

Free to be Human^{*}

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I am going to talk quite personally and informally about some of the ideas that have been going through my mind, particularly since my last visit to China, where I spent five months earlier this year. I do not intend to give you a list of China's achievements, although the achievements are very great, because they must be fairly well known to this audience. Even if they are not, that's not really what I want to talk about this afternoon.

I have come to think that knowing a great deal about China, accumulating many facts about China, has very little meaning in itself unless we can in some way relate it to ourselves, to our own society and to ourselves as individuals. I know many people who have a tremendous knowledge about China, who read everything they can about that country, and have been there, but have nonetheless missed the essence. There has been a gap between what they see, the facts that they accumulate, and their own consciousness. What has been going on in China has been an encouragement to everybody throughout the world who has been aware of it. What they are doing there I think constitutes a milestone in the history of human development.

But we can't just leave it at that. Speaking personally, what China has done and is doing—especially since the Cultural Revolution—has acted like a powerful searchlight illuminating our own society,

the relationship that we take for granted here, and, again speaking personally, my own behaviour and my own consciousness and my own relationship to other people.

Now the pointlessness of merely accumulating facts about China was brought home to me a few days ago when I listened to a talk by a very eminent American Chinese expert who has just returned from five weeks there, and who has considerable influence in his own country. He has a vast mental file-index of information about China which has been to some extent brought up to date during his recent visit. But after listening to him, I felt that he might just as well not have been there at all. He went with a number of preconceptions and, looking through his own particular coloured glasses, saw only what those glasses would permit him to see. He said he was sad (and this is merely an example of his thinking) that the Chinese would not enjoy all the technical achievements of the West. He saw a coming crisis in China between the inevitable demand for more consumer goods and the inability of Chinese technology to provide them. And he went on to say that modern technology really requires an élite.

It seems to me that he has missed the real point of what the Chinese people are trying to do today, which is to use technical achievements for the service of the people and not to allow it to control the society. They believe that the quality of relationship between people is more im-

^{*} This is a speech made by Felix Greene after his trip to China last year.

portant than the accumulation of possessions, and that people can possess technical skills without it resulting in their becoming an 'élite'.

This American professor is a fine gentleman in himself—I do not want to denigrate him as a human being. I am merely using him to show that the accumulation of factual information on China does not necessarily help one to penetrate into the reality of what they are attempting to do. But it illustrates, at least to me, something even more important, and that is the depth of the conditioning process to which we are all being subjected in a capitalist world.

This last visit to China made me more aware than I have ever been of the complexity, the subtlety, the total pervasive influence, that bourgeois capitalist ideology exerts upon us from the moment we are born. It influences every aspect of our lives. It certainly influences our educational system and our moral values, our relationships with each other. Our fears, our aspirations, our ambitions. The very structure of our thinking is influenced by the prevailing ideology of our society, starting while we are so young that the cement had not set, so to speak.

It is extraordinarily difficult for us to overcome our conditioning and its pervasion of our whole existence—or even to be aware that we have been conditioned. One need only look at the kind of 'cultural' stuff that is dished out to us, the West End theatre (most of it), the cinema, the entertainments, the BBC—you know, the whole range of it, to realise how totally non-political it is or how very carefully and deliberately it supports the status quo.

I'm thinking also of the various mythologies that have influenced us—the religious mythology; the mythology of royalty which is so deeply rooted in our tribal unconscious; and another mythology that one might call the 'democracy' mythology. Those who support the status quo have succeeded in putting it across

to us that by putting a cross on a voting paper every four years for Mr Tweedledum or Mr Tweedledee we are 'democratic'. But democracy, to my way of thinking, has much more to do with the way we feel and act towards each other than the mere machinery of voting. We concentrate on the formal aspects of the democratic processes which I believe to be the least essential element that is required of a society to make it truly democratic. A democracy means that there exist between individuals a thousand invisible threads, threads of trust, and mutual respect and liking—everything that makes us feel at one with each other. Creating an atmosphere that does not call for us to be tough or competitive. And I have come to think that democracy and competitiveness are self-contradictory—that as competitiveness comes in, the sense of democracy goes out. We need only look at the society that has developed capitalist competitiveness to its ultimate extreme, the United States, to see to what degree of sadness and isolation, human deprivation and violence it drives people.

The United States is a society whose ideology of competitiveness denies very essential human values. There is no society that has developed the forms of democracy to a higher degree, and yet the living spirit of democracy there has died. So unrelated and fearful are people of each other that few these days ever dare walk in the streets of the cities alone at night.

China has moved in a totally different direction. There's no place in China, in any city, where one would feel the slightest anxiety walking alone at any time of the day or night, stranger, foreigner, it doesn't matter. You feel in China the extraordinary inter-relatedness of people, so that in one sense no one is a stranger to anybody else.

Our educational system of course does its best to buttress these already deeply-set prejudices and conditionings in ourselves. For some, education establishes

a built-in sense of prerogatives and superiority. I don't blame the kids who come down from Eton or Harrow or the other public schools for feeling members of an élite. They are not to blame, it's the structure of the society as a whole. Thus for a few, education provides the climate in which they come to feel they are something special, and removed from the common run of mankind. Our educational system also establishes in other people—indeed the vast majority—a deep feeling of inferiority. And for all, the privileged as the unprivileged, it creates a belief that this society with these divisions is in accordance with some natural law and therefore cannot be changed, or even radically modified.

