

Freedom For Sale: are we really trading in liberty for luxury?

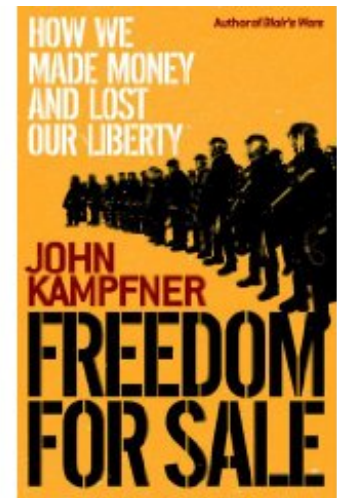
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Across the world people are trading in liberty for material wealth as the freedom gains from the end of the Cold War are turned into a consumerist clampdown. That's the grim global warning in John Kampfner's new book [Freedom For Sale](#). But is this another example of the liberty lobby putting passion and persuasion before the facts?

Like John Kampfner, I am a member of the small but determined group of organisations dedicated to defending freedom of expression as well as wider human rights. Kampfner is what he describes as a 'post-journalist', someone who uses his skills gathered over two decades of reporting and editing to advocate a cause. He is the director of [Index on Censorship](#), I am a trustee of [Article 19](#), the global campaign for free expression.

Both organisations are based on the presumption that the world is a place where freedom of expression is constantly under threat, but this new book goes further. It claims that we are actually on a downward curve and that the cause is materialism. I am a huge admirer of this book in the way that it amasses evidence and stimulates debate, but I am not convinced by that underlying thesis.



Freedom For Sale is a series of journeys through countries in the post Cold War world. We are shown how the end of Communism has not brought vibrant representative democracy. Instead countries like Singapore suggest that it is perfectly possible to have the external trappings of a free media, elections and a market economy alongside highly restrictive legal systems, punitive policing, endemic corruption, inequality and oligarchical politics.

Easy targets

Some of the targets are fairly easy. China and Russia are clearly more democratic than they were in 1989 but they have replaced communism with a series of brutal adaptations to capitalism that have brought new forms of control along with economic growth.

The United Arab Emirates is another relatively uncontroversial example of where profit has come before personal or social liberties. The critique of India is more controversial as he insists that not enough is being done for the poor and disenfranchised in the caste system as south Asia enjoys its new economic super-power status.

Populist Precedents

But when Kampfner gets closer to home the thesis gets more interesting. He sees Berlusconi's Italy not as an eccentric exception but as a dangerous precedent for populist demogogy.

And he sees Britain in Orwellian terms as a police state overseen continually by CCTV. While America is riddled by the anti-libertarian impulses of the military-industrial lobby given their head by the neo-cons.

Kampfner's key insight is that where liberties have been lost, it has not been through old-fashioned totalitarian enforcement, but by consent. In a Chomskian way we have given up freedoms through a desire for security and comfort.

Illiberal Catalogue

Much of this travelogue of illiberalism is undeniably true. But a catalogue of problems is not the same as an

argument . And arguments around human rights are currently much more complicated than the black and white moral certainties that the liberty lobby sometimes indulges in. Even veteran human rights campaigners like [Conor Gearty](#) accept that the whole field is uncertain.

I feel uneasy about a materially-successful writer in a wealthy country blaming the world's poor for trading in some rights and freedoms in exchange for a decent standard of living. If it was true. But I think that Kampfner makes a causal link that simply isn't there. I think that where freedoms or frameworks of rights and liberty have changed it has been for other reasons.

It has sometimes been that societies have responded to particular issues. So in the UK we now insist that people who work with children must have their criminal records checked. That is a classic example of a society making a decision to limit freedom for the greater good. You might disagree with it, but it was an open and deliberated change in the way we view the balance of rights between children's safety and adult privacy.

Golf Is Good

But the other kind of cause is much more brutal. It is about power. It is a case of strong elites/leaders/governments made stronger by the wealth that growth brings. The problem is not that people are happily agreeing to surrender liberties because they are too busy watching colour TVs or playing golf. It is that democracy itself has not adapted to a more complex, individualised, and insecure world.

Kampfner ends up making the same old activist complaint that has been made through the centuries. People are apathetic:

"The tragedy of the past twenty years is that the allure of globalised wealth served as a drug, not just for the super-rich, and as much in the West as in the East"

These sentiments have been expressed since the the beginnings of human politics and in the end Kampfner does not provide the historical context or analysis to convince me that this is truly a new situation. Wasn't globalised wealth and politics in a similar state at the end of the 19th century for example?

I still prefer the limited freedoms of contemporary Russia and China to the old Communist regimes. I don't think that they are necessarily heading backwards. It is only in comparison to the lofty hopes of 1989 that the current situations appear so dire. The danger of putting it like that is that I will be accused of complacency. But I hope that the evidence of my campaigning work on freedom disproves that. Likewise, my hopes for new media technology is that it will bring deeper and sustainable democracy, not just a legalistic or constitutional improvement.

So while I take issue with its wider thesis, I would say that this book is essential reading for anyone who cares about freedom in our time. I entirely accept the danger of sleep-walking towards a new kind of populist totalitarianism. I agree that we should battle against every little loss of liberty.

However, I strongly believe that the world is a much free-er place than in 1989. I think that, generally speaking, open, growing markets compliment the possibility of open liberal societies and vice versa. The diversity of political organisation that we see around the world – including the many illiberal trends – is a great surprise for those who somehow expected a triumph of either social democracy or rampant capitalism after the end of Communism. But diversity is not the same as defeat for freedom.

Kampfner's book is a very useful reminder that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. At a time when we have unprecedented technological and material capacity to create and sustain democracy and freedom, he shows that you still need to fight to make sure that it is delivered – along with the groceries.

