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Albert Camus
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September 1953

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Bread and Freedom

Albert Camus

September 1953

If we add up the violations and the many abuses which have been revealed to us, we can foresee a time when, in a Europe of concentration camps, only prison guards will be free, who will still have to imprison each other. When only one remains, he will be named the head guard and this will be the perfect society wherein the problems of opposition, the nightmare of twentieth-century governments, will be finally, and definitively, resolved.

Of course, this is only a prophecy and although governments and police forces around the world are striving, with great good will, to reach such a happy outcome, we are not there yet. Amongst us, for instance, in Western Europe, freedom is officially viewed favourably. Basically, it makes me think of those poor cousins that we see in certain bourgeois families. The cousin became a widow, she lost her natural protector. So they took her in, gave her a room on the top floor and tolerate her in the kitchen. They occasionally parade her in town, on a Sunday, to prove that they are virtuous and not dogs. But for everything else, and especially on special occasions, she is requested to keep her mouth shut. And even if a police officer casually violates her a little in a corner, they do not make a fuss about it, she has been through worse, especially

with the master of the house, and, after all, it is not worth getting into trouble with the proper authorities. In the East, it must be said that they are more forthright. They have settled the business of the cousin once and for all and flung her into a closet with two sturdy locks. It seems that she will emerge in fifty years, more or less, when the ideal society will have been definitively established. Then they will have celebrations in her honour. But in my opinion she may be somewhat moth-eaten by then and I do fear that they may no longer make use of her. When we add that these two concepts of freedom, that of the closet and that of the kitchen, are each determined to prevail over the other, and are obliged in all this commotion to further reduce the movements of the cousin, it will be easily understood that our history is more that of servitude than of freedom and that the world in which we live is the one just spoken of, which leaps out at us from the newspaper every morning to make of our days and our weeks a single day of outrage and disgust.

The simplest, and therefore most tempting, thing is to accuse governments, or some obscure powers, of these wicked ways. Besides, it is indeed true that they are guilty, and of a crime so impenetrable and so long-lasting that we have even lost sight of its beginnings. But they are not the only ones responsible. After all, if freedom had only ever had governments to guard its growth, it is likely that it would still be its infancy, or definitively buried with the inscription "an angel in heaven". The society of money and exploitation has never been charged, so far as I know, with ensuring freedom and justice. Police States have never been suspected of opening law schools in the cellars where they interrogate their subjects. So, when they oppress and exploit, they are doing their job, and whoever gives them unchecked disposal of freedom has no right to be surprised when it is immediately dishonoured. If freedom today is humiliated or in chains, this is not because its enemies have used treachery. It is actually because it has lost its natural pro-

tector. Yes, freedom is widowed, but it must be said because it is true, it is widowed by all of us.

Freedom is the concern of the oppressed, and its natural protectors have always come out of oppressed peoples. In feudal Europe it was the communes which maintained the ferments of freedom, the inhabitants of the towns and cities who ensured its fleeting triumph in 1789, and since the 19th century it was the workers' movements assumed responsibility for the double honour of freedom and justice, which they never dreamt of saying were irreconcilable. It was the manual and intellectual workers who gave freedom a body, and who made it advance in the world until it become the very principle of our thought, the air that we cannot do without, that we breathe without even noticing it, until the moment when, deprived of it, we feel we are dying. And if, today, freedom is declining across such a large part of the world, it is undoubtedly because the business of enslavement has never been so cynical nor better equipped but it is also because its true defenders, through fatigue, through despair, or through a false idea of strategy and efficiency, have turned away from it. Yes, the great event of the 20th century was the abandonment of the values of freedom by the revolutionary movement, the progressive retreat of the socialism of freedom before Caesarian and military socialism. From that moment, a certain hope has disappeared from the world, a solitude has begun for every free man.

When, after Marx, the rumour began to spread and gain strength that freedom was a bourgeois hoax [*balançoire*], a single word was misplaced in this definition, but we are still paying for that misplacement in the convulsions of our century. For it should have been said merely that bourgeois freedom was a hoax, and not all freedom. It should have been said specifically that bourgeois freedom was not freedom or, in the best of cases, that it was not yet [freedom]. But that there were freedoms to be conquered and never relinquished. It is quite true that there is no freedom possible for the man tied to his lathe all day and who, when evening comes,

