

Free Speech and the Social Technologies of Democracy, Scientific Inquiry and the Free Market

Richard Barron Parker

Abstract This essay points out the historical importance of freedom of speech in the rise and fall of nations. My major point is that over the past two centuries, nations have flourished or failed to flourish to the degree that they have adopted the social practices of scientific inquiry, democracy, and the free market, each of which requires freedom of speech. Those societies that did not embrace the freedom of speech necessary for the operation of the three practices were handicapped in competition with societies that did. In sum, the amount of free speech in any society has been central to the ability of that society to avoid disaster and to flourish.

Keywords Freedom of expression • Democratic government • Scientific method • Free market • Successful societies

1 Introduction

This essay points out the historical importance of freedom of speech in the rise and fall of nations. My major point is that over the past two centuries, nations have flourished or failed to flourish to the degree that they have adopted the social practices of scientific inquiry, democracy, and the free market, each of which requires freedom of speech. My point of view is a distant high-altitude aerial picture of world history over the past two centuries. Events such as the current world economic downturn or the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States can barely be seen from this altitude. Examples of events that can be seen, and which illustrate my major point, are the failure of most of the world's societies to avoid colonization by the nations of Western Europe, or the fall of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the Second World War, or the defeat of the

R.B. Parker (✉)
Hiroshima Shudo University, Hirohima, Japan
e-mail: rbarronparker@yahoo.com

Soviet Union in the Cold War. In all of these cases, a major cause of failure was less use of democracy, scientific inquiry, and the free market compared to competitors who made greater use of these three practices. Free speech is the heart of each of these practices. A resistance to free speech is usually the way that societies have resisted the adoption of the three practices. Those societies that did not embrace the freedom of speech necessary for the operation of the three practices were handicapped in competition with societies that did. In sum, the amount of free speech in any society has been central to the ability of that society to avoid disaster and to flourish.

2 Social Technologies

It is useful to think of the social practices of scientific inquiry, democracy, and the free market as similar to technologies that can be transferred from one society to another.

Imagine a spectrum. On the left end (the blue end) are things that human beings discover in the natural world – the properties of iron, electricity, atomic energy. A bit closer to the center of the spectrum from the blue end are things that human beings invent – iron weapons, the electric light bulb, the atomic bomb. At the opposite end of the spectrum (the right red end) are the constituent elements of cultures – religions, languages, kinship patterns, festivals, costumes, domestic architecture, etc. We generally do not say that these constitutive elements are discovered or invented, we say that these constitutive elements of culture arose or developed.

Discoveries or inventions – things toward the left end of the spectrum – are thought of as transferable from one society to another. Gunpowder, the steam engine, electricity and the electric light, atomic energy and the atomic bomb may be discovered or invented by a given society and then adopted by other societies. Discoveries and inventions have often given the society that first made the discovery or invention a large military or economic advantage over rival societies. Societies often adopt the new discovery or invention in self-defense. The spread of discoveries and inventions may work large changes in the societies that adopt them, but we do not usually speak of the spread of discoveries and inventions as the imposition of one culture on another.

Discoveries or inventions are not just physical. New forms of social organization can also be discovered or invented. Military organizations such as the Roman army or economic arrangements such as the Dutch joint-stock company are inventions that gave the inventing societies a competitive advantage over their rivals until those rivals adopted the new invention or discovered or invented something that could neutralize the advantage.

I use the term “social technologies” for the social arrangements and practices and processes in the middle of the spectrum described above. They have some of the transferability and independence of culture that is true of physical technologies. They often confer competitive advantage over rivals on the societies that discover

or develop them, but they are social arrangements and practices, not physical discoveries or inventions.

The three “social technologies” I wish to discuss in more detail in this essay are the social practices of democracy, scientific inquiry, and the free market. They are near the middle of the spectrum described above. We can say that the ancient Greeks invented democracy, but it is also natural to say that democracy arose as a form of government in the Greek city states in the sixth century BCE. Scientific inquiry and the free market are perhaps a bit to the right of democracy in that we are a little less likely to say that they were invented or discovered and more likely to see them as arising in a cultural context.

3 Common Characteristics of Democracy, Scientific Inquiry, and the Free Market

Democracy, scientific inquiry, and the free market can be seen as effective methods for organizing vast amounts of information. They differ only in the sort of information they process. Scientific inquiry handles information about the physical world which fosters the development of new technologies that often contribute to a society’s economic or military advantage over societies lacking the new technologies. Democracy handles information about the interests of various groups in society, confers legitimacy on governments, and enables a society to make the necessary hard choices between competing domestic or foreign policies without endangering social stability. The free market handles economic information and determines what goods and services are needed at what prices.

