First Decrees of Power* (London: Lawrence & Wishort, 1970), pp. 29–30.

nongovernmental newspapers.<sup>9</sup> But much more devastating than this advertising ban were expropriations of facilities and paper supplies and the business conditions after the October revolution.<sup>10</sup>

The economic institutions of the press have remained fundamentally the same: state ownership or ownership by cooperatives that are creatures of the state.<sup>11</sup> Roy Medvedev notes that, by 1929, “there was not a single non-Party publication left, nor any privately owned publishing houses that might serve as vehicles for oppositionist views.”<sup>12</sup>

*Samizdat* is a form of private publishing that takes place despite the fact that the state forbids private ownership of capital equipment (means of production) for the mass production of intellectual products.

Rare and brief periods of genuine liberty of the press do occur under existing socialism—for example, during the 1968 Prague Spring period

9. Bunyan and Fisher, *Bolshevik Revolution*, pp. 222–23; Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, ed. Bertram D. Wolfe (New York: Modern Library, 1960), pp. 365, 391–92; Resis, “Lenin on Freedom of the Press,” p. 292.

10. See Kenez, *Birth of the Propaganda State*, p. 42.

11. There were two exceptions: (1) During the civil war, the Bolsheviks permitted pro-Soviet non-Bolshevik political parties and groups to operate and to publish their own newspapers under censorship. (2) Under the liberalized conditions of the NEP, beginning in 1921, private capitalists and independent cooperatives published books. Such private ventures together with the mildness of the government’s literary censorship at this time permitted a literary renaissance in the 1920s. On literary policy during the NEP, see Kenez, *Birth of the Propaganda State*, pp. 239–45.

This was the time of greatest liberalism in Soviet literary policy. See Ernest J. Simmons, “Introduction: Soviet Literature and Control,” in Simmons, ed., *Through the Class of Soviet Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 6. On the limits of freedom of expression during the NEP, see Jean Elleinstein, *The Stalin Phenomenon*, trans. Peter Latham (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), p. 65; Raphael R. Abramovitch, *The Soviet Revolution*, ed. Anatole Shub, trans. Vera Broido-Cohn and Jacob Shapiro (New York: International Universities Press, 1962), pp. 225–26; Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), vol. 3, pp. 7, 45.

12. R. Medvedev, “New Pages from the Political Biography of Stalin,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 205. See also Elleinstein, *Stalin Phenomenon*, p. 87; Nicola A. de Basily, *Russia under Soviet Rule* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), pp. 431–32.

in Czechoslovakia and during the 1980–81 period in which the Solidarity labor union operated publicly in Poland.<sup>13</sup>

Why, according to the critics of existing socialism, do such societies not enjoy long-term liberty of the press? Skeptics about the liberty of the press under socialism point to two major difficulties. The first is the absence of opportunities for independent, nongovernmental employment. The second is the absence of opportunities to organize independent institutions for the gathering and dissemination of information, the creation and exhibition of cultural works, and so forth.

Let us turn to socialist policies on income and their effect on liberty of expression. Socialists at all times have complained that proletarians, with their low incomes, cannot effectively exercise liberty of expression. Some, such as Upton Sinclair, simply point to the higher income that they maintain workers will enjoy under socialism as a further assurance of freedom of expression.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, twentieth-century socialist theorists are aware that the authorities in existing socialist societies have not hesitated to demote or fire dissidents in order to stifle their voices.<sup>15</sup> C. B. Macpherson proposes a guaranteed income as one way of protecting a dissident from his or her employer—the state.<sup>16</sup>

13. See John Downing, *Radical Media* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), section three.

14. Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (Pasadena, Calif.: Author, 1920), p. 409.

15. See, for example, the discussion of job discrimination in existing socialist societies in R. Medvedev, *On Socialist Dissent: Interviews with Piero Ostellino* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 19, 22; R. Medvedev, *Political Essays* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1976), pp. 15, 89; Zdenek Mlynar, *Relative Stabilization of the Soviet System in the 1970s*, Research Project: Crises in Soviet-Type Systems, Study No. 2 (Cologne: Index, 1983), pp. 6, 15; Ota Sik, *The Communist Power System*, trans. Marianne Grund Freidberg (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 103; Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution*, p. 63. Richter anticipated the problem of political job discrimination under socialism. See Eugen Richter, *Henry Wright* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), p. 16.