huddles with his family in a single room. But that condemns a class, a society and the servitude it presupposes, not freedom itself which the poorest of us cannot do without. For even if society were suddenly transformed and became decent and comfortable for all, it would still be barbaric if freedom did not reign there. And because bourgeois society talks of freedom without practising it, must the workers' society also give up practising it, boasting only of not talking about it? Yet the confusion took place and freedom was gradually condemned in the revolutionary movement because bourgeois society used it as a mystification. From a just and healthy distrust of the prostitution that this bourgeois society inflicted upon freedom, we have come to distrust freedom itself. At best, we have postponed it to the end of time, praying that in the meanwhile we will not talk about it anymore. It was declared that justice was the first necessity and that freedom would be seen to later, as if slaves could ever hope to achieve justice. And vibrant intellectuals announced to the worker that it was bread alone that interested him and not freedom, as if the worker did not know that his bread also depends on his freedom. And certainly, faced with the long injustice of bourgeois society, the temptation to go to such extremes was great. After all, there is perhaps not one of us here who, in action or thought, has not yielded to it. But history has moved forward and what we have seen must now make us reconsider. The revolution made by the workers triumphed in 1917 and it was then the dawn of real freedom and the greatest hope that this world has known. But that revolution, surrounded, threatened within and without, armed itself, equipped itself with a police force. Inheriting a conception and a doctrine that unfortunately rendered it suspicious of freedom, the revolution gradually weakened as the police grew stronger, and the world's greatest hope ossified into the world's most effective dictatorship. The false freedom of bourgeois society is no worse off, however. What was killed in the Moscow trials and elsewhere, and in the camps of the revolution, what is murdered when a railway worker is shot, as in

our resistance, can then be expressed simply: anything that humiliates labour humiliates the intellect, and vice versa. And the revolutionary struggle, the age-old striving for liberation is defined first of all as a dual and unceasing rejection of humiliation.

To tell the truth, we have not yet emerged from this humiliation. But the wheel turns, history changes, a time approaches, I am sure, when we will no longer be alone. For me, our meeting today is already a sign. The fact that trade unionists gather together and group around our freedoms to defend them, yes, this truly merited everyone rushing from all directions to demonstrate their unity and their hope. The road ahead is long. Yet if war does not come and mixes everything into its hideous confusion, we will have time to finally give a form to the justice and freedom we need. But for this, we must from now on categorically refuse, without anger but implacably, the lies with which we have been forced fed. No, we do not build freedom on concentration camps, nor on the subjugated peoples of the colonies, nor on working-class poverty! No, the doves of peace do not perch on gallows, no, the forces of freedom cannot mix the sons of the victims with the executioners of Madrid and elsewhere! Of this, at least, we will henceforth be sure, as we will be sure that freedom is not a gift that we receive from a State or a leader, but a good that we conquer every day, by the effort of each and the union of all.

lie in union, that separated they will allow themselves to be diminished one by one by the forces of tyranny and barbarism, but that, on the other hand, united they will rule the world. This is why any undertaking which aims to disengage and separate them is an undertaken directed against man and his highest hopes. Therefore the first deed of any dictatorial endeavour is to simultaneously subjugate labour and culture. It is necessary, in fact, to gag them both otherwise, the tyrants are well aware, sooner or later one will speak up for the other. This is how, in my opinion, there are today two ways for an intellectual to betray and, in both cases, he betrays because he accepts only one thing: this separation between labour and culture. The first characterises bourgeois intellectuals who accept that their privileges are paid for by the enslavement of the workers. They often say that they defend freedom, but they defend first the privileges that freedom gives them, and them alone.⁵ Second characterises intellectuals who believe themselves to be on the left and who, through distrust of freedom, accept that culture, and the freedom it presupposes, should be directed, under the vain pretext of serving future justice. In both cases, whether they are a carpetbagger of injustice or a renegade of freedom, they ratify, they consecrate the separation of intellectual and manual labour which dooms both labour and culture to impotence, they debase at the same time both freedom and justice.

It is true that freedom, when it is made up primarily of privileges, insults labour and separates it from culture. But freedom is not made up primarily of privileges, it is made up above all of duties. And from the moment any of us tries to ensure that the duties of freedom prevail over its privileges, from that moment, freedom unites labour and culture and sets in motion the only force that can effectively serve justice. The principal of our action, the secret of

⁵ And besides, most of the time they do not even defend freedom whenever there is a risk to do so.

Hungary, for a mistake at work, is not bourgeois freedom, it is the freedom of 1917. Bourgeois freedom can meanwhile engage in all its mystifications. The trials, the perversions of the revolutionary society give it both a good conscience and arguments.