These practices are so superior to the alternatives for dealing with the same sort of information that any society which uses them has a competitive advantage over one which does not. The generally perceived superiority of the three practices is why they are spreading so rapidly.

The practices produce superior results because they share three characteristics.

First, there is more widespread participation in these practices than in more bureaucratic or authoritarian alternatives. More information is taken in. Scientific inquiry, democracy, and the free market allow a wider range of people to offer a scientific theory, political leadership or a public policy, or a good or service.

Second, the three practices give a wide circulation to the various scientific theories, political leaders or public policies, and goods and services that are offered and force them to compete against one another.

Third, there is a decentralized yet clear and peaceful decision procedure for determining which theories, political leaders or public policies, or goods or services survive and which are rejected. The consensus of opinion in a worldwide scientific community rejects or accepts a scientific theory. The electorate, or their representatives in government, accept or reject various leaders and their domestic and foreign policies. The marketplace accepts or rejects the provision of a particular good or service at a particular price.

4 Unpredictability and Trust

The results of each of the three practices are unpredictable and cannot be controlled by any single group or person. One never knows in advance what goods or services will be provided by a free market, or what political leaders or domestic or foreign policies will be chosen by a democratic society, or what new knowledge and consequent technology will be discovered in the course of scientific inquiry.

This unpredictability allows maximum adaptability by a society to changing circumstances. The practices of democracy, the free market, and scientific inquiry begin forcing necessary changes on a society even before the elite members of the society realize what is happening. To enjoy the benefits of this unpredictability leading to adaptability, there needs to be trust in the practices to produce over time better results than the conscious planning of any individual or small group could accomplish.

In the case of democracy, trust in the practice means that the commitment to democratic practice outweighs any commitment to any particular policy, political leader, or political party. Individuals may work hard to advance a policy, leader, or party, but those committed to democracy do not subvert democratic practice to achieve a desired substantive result. Using private violence or governmental power to intimidate voters or suppress speech are examples of a lack of trust in democratic practice and a failure to use it fully. Trust in democratic practice requires trust in freedom of speech. Speech is sometimes banned because it is false, or unsound, or seditious, or prejudicial to good order, or hateful or offensive. There may be good reasons in local contexts to ban speech but if those reasons are often considered dispositive and speech is often banned, democracy as a practice for the processing of information is undermined.

In the case of the free market, regulations which limit participation in the market, foster public or private monopolies, prevent competition, or thwart consumer choice are all examples of a failure to use fully the market process. (The free market is not, of course, identical with *laissez-faire*. Some regulation of markets is necessary to prevent monopolies or excesses leading to market collapse.) Trust in the market means that the commitment to market freedom outweighs any commitment to the success or failure of any given service or product in the marketplace. Freedom of commercial speech is important to market freedom. Again, there may be good reasons in local contexts to regulate commercial speech but if those reasons are often considered dispositive, the free market as a processor of information is undermined.

In the case of scientific inquiry, examples of a lack of trust are limitations on scientific research or on the use of the technologies to which scientific knowledge gives rise. Religious objections to scientific inquiry or a suppression of scientific inquiry on the grounds that it is dangerous – that new evils will be released upon the world – reveal a lack of trust in scientific inquiry as a processor of information. A society which does not have the confidence in science to solve the problems science creates will not be able to use fully the process of scientific inquiry.

Scientific inquiry depends essentially on free speech. The suppression of scientific opinion as heretical or dangerous will cripple a society's ability to make use of the process of scientific inquiry.

In general, private or governmental actions that constrict the collection and circulation of information, prevent opposing views from competing, or limit decentralized decision-making show a lack of trust in the three practices. The more government and private actions open the flow of information, encourage competition, and encourage the decentralized but dispositive decision-making characteristic of the three practices, the more a society can make use of the three practices. In sum, the freer speech is in a given society, the more a society can make use of the three practices. Societies that do not make extensive use of the three practices will not be able to process enough information fast enough to keep up with societies that do.

The three practices reinforce one another. It is difficult for a society to embrace fully one practice while refusing to countenance the others. Attempts by authoritarian countries to embrace the free market or scientific inquiry while refusing democracy are likely to fail. The three practices require a commitment to free speech, the free flow of information, and decentralized decision making that authoritarian governments have usually lacked. The commitment to accepting the unplanned results of the three practices is especially difficult for authoritarian governments.