If in fact the working people of this country wanted to change things, the power lies in their hands. But they have been conditioned to have a kind of pseudo-respect for the supposedly educated, so they too have been inhibited from action.

All this (as of course it was intended to) has given rise to our deep-seated Western scepticism, our inability to believe that we could take hold of our society and transform it.

It is no wonder then that Mao Tsetung emphasised right from the start the importance of the class struggle. We mustn't forget that China had all these conditioning factors in her society too and in some ways they were practised there to an even greater extreme than in our Western societies. China had her élites—the educated, the rich, the landlords, the big industrialists. She too had her intellectuals with their profound conviction of their social superiority. The Chinese were guilty of a chauvinism that led them to believe that China was the repository of all that was finest and best in human culture and that all others were lesser breeds.

Thus the Chinese revolutionary leaders had all this to contend with, the same problems that are confronting and confusing us, the same deep-seated scepticism,

the same doubt that fundamental change is impossible. Power, as with us, was in the hands of a few; the Chinese educational system was designed to provide an intellectual élite. No wonder that from the first, Mao Tsetung said 'Understand class struggle'. And this is, to me at least, the very heart, the root, the very essence of what China stands for and what China tells me. I don't mean the class struggle only in its formal Marxist sense, though that of course is included, and certainly I don't mean it in the very flabby use we make of the word 'class' when we are referring to social divisions in our bourgeois society; the 'upper middle class', the 'lower middle class', and so on. But I'm thinking especially of the struggle within ourselves as individuals. I think that our effort must begin with the realisation that we are class-conditioned creatures. We are judging society here and everywhere through our particular kind of coloured spectacles and we had better begin to come to terms with that in ourselves—and for those of us with a bourgeois upbringing that's no easy job. The Chinese found it was no easy job either. It not only took the original revolution, but it took a second revolution, the Great Cultural Revolution, really to awaken people in China to the extent they were still carrying within them the legacy of division, classes, privileges, élitism, and that the overcoming of this was just as important a part of the revolutionary transformation as the initial struggle to gain state control.

The lesson I have come back with from China is really a very profound one, and I cannot do it justice because I'm not a very learned person. It is the conviction that not only must the structure of society be changed so that control is in the hands of the working class, but that such change will be dissipated, and eventually subverted, unless there is a change within human beings too.

The professor whom I mentioned earlier, raised another question which I

think we need to touch on here. He said that he had not found in China that respect for individuality and the development of the human personality on which we in the West place so high a value; in other words, he felt that there is in China a lack of individual freedom. This deserves to be mentioned briefly because it is indeed one of the big stumbling blocks for anyone who talks about China to groups in the West.

I have come to believe that our ideas about the nurturing of individuality and our concepts of freedom are also class-conditioned ideas. They also are part of what has been built into us by the prevailing social system. Our present ideas of 'freedom' of course derive largely from the 19th century idea of bourgeois freedom, capitalist freedom, freedom for the emerging industrial owners from any social control. In essence this freedom could be expressed as 'Me first', 'Everyone for himself', 'Grab what you can', and if everybody acted thus, society (so the theory went) would somehow be benefited. That was the basic philosophy of the new 19th century capitalists.

We have since given up that rather crude definition of capitalist ideology, but we are still basically operating within the 'We first' capitalist jungle. Individualism in a competitive capitalist society is necessary for survival. To get on I must push, I must develop myself, I must make more money, and out of this has grown the idea of the sacredness of 'me', 'my' individuality, and 'my' creativity, and so on. This is a very difficult concept for us to feel and think our way through to, but the question I'm beginning to ask myself is: is this development of 'my' individuality on which we place so high a score, is this the only possible kind of freedom? Or indeed is it really freedom at all?

The Chinese are showing us that this concept of individuality which has been developed in the West under capitalism, is really not freedom but another kind of

imprisonment. It is the imprisonment of 'me', inside myself. It is this enclosure of me. With all my personal strivings, ambitions, fears, defensiveness, which divides me from other people. It is this 'me-ness' which is the prison and in the very depths of our consciousness we know this. And how we hate it all! The perpetual struggle to compete, to be cleverer than other people, to get a better education than other people, to have a better job—the constant striving of me against others to get ahead, or to give my ego a boost, knowing that any advance up the ladder of success has almost always to be at the expense of someone else. And we call this freedom!

A co-operative society develops an entirely different kind of ethic, a wholly different concept of freedom, and this is what I learned in China. What we all long for, surely, is to be part of a society which doesn't divide us from one another, which releases us from the prison, the small, boring world of me; which allows us to be members of a community in which we do not have to push ourselves. I have seen how the skills and initiative of the Chinese people have been enormously enhanced by the fact that they don't have to compete, or worry about finance or what's going to happen to them when they get old. They are free of the myriad anxieties that burden us who live in a supposedly free world, and thus are free to relate to each other as human beings, without fear and without defensiveness, all involved in something bigger than themselves.

Many of you have not been to China and may feel rather out of it because of that. But you should not think that you cannot understand what they are doing in China or be disheartened if you cannot go there. For the Chinese message is universal, it is not just for China. It is in the very air around us if we listen to it; for it is expressing what we all have in our hearts: the need for a world in which we can be really human.