Ultimately, what characterises the world we live in is precisely this cynical dialectic that pits injustice against enslavement and which strengthens one by the other. When they bring into the palace of culture Franco, the friend of Goebbels and Himmler, Franco, the real victor of the Second World War, to those who protest and say that the rights of man enshrined in the charter of UNESCO are mocked every day in Franco's prisons, they answer with a straight face that Poland is also at UNESCO and that in terms of respecting public freedoms, one is no better than the other. An idiotic argument, of course! If you have had the misfortune to marry your elder daughter to a sergeant in a battalion of convicts [*bataillons d'Afrique*¹], this is no reason to marry the younger sister to an inspector in the Vice Squad: one black sheep in the family is enough. However, the idiotic argument is effective, as is proved to us every day. To those who bring up the slave in the colonies crying out for justice, they are shown the prisoners in Russian concentration camps, and vice versa. And if you protest against the assassination in Prague of an opposition historian like Kalandra, two or three American Negroes are thrown in your face.² In this disgusting one-upmanship, only one thing does not

¹ The Battalions of Light Infantry of Africa (*Bataillons d'Infanterie Légère d'Afrique*) were French infantry and construction units serving in Northern Africa which were made up of men with prison records who still had to do their military service or soldiers with serious disciplinary problems. Created in 1832, they were disbanded in 1972. (Translator)

² Závěš Kalandra (1902–1950) was a Czechoslovak historian and theorist of literature. In 1923 he joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, but he was expelled due to his criticism of Stalin's policy. Arrested by the Gestapo in 1939 and imprisoned until 1945 in various concentration camps, after the war he was branded a Trotskyist and executed for being a member of an alleged plot to overthrow the Communist regime. (Translator)

change, the victim, always the same, only one value is constantly violated or prostituted, freedom, and then we realise that together with it justice is also debased everywhere.³

How then to break this infernal circle? It is obvious that we can only do this by restoring, right now, in ourselves and around us, the value of freedom – and by never again agreeing to it being sacrificed, even temporarily, or separated from our demand for justice. Today's watchword, for all of us, can only be this: without conceding anything on the plane of justice, never abandoning that of freedom. In particular, the few democratic liberties we still enjoy are not unimportant illusions, and which we cannot allow to be stolen from us without protest. They represent exactly what we have left of the great revolutionary conquests of the last two centuries. They therefore are not, as so many clever demagogues tell us, the negation of true freedom. There is not an ideal freedom that will be given us one day all at once, as we receive our pension at the end of our life. There are freedoms to be conquered, painfully, one by one, and those we still have are steps, certainly not enough, but nevertheless steps on the way to a real liberation. If we agree to suppress them, that does not mean we are moving forward. On the contrary, we retreat, we go backwards and one day we will have to retrace that route, but this new effort will be achieved once again in the sweat and blood of men.

No, choosing freedom today is not, like a Kravchenko, going from being a carpetbagger for the Soviet regime to that of a carpetbagger for the bourgeois regime.⁴ For that would be, on the con-

³ The latest news is that the Laniel government killed seven demonstrators in the Place de la Nation to keep up with the Berlin shootings. That will teach us to demand dialogue. We have it, but it is the dialogue of the dead. Yes, it is who will be the most despicable! [Footnote from the original article not included in the reprint – Translator]

⁴ Viktor Andreevich Kravchenko (1905–1966) was a Ukrainian-born Soviet defector. Originally an enthusiastic member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who joined the party in 1929, he later became disillusioned and defected to the United States during World War II. He is best known for writing the book

trary, to choose servitude twice and, a final condemnation, choosing it twice for others. Choosing freedom is not, as we are told, choosing against justice. On the contrary, we choose freedom today at the same level as those who everywhere suffer and struggle, and only there. We chose it at the same time as justice and, in truth, now we can no longer choose one without the other. If someone takes away your bread, he removes your freedom at the same time. But if someone steals your freedom, rest assured, your bread is threatened, for it no longer depends on you and your struggle but on the whim of a master. Poverty increases as freedom recedes in the world, and vice versa. And if this unforgiving century has taught us anything, it is that the economic revolution will be free or it will not be, just as liberation will be economic or it will be nothing. The oppressed not only want to be liberated from their hunger, they also want to be freed from their masters. They know very well that they will be effectively freed of hunger only when they hold their masters, all their masters, at bay.

Finally, I should add that separating freedom from justice amounts to separating culture and labour, which is the quintessential social sin. The confusion of the labour movement in Europe stems partly from the fact that it has lost its real home, the one where it regained its strength after all defeats, and which was the faith in freedom. But, likewise, the confusion of European intellectuals arises because the double mystification, bourgeois and pseudo-revolutionary, separated them from their sole source of authenticity, the work and suffering of all, cutting them off from their sole natural allies, the workers. As for me, I have only ever recognised two aristocracies, that of labour and that of the intelligence, and I know now that it is crazy and criminal to want to subject one to the other, I know that between them they make but one nobility, that their truth and above all their effectiveness

I Chose Freedom, published in 1946, about the realities of life in the Soviet Union. (Translator)