5 The Social Costs of the Three Practices

Even from the high-altitude distant point of view of this essay, it is clear that the three practices tend to undermine traditional social institutions and make social interactions less dependable and often less humane. Thus good arguments can sometimes be advanced for limiting free speech and limiting the operation of the three practices in various local contexts. Although my point of view in this essay is too distant to dictate answers to specific questions of exactly when free speech might be limited in cases of, for example, hate speech, campaign financing, pornography, invasion of privacy, or the regulation of scientific or commercial speech, the historical patterns seen from the high-altitude distant point of view of this essay do support a general presumption in favor of free speech.

The rapid spread of these three practices or "social technologies" has often been seen as some kind of Western (especially American) cultural imperialism. But the spread of these three social technologies is more akin to the spread of steam power in the early nineteenth century. The spread of steam power was not "Britification." The spread of the three processes is not "Americanization." It may seem that way at present because the United States over the past two hundred years has made the most use of the three practices and has thus enjoyed a competitive advantage over societies that have used them less, but the three practices themselves are forms of social organization available to any society. None of them originated in the United States.

Much of the objection to “American hegemony” in the world is in fact objection to the three practices. Resistance to the three practices is expressed as resistance to the country – the United States – that enjoys “hegemony” because of its more extensive use of the three processes over the past two centuries.

In the United States, no one person, or group, or social class, is in charge. There is no semi-permanent hierarchy that can be relied upon. There is only the legal and political system, an open civil society, ethnic sub-cultures, and the shifting fortunes of individuals.

The comparatively rootless and consensual character of human relations in America allows greater use of the processes of democracy, the free market, and scientific inquiry. Americans are very good at coming together to create temporary communities among people with no prior relation to one another for a given temporary project. The only criteria for membership in the project, whether that project is to make money in a computer software business, to advance some political goal, or to achieve some national goal such as sending a man to the moon or winning a war, is whether someone can contribute to the success of the task at hand.

In other countries, social roles, class lines, traditions, seniority, and the comparatively pre-determined character of individual social relationships slow down the combination and recombination of individuals and groups that characterize America society. Japanese and British, and most other peoples, enter into cooperative arrangements within a larger social context. Before they cooperate, they want to know where people went to school, how old they are, who their parents are, and their status in the social world they share together. They are much slower to commit but much more likely to be loyal once relations are established. This concern with the long term social consequences of cooperation inhibits free speech in all contexts and thus inhibits democracy, the free market, and scientific inquiry.

Elites in various societies often limit free speech not out of selfish, self-interested motives, but out of genuine concern for the welfare of the societies they rule. Extensive use of free speech and the three practices creates a society with more physical risk, more economic risk, and more emotional risk. The slower, less nimble, more attached, more humane person, and the more traditional elements of society are often crushed. As severe as these social costs of the three practices are in the United States, they are worse elsewhere.

For the rest of the world, especially the economically poorer societies, the three practices and the free speech they require constitute an assault on traditional family structures, religious hierarchies, and accepted structures of social and political authority. The three practices piggyback on one another. For example, the exponential growth of access to information through TV, cellular phones, and the Internet – products of scientific inquiry – produces an exponential growth in the expectations of ordinary citizens in poorer countries for government more responsive to their welfare. This in turn produces a society that can only be governed democratically. Democracy is the only political system that can produce governments with sufficient authority to have a chance of dealing effectively

with the exponential growth of access to information among the citizenry. Democracy is increasingly seen even by non-democratic elites as necessary to the legitimacy and authority of governments. Even authoritarian governments feel the need to allow more free speech and to conduct elections that they would much rather forbid.

The consequences are hard for non-democratic elites to swallow. The problem is not that elites are not necessary in democracies. They are. The problem for more traditional elites is that the more democracy there is, the more rapid the turnover in the membership of elites.

The United States has a remarkable record of using free speech and the three practices to turn over its elites several times in the last two hundred years. Picking up the story eighty years ago, the Depression and Second World War gave rise to new elites that displaced those descended from the families that made fortunes in America's industrialization in the late nineteenth century. The new elites in the 1950s were the professional CEOs of large manufacturing companies and the leaders of the unions representing the workers that these large companies employed. Lawyers such as John Foster Dulles from large law firms occupied the top government positions occupied in other countries by elite civil servants. Fifty years later, this post-war elite has been replaced by enormously wealthy information technology entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates and media magnates such as Rupert Murdoch. Career military officers and academic experts are increasingly occupying the top government positions themselves rather than just acting as advisors.

