



A SPECIAL MEETING

THE MONT PELERIN SOCIETY

1980 | 2020

JANUARY 15–17, 2020

**FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE:
IDEAS AND ACTIONS FOR A FREE SOCIETY**

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CULTURE AND THE FREE SOCIETY

SAMUEL GREGG



Taking Ideas to Action around the World

“Culture and the Free Society”

Samuel Gregg

Research Director

Acton Institute

Mont Pelerin Society Meeting

Hoover Institution

17 January 2020¹

¹ © Samuel Gregg 2020. Not to be copied or distributed without the author's permission.

Thank you. I'm grateful to be here and to John Taylor for the kind invitation to speak on this important topic of how to translate the ideas of liberty into action throughout the world. My remarks are not going to be on the technical dimension of this topic. Rather, I'm going to focus on a broader strategic question, with particular reference to a topic I think needs more attention: That topic, as you can see, is culture.

I take it that one assumption underlying this panel's topic is that the free society is primarily a product of Western societies. By this, I mean that the roots of the free society are primarily—not exclusively—but primarily found in the philosophical, religious, political, legal and economic inheritances bequeathed by Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, the Jewish and Christian religions, and the various Enlightenments, not to mention numerous thinkers

ranging from Aristotle to Aquinas, Smith, Burke, and Tocqueville. That is, I'd suggest, what the founders of our Mont Pelerin Society had in mind when they used expressions like, quote, "the central values of civilization" and, quote, "Western Man" in their 1947 Statement of Aims.

If that's true, the question becomes: how does one take ideas about freedom to societies where the dominant cultural settings are not well disposed to the free society? How do we spread these ideas in cultures where there is not, for instance, a strong history of rule of law, or where liberty has not been a dominant normative concern, or where political life has been dominated by top-down mentalities, or where civil society is weak to non-existent?

I spend some much time studying the relationship between culture, liberty, and the free economy. So let me offer some insights and suggestions based upon what I have learned.

My first insight is the sheer difficulty of such endeavors. Cultures are not easy to change. As we know, recent efforts to shift societies marked by tribalism and quite different philosophical and religious heritages to the West in the direction of more freedom have not turned out so well. Now I happen to believe that there is such a thing as human nature and a natural law knowable by all human beings because we all possess reason. But I also think that culture—by which I mean the dominant ideas, beliefs, value-commitments, attitudes, expectations, rules, and institutions that shape life in a given society—is very powerful.

My second insight is that the political left have always understood the importance of “winning the culture” if you want to shift societies in particular directions. Incidentally, this topic was discussed at length during the 1972 Mont Pelerin meeting in Switzerland. Those of you who know me will know that I don’t often recommend Marxist thinkers, but I do think that the writings of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci are very important for us to read today. While most Marxists of his time stressed the economic means of production as the primary driver of history, Gramsci believed that capturing what he called the cultural means of production was more important. I don’t think that it’s an exaggeration to say that the left has been spectacularly successful in realizing that objective. And the consequences for free societies have been decidedly negative.

My third insight is that, thanks to particular economists and historians—I'm thinking specifically of Nobel economists Douglass North and Edmund Phelps and the economic historian Eric Jones—we have considerable evidence of how certain values embodied in particular cultural settings influence economic development. We know, for instance, that if a given culture constantly prioritizes equality-as-sameness over liberty and creativity, it is hard for a society to move towards greater freedom. That's one of the key lessons I took from Jones' 1981 book *The European Miracle* and Phelps's 2013 book *Mass Flourishing*.

Put another way, institutions, law and economic policy certainly matter. If policy changes don't happen, free societies won't grow. But if the ideas of a free society are not grafted into a culture, or accepted by some of those who shape culture, you have good

reason to worry whether policy changes will last. Chile is a good example of this. Economic liberalization from the mid-1970s onwards delivered in terms of economic growth and the diminishment of poverty. But the riots and social upheaval which have plagued that country since late 2019 until now surely reflect in part the fact that large and influential segments of the population never accepted the normative case for economic liberty. Perhaps that case was never even put to them in the first place.

If all I have said is true, what are some practical ways to take the ideas of liberty into societies where they are not been noticeably strong? These suggestions are not listed in any order of importance, but I do think they matter.

My first suggestion: it is always worth trying to find traditions of liberty that exist in a given culture, even if it is not a lively tradition in the present. The reason for this is that, in my experience, many people in a given cultural setting are more willing to accept certain arguments if they believe such positions have been previously expressed in some way by individuals who were clearly part of that culture.