16. C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 153–54. See also Bertrand Russell, *Proposed Roads to Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), pp. 177–78; Paul G. Chevigny, “Reflections on Civil Liberties under Socialism,” *Civil Liberties Review* 2, no. 1 (winter 1975): 55–57. I am indebted to Robert Hessen for bringing Chevigny’s article to my attention.

Spargo, Liehm, and Hook, with somewhat different emphases, also rely on the right to work or the right to one's job as a guarantee of freedom of expression. Liehm envisions a right to see one's ideas realized. Hook proposes to extend the prerogatives of academic freedom to the publishing industry.<sup>17</sup>

Let us now turn to socialist production policies and their consequences for freedom of expression. On the production side, some socialists advocate setting aside sites in socialist societies for the public expression of views—Hyde Parks, if you will, in public meeting places, in the press, and on broadcast programs. For example, Norman Thomas in *America's Way Out* proposes that the state set aside places for Hyde Park-like forums. He proposes that the state aid the efforts of political parties to publicize their positions via the mails or broadcasting. Alternatively, he suggests, the socialist state should itself undertake this task: the state should provide the members of society with “intelligible accounts” of the views of the various political parties.<sup>18</sup> Some socialists favor huge subsidies to culture. Liehm, for example, wants the state to guarantee each film artist that his or her ideas will be turned into films and shown to the public.<sup>19</sup>

These proposals raise numerous questions. Thomas is aware of the fact that allocation decisions will have to be made about every means of expression because he specifically says that political groups should be entitled to prime time for broadcasting their views.<sup>20</sup> But he does not

17. John Spargo, *Applied Socialism* (New York: B. W. Hebsch, 1912), p. 227; Liehm, “On Culture, Politics, Recent History,” p. 80; Sidney Hook, “Is Freedom of the Press Possible in a Planned Society? Discussion Notes,” May 4, 1942, unpublished ms., Sidney Hook Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, p. 2; Hook, *Political Power and Personal Freedom*, 2d ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 405.

18. Norman M. Thomas, *America's Way Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 210–11.

19. Liehm, “On Culture, Politics, Recent History,” p. 80. On the supply and demand for public assistance to culture, see Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 18.

20. For an example of a socialist theorist's dismissal of economic constraints as applying

begin to address the problems that will arise. For example, an auditorium can perhaps be used for five meetings a day. Many groups will want to use the facility at times convenient to them. The government will have to decide who uses it and when. Even if the government adheres formally to the requirements that Thomas proposes, it has a monopoly of the means of communication; it should therefore have no difficulty in effectively relegating to obscurity whomever and whatever it finds disagreeable.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the authorities can easily distort a publish-at-cost rule in the name of needed economy measures. The authorities can distort such a rule by placing low ceilings on the numbers of copies of unofficial publications the state prints. Officials might authorize the state printing house to print only a handful of copies of unofficial publications because of, say, a supposed paper shortage or some other supposed emergency situation. At the same time, these officials might deem it vital to print millions of copies of works of governmental propaganda.

Finally, under socialism the state will distribute all products. It can stifle dissent through its control of the distribution network.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the authorities in existing socialist societies have been able to use this economic dependency to reestablish their control following periods (the Prague Spring, for example) in which many persons—including those working in the communications industry—enjoyed liberty of an anarcho-syndicalist sort. The authorities reestablished con-

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to cultural products in a socialist society, see Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1905), pp. 181–83.

21. See Eugen Richter, *Picture of the Socialist Future*, trans. Henry Wright (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), p. 85.

22. H. G. Wells and Upton Sinclair, for example, are most emphatic that distribution must remain in the hands of the government. Wells, *New Worlds for Old* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 281; Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (Pasadena: Author, 1920), p. 409. See also Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, ed. John L. Thomas (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 199; G.D.H. Cole, *Fabian Socialism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943), p. 41; P.J.D. Wiles, *Economic Institutions Compared* (New York: John Wiley, 1977), pp. 462, 466.

trol in part by having the police coerce dissidents. But much more important in making such “normalization” and stabilization possible is an ideology and a reality of economic dependency.

So long as a command economy remains in place, power will flow back to the authorities—even after a time of revolt and anarcho-syndical freedom—because they are the only employers and because they are the bosses of the societal coordinating mechanism that seems to make the economy run.