The pace of change is accelerating. The new entrepreneurial/technocratic elite of the past twenty years will be replaced in less than sixty years. By whom, we do not now know, but no elite in the United States has lasted more than three generations. The choice will be made by the open-ended uncontrolled practices of scientific inquiry, democracy, and the free market. It is likely that Bill Gates' children will be nothing more than very wealthy. They will not wield power and influence at the highest levels.

This rapid replacement of elites over its history has served America well. As conditions change, old leaders, old families, and old social sets were swept aside by the impersonal three practices. The new elites have been better able to deal with the new conditions.

If the United States was more like other societies, the Washingtons, the Astors, and the Vanderbilts would still hold power. The idea of a great family has always been thin in America when compared with Asia or Europe. In the twentieth century, the great families of America – the Rockefellers, the Roosevelts, the Kennedys – were able to stay at the top for no more than three generations.

This instability is upsetting enough in America. In most other human societies, it represents a revolution in how authority of all kinds is acquired and used. Yet when those other societies try to protect the position of the old elites by failing to adopt more fully the three practices of democracy, the free market, and scientific inquiry, and the freedom of speech they require, those societies fail to adapt to ever more rapidly changing conditions.

6 The Effect of the Worldwide Spread of the Three Practices on the United States

If the above description of the advantage given to the United States by extensive use of the three practices and the free speech they require is anywhere close to the truth, then it also shows how “American hegemony” will end. Other nations, or combinations of nations, will make more extensive use of the three practices than they do now and the United States will make relatively less compared to other nations.

To some degree this is already happening. Many European countries are more democratic than the United States. Several countries such as Singapore have freer markets. Many of the best European and Asian scientists participate in the worldwide network of laboratories that constitutes the world of scientific inquiry. The decline in the ability of American universities to attract foreign students, and American financial markets to attract investors, are indicators of relative decline. In the United States, the power of the Bush family and the Clinton family and their large groups of courtiers are a symptom of a more rigid less open political system. On the other hand, the rise of Obama and the growth of Internet financing of political campaigns are hopeful signs of an increase in the amount of democracy in the United States.

The only countries in the world with a population larger than the United States are China and India. They will be formidable competitors in the future if they continue to increase their use of the three practices. (I am sanguine about the danger China may present to the United States. If China continues to democratize, it will become more powerful but also less likely to be a threat if it is true, as I believe, that large democracies do not go to war with one another. If China backtracks and uses the three practices less, China will be less powerful and thus less of a threat. In either case, China will not be a serious threat to the United States.)

At some point in the near future, the United States will decline in relation to some of the rest of the world. The major cause of the relative decline of the United States will be the more extensive use of the three practices by other countries.

7 A Personal Postscript

I hope that it is clear from the above that I think that free speech and the three processes are a mixed blessing. Americans have embraced free speech and the three practices to a degree unmatched by any other large society over the past two centuries. While I do think that this embrace has given the United States a competitive edge, it also has exposed Americans to greater economic insecurity and greater personal anxiety than people in most other societies. In the United States, expectations of any sort are much less likely to be realized than in Japan or the United Kingdom. American society is riskier, rougher, more violent, and harder on the delicate and the subtle.

As an American, I have been raised to take care of myself in a cultural semi-vacuum, but the majority of the world's people see life in America as exciting and free but also as dangerous and lacking in community and compassion. As D. H. Lawrence wrote in 1923, "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer."¹ Perhaps we Americans should collectively decide to abandon our lead in free speech and the three practices. (Our extraordinary democratic political system enables us to make collective decisions to change the fundamental premises of our society. More traditional societies have more difficulty making such basic changes.) Should we decide to be less free? Such a decision would make us more comfortable. People would do more what was expected. Our lives would be safer and more stable. We would provide more for one another's welfare and be more considerate of one another. We would be more like the rest of the world. Having lived in Japan for the past eighteen years, I can testify to the attractiveness of a society with less free speech and less use of the three practices.

On the other hand, as a competitive, isolate, and stoic American, I am reluctant to surrender my freedom. I also do not wish to lose the advantages that freer speech and greater use of the three practices offer in the historical competition among societies. As other countries adopt freer speech and make more use of the three practices, the competition to adapt well to changing conditions will increase. As an American, I think it is probably better for our long term flourishing if we accept the pain and pleasures of living in a rougher but freer society. When in doubt in weighing the value of free speech versus other values in local contexts, the large historical patterns pointed out in this essay incline me to favor free speech.

¹D.H. Lawrence, "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels," in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 68 (London: Penguin Classics, 1977).