When, for example, I am speaking to Jewish audiences, especially religious Jewish audiences, whether in Israel or elsewhere, I'm careful to link my arguments to impeccably Jewish sources. Or if I'm in Latin America and addressing, for instance, a group of Catholic bishops, I make extensive references to scholastic thinkers, from Aquinas onwards, who made important contributions to economic thought that most of us take for granted today.

My second suggestion: it is important that the bulk of the work of persuasion is done by people who live in a given society or who have standing in a particular tradition. It is important that people come from “the outside” to spark debates about liberty. Milton Friedman, for instance, spent much time in the 70s and 80s visiting different countries, meeting politicians and policymakers, debating local leftists, etc. Sometimes it’s easier for a foreigner to start the process of challenging collectivist status quos.

In the long-term, however, these ideas need to be expressed and developed from “within”: by networks of intellectuals, business leaders, academics, journalists, and policymakers who live in these countries, or whose voices carry weight in their respective traditions.

One important task is thus to undertake the often tedious long-term work of helping these networks establish themselves and acquire their own momentum. The purpose is to put like-minded people in touch with each other, to develop focus to often uncoordinated efforts, and help them attain the resources they need to pursue their goals under their own volition.

But above it is to give a face, an accent, and an emphasis to our ideas that can't be dismissed by our opponents as an imposition from the outside by assorted Anglophones like myself. A good example of this is the Islam and Liberty Network, which has done excellent work in some difficult environments. In more recent years, some of my colleagues, most notably, Alejandro Chafuen, have been building up networks of free market, limited government-inclined Evangelicals and Catholics in Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking Latin America.

My third suggestion: if you want to shift a given culture towards greater acceptance of markets and limited government, we need people who can speak beyond the world of economics. Many people come to the ideas of the free society through studying free market economics. I myself spend much time writing about political economy. But many people are more responsive when ideas for freedom are presented through a different lens. That's especially true at the level of culture. Putting ideas into action thus means working with individuals who can exercise considerable cultural influence: historians, novelists, scientists, religious leaders etc.

On the screen, you see two examples. As we all know, economic critiques of the New Deal have been around for a long time. These are important. But my suspicion is that far more people have

embraced more critical views of the New Deal by reading the journalist and historian Amity Shlaes' 2007 book *The Forgotten Man*. This integrates history and narratives to explain why the New Deal was so damaging to freedom. Another example would be the theologian, the late Michael Novak. His 1982 book *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* was highly influential in shifting religious Jews and practicing Christians in countries ranging from Chile to Poland towards more favorable views of the free economy. Yet the core of Novak's argument wasn't economic: it was philosophical, theological and historical.

I could go on and say more, but I'll summarize by saying this. If we want the ideas of the free society to flourish in environments not presently inclined in that direction, we must take culture deadly seriously. That means pursuing a delicate combination of approaches: of challenging some existing norms, but building on

others; of challenging some dominant narratives in a given tradition while developing other narratives grounded on other aspects of that same tradition. But above all, we must recognize that there are no shortcuts if you want lasting change. There are no magic bullets. Policy matters. Politics matter. Embracing the habits, practices, and institutions of economic liberty are especially important. If you are successful, however, in grafting ideas of freedom into the culture of these societies, there is every reason to expect essential transformation to occur and every reason to expect such change to last. Winning the economic argument is indispensable. But if you can win the culture as well, I think that you stand to win everything.



SAMUEL GREGG

ACTON INSTITUTE

Samuel Gregg is research director at the Acton Institute and a fellow at the Center for Law and Religion at Emory University. He has a PhD in moral philosophy and political economy from Oxford University, and writes and speaks extensively on political economy, finance, economic history, and natural law theory.

Gregg oversees domestic and international academic programming, conferences, and seminars at the Acton Institute. He is also the current president of the Philadelphia Society. His articles have been published in journals including the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*; the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy*; the *Journal of Markets and Morality*; *Economic Affairs*; and the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*. He has also written for newspapers and other print and online publications, including *Foreign Affairs*; *First Things*; the *National Review*; *American Banker*; *Law and Liberty*; *Real Clear Politics*; *Real Clear Markets*; *Wall Street Journal Europe*; *Investor's Business Daily*; the *Washington Times*; the *Australian Financial Review*; *El Mercurio*, and the *Jerusalem Post*. Gregg has written fifteen academic and popular books, most recently *Reason, Faith, and the Struggle for Western Civilization*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAST AS PROLOGUE TO THE FUTURE

An Opening Conversation

Chapter 1. Why Choose Economic Freedom?.....	6
<i>George P. Shultz and John B. Taylor</i>	

Free to Choose: 1980 to 2020 and the Network

Chapter 2. Introduction to Free to Choose 1980 to 2020 and the Network.....	14
<i>Robert Chatfield</i>	
Chapter 3. Milton, Rose, me and Poetry.....	16
<i>Robert Chitester</i>	