Nonetheless, one cannot rely on a social system that gives an important role to unknowable and changeable visions and motives. Far more trustworthy is a social system where the structures and incentives hedge power, do not permit the morally corrupt to exercise unchecked coercion, and encourage the exposure and accountability of those corrupted by power. In the absence of suitable institutional supports, even the favorable intentions of most political officeholders in a socialist society will not suffice to sustain liberty of the press over the long run.

Another proponent of liberty of the press under socialism might contend that the authorities in socialist societies will observe the laws upholding liberty of the press if the public is vigilant.<sup>23</sup> But is it not likely that the public will defer to the government and that public opinion will be shaped by the government when the government is in charge of all schools (as would be the case in most models of socialism<sup>24</sup>)? What can one expect when there is no independent press

23. R. H. Tawney, “We Mean Freedom,” *Review of Politics* 8, no. 2 (April 1946): 237.

24. For example, Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Socialism: How It Is and What It Seeks to Accomplish*, trans. May Wood Simmons (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1897), pp. 57–58. It might seem from Engels’s criticism of a draft of the Erfurt Program of the German Social Democrats that he favored permitting private educational institutions under socialism. A passage in this piece in which Engels says that one cannot forbid religious persons from founding their own schools with “their own funds” is cited by Hunt as revealing Engels’s “liberal and Victorian sense of decency.” Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974–1984), vol. 2, pp. 181–82. But Engels’s reference to the religious persons’ “own funds” shows that he is talking about educational reform and church disestablishment in what he considered capitalist societies, not about

to speak out for liberty of the press and other liberties and to propagandize for them?

Yet the issue goes deeper than this. What is at issue is clearly suggested in the following remarks of Irving Howe:

While there is no reason to suppose that . . . an intense political consciousness is a “normal” or even desirable feature of human life at all times, there can be no guarantee of minority rights except insofar as they are cherished in consciousness—and this is true for all societies.<sup>25</sup>

As one looks back across the various proposals for the press under socialism, it appears that they are, most often, a partial rejection of pure, orthodox socialist principles—somehow partially exempting intellectual work and intellectual products from the purview of state ownership and planning. The proposals are attempts to produce some of the features of property rights while retaining most of the subsidies and many of the controls of pure socialism.

In these proposed exemptions and modifications of socialism, one can see an effort by members of the intelligentsia to carve out a special sphere of privilege for themselves under socialism. Such exemptions and modifications are for brain workers, not hand workers.<sup>26</sup>

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private schooling under Marxian socialism, which from the outset of proletarian rule would have a moneyless economy.

25. Irving Howe, “An Answer to Critics of American Socialism,” review of *Socialism and American Life*, ed. Stow Persons and Donald Drew Egbert, *New Internationalist* 18, no. 3, whole no. 154 (May–June 1952): 131.

26. For at least tacit acknowledgment that such measures are deviations from a thoroughgoing application of socialist planning principles, see Kautsky, *Social Revolution*, pp. 182–83; Bellamy, pp. 200, 204; Russell, pp. 180–81 ; G.D.H. Cole, *Fabian Socialism*, pp. 40–41 ; Spargo, p. 298; Annie Besant, “Industry under Socialism,” in George Bernard Shaw, ed., *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), pp. 148–49; Wells, pp. 275–83; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Consumer’s Co-operative Movement* (London: Longmans, Green, 1921), p. 412; Hook, *Political Power*, pp. 403–4; Robert G. Picard, *The Press and the Decline of Democracy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 67; James A. Yunker, *Socialism in the Free Market* (New York: Nellen Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 200–1; William E. Connolly, *Appearance and Reality in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

But the dynamics of actually existing socialist societies—in particular, the effects of the sociology of control over resources and the resulting sociology of power—seem to overwhelm such efforts to carve out a special sphere for the press. Three interconnected phenomena block the emergence of a free and independent press: the absence of liberal institutions of private property, the privileged status of the *nomenklatura* (the Soviet political elite), and the concentration of power inherent in central planning.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, it could be argued that the possibilities for freedom of the press under socialism are open to grave doubts. Perhaps these doubts could be resolved by more work on such topics by socialist theorists. They could certainly be resolved by the existence of a pluralistic socialist society. Until that time, the obstacles in the way of freedom of the press under socialism will continue to look formidable.

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Press, 1981), p. 190. Compare Bukharin, quoted in Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 205.

27. On the sociological implications of the *nomenklatura* and central planning for liberty of the press under socialism, see Williamson M. Evers, "Limits of Liberty of the Press in Political Theory from Milton to Hocking," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1987, pp. 301–6, 324–25, 331–62.