Removing Obstacles on the Road to Economic Freedom: 1947 to 1980

Chapter 4. Removing Obstacles on the Road to Economic Freedom.....	24
<i>Eamonn Butler</i>	
Chapter 5. Milton Friedman: The Early Years.....	26
<i>Jennifer Burns</i>	
Chapter 6. Mont Pelerin 1947.....	32
<i>Bruce Caldwell</i>	
Chapter 7. The Road Not Taken of “Nuovo liberalismo”.....	85
<i>Alberto Mingardi</i>	

Spread of Free-Market Ideas in the 1980s

Chapter 8. The Reception of Free to Choose and the Problem of Tacit Presuppositions of Political Economy.....	102
<i>Peter Boettke</i>	
Chapter 9. The Spread of Free-Market Ideas in the 1980s (With a Nod to the Late 1970s).....	131
<i>David Henderson</i>	
Chapter 10. Ideas of Freedom and Their Role in Active Policymaking.....	142
<i>Condoleezza Rice</i>	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Lessons Learned from History for the Future of Freedom

Chapter 11. Assaults on Freedom and Citizenship.....	147
<i>Victor Davis Hanson</i>	
Chapter 12. Fed Chair Agonistes.....	152
<i>Amity Shlaes</i>	
Chapter 13. Keynes v Hayek: The Four Buts.....	160
<i>Robert Skidelsky</i>	

IDEAS FOR A FREE SOCIETY

The Role of Law as Protector of Liberty

Chapter 14. Capitalism, Socialism and Nationalism: Lessons from History.....	168
<i>Niall Ferguson</i>	
Chapter 15. Magna Carta, the rule of law, and the limits on government.....	200
<i>Jesús Fernández-Villaverde</i>	
Chapter 16. The Commerce Clause, the Takings Clause, and Due Process.....	208
<i>Douglas Ginsburg</i>	

How to Deal with the Reemergence of Socialism

Chapter 17. The rise and fall of environmental socialism: Smashing the watermelon.....	221
<i>Jeff Bennett</i>	
Chapter 18. Understanding the left.....	226
<i>John Cochrane</i>	
Chapter 19. Economic systems between socialism and liberalism and the new threats of neo-interventionism.....	233
<i>Lars Peder Nordbakken</i>	

Measures of Economic Freedom

Chapter 20. Economic Freedom Matters & Charts.....	248
<i>Anthony Kim</i>	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 21. Economic Freedom: Objective, Transparent Measurement.....279
Fred McMahon

Chapter 22. The World Bank’s Doing Business Indicators.....310
Valeria Perotti

Restraining Expansions of Government

Chapter 23. Common Sense Approach to Addressing America’s Entitlement Challenge.....318
John Cogan

Chapter 24. Key Milestones in Regulation.....339
Susan Dudley

Chapter 25. A Quest for Fiscal Rules.....343
Lars Feld

ACTIONS FOR A FREE SOCIETY

Taking Ideas to Action around the World

Chapter 26. Turning Freedom into Action: Some Reflections on Reforming Higher Education.....371
Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Chapter 27. Culture and the Free Society.....380
Samuel Gregg

Chapter 28. Taking Ideas to Action Around the World.....394
Bridgett Wagner

What Happened in Chile?

Introduction.....402

Chapter 29. Presentation I.....403
Axel Kaiser

Chapter 30. Presentation II.....406
Ernesto Silva

Chapter 31. Presentation III.....409
Arnold Harberger

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Taking Ideas to Action: Making the Case for Freedom

- Chapter 32. Restoring Liberty for American Indians.....411
Terry Anderson
- Chapter 33. The Effect of Economic Freedom on Labor Market Efficiency and Performance.....434
Lee Ohanian
- Chapter 34. Making the Case for Liberty.....466
Russell Roberts

Taking Ideas to Action in the Private Sector

- Chapter 35. Brexit: Taking a Good Idea into Action.....473
Jamie Borwick
- Chapter 36. Taking Ideas to Action in Central Governments—The US Case.....476
Tyler Goodspeed
- Chapter 37. Ideas and Actions for a Free Society.....487
Ruth Richardson

Taking Ideas to Action in the Private Sector

- Chapter 38. Public Policy, Private Actor.....491
Dominique Lazanski
- Chapter 39. Libertarianism is Dysfunctional but Liberty is Great.....508
Joe Lonsdale
- Chapter 40. The False Promise of Medicare for All.....514
Sally Pipes

A Closing Conversation

- Chapter 41. China, Globalization, Capitalism, Silicon Valley, Political Correctness,
and Exceptionalism.....527
Peter Thiel and Peter Robinson