A Young Intellectual's Guide to Freedom

by Robert Jameson

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Warning/Disclaimer

This book shouldn't offend anyone - but, with so many ridiculously over-sensitive people around these days, there's always a danger that it will. Please note, therefore, that you read this book at your own risk. Furthermore, please note that this book is intended to present ideas rather than facts. No guarantee is being made about the factual accuracy of any of the information presented in this book.

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Introduction

It has often been the job of intellectuals to inspire people to value and protect their freedoms and to fight to regain freedoms that tyrannical governments and oppressive societies have taken away. Most of my books are part of this ongoing fight for freedom. I encourage people to regain their intellectual freedoms through questioning the accepted ideas of the society they live in.

There is, however, a problem. Our societies and our education systems are failing to prepare young people to be able to understand intellectual ideas and participate in intellectual conversations, even on such important issues as our fundamental freedoms. If I point to a news story and say, "That's rather Orwellian!" or, "What is this? 1984?" many school leavers will have no idea what I'm referring to. They're lacking in knowledge of key reference points that are used to convey important ideas. It is no wonder their brains turn to mush when they don't have the means to take part in an intellectual conversation.

Young people are leaving school without the basic sets of tools and basic awareness to be able to participate in the sorts of normal intellectual conversations that reasonably educated people might well have. They're just not familiar with the basic common reference points within which intellectual discussions can take place.

This book is intended for young adults and anyone else who would like to rectify this problem. It is for people who would like to enhance their intellectual awareness and be better able to participate in the ongoing quest for freedom.

From the Magna Carta to The Matrix, this book is

designed to give young intellectuals a firm foundation in the language, stories, characters and ideas of freedom.

Robin Hood

Robin Hood is a legendary character of English folklore. He is the hero of many stories, songs, plays, books and, in more modern times, films and television series. Most commonly, but not always, he is portrayed as having lived many hundreds of years ago in Sherwood forest, near Nottingham in central England. He is famous for being prodigiously skilled with a bow and arrow and for having a band of followers known as his 'merry men,' most of whom seem to have a particular fondness for the colour green. Little John, Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet are amongst his most well-known companions. He is often also portrayed as being very much in love with the fair Maid Marian.

Most importantly of all, however, Robin Hood was an outlaw - he was a criminal, a thief, a robber, a bandit. He lived in the forest in order to escape from the law - and especially from his arch-enemy, the pitiless Sheriff of Nottingham.

Was Robin Hood real? Well, there are many references to people known as Robin Hood or 'Robyne Hude' in historical documents. It seems that, at certain times, the name was used as a sort of nickname for any wandering thief. It may be that some of Robin Hood's exploits and adventures were based on those of real people. On the whole, however, the Robin Hood we know of is an invention of popular fiction.

It isn't really particularly important whether Robin Hood was real. Sometimes, a legend can be more

important than the truth. It's not about the facts - it's about the principles and ideals that the stories represent. What's of enormous cultural importance here, is that, in the Robin Hood stories, the outlaw, the law-breaker, the criminal is the good guy and the authorities are the bad guys.

We are used to regarding Robin Hood as a hero, but, in many ways, the legend of Robin Hood is a thoroughly subversive one. In other words, it is one that questions the authority of the state, of officials, of rulers and even of the law.

The stories of Robin Hood highlight the fact that legal is not the same as right and that illegal is not the same as wrong. The stories question whether theft is wrong. They question whether it really is wrong to take up arms against the authorities. They question whether law enforcers, courts and judges should be respected and obeyed.

Some politically-correct versions may try to portray him otherwise, but, generally, Robin Hood is very definitely portrayed as a thief. He stole, but he was still a good guy, because, at least much of the time, he 'stole from the rich and gave to the poor.'

Robin Hood is far more than a character in stories where there is a lot of action - chasing about, firing arrows and sword-fighting. The Robin Hood story is a celebration of non-conformism. Robin Hood refuses to conform to the orders from people in authority, he refuses to abide by the rules of society and he refuses to abide by the law. It is a story about freedom - not just the sense of freedom that comes from living in the open, from living with nature in the forest, but the more general freedom of being able to live your life according to your own rules, free from the oppressions of authoritarian masters. The story boldly supports the notion that we should take risks

for freedom, that we should fight for freedom and perhaps, if necessary, even lie, steal or kill for freedom.

Think about it; we've made a hero out of a villain! Yes, he stole. Yes, he broke the law. He was a bandit, but he's also a hero because, unlike his adversaries, he stood firmly on the side of freedom and justice, even when the law of the land didn't.

Robin Hood fought against the rulers and laws of England, but he isn't a villain as far as the people of England are concerned - he's the very essence of Englishness. He's an eccentric, non-conformist. He's a freedom-fighter and a principled, heroic subversive.

This fine tradition of subversiveness is something that people and cultures from many parts of the world do not understand. There are many places where you can still be arrested and imprisoned for 'subversion.' There are many places where people are dangerously subservient and deferential to authority and almost anyone in an official uniform.

The Robin Hood legend is far more than an adventure story. It is of great cultural importance because it encourages us to celebrate the outsider, the outlaw, the non-conformist, the adventurer and to always question the dictates of those in authority and of the law itself.

Despite the continued popularity of Robin Hood, however, I wonder if he's the sort of person we might respect if he's in a fictional story or if he's fighting in some far-off part of the world, but who society often dislikes and derides when he's fighting here at home against our own government.

Too often, our fine tradition of subversiveness often goes largely ignored in modern England. Sometimes, we in England have to look to others - some of our friends in the United States, for example - to

champion the subversiveness that we used to cherish and nurture, but too often, these days, neglect. It's time we made a renewed effort to reacquaint ourselves with Robin Hood's non-conformist values and his great passion for freedom.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a philosopher and he and his ideas are intimately associated with the cause of freedom.
His most famous work was, 'On Liberty,' and the view he most famously supported and promoted was basically that the state, the government and their representatives - the police and other officials, for example - should no way in hell just have the right to tell you, as an individual, what you can and can't do unless they have a very, very good reason for doing so.
He asked when the government or the state might be justified in restricting your individual liberty. When should it be allowed to tell you you can't do something? When should it be allowed to compromise on your freedoms? The answer he came up with, argued for and promoted was essentially very simple: The state should only restrict your individual freedoms in order to stop you restricting the freedom of others.
So, some simple examples: Mill would argue that the state is perfectly justified in stopping you committing murders because, if you murder someone, that takes away their freedom. Generally, if you physically harm other people, you are taking their freedom away in some way. If you break their legs, this obviously restricts their movement, but any violence or threat of violence can obviously stop people going about the

streets and going about their lives as they see fit. The state is also justified in stopping you kidnapping people, because that obviously takes away their freedom too. And if you steal, that obviously takes away someone else's freedom to use their own possessions. The state, therefore, may be able to justify putting you in prison if that's what's necessary to stop you murdering, harming or stealing from other people.

On the other hand, the state is not justified in taking your freedom away simply because it doesn't like what you are doing. It also shouldn't stop you saying things just because it doesn't like or doesn't agree with what you are saying. Even if you say racist or sexist things, that doesn't really restrict the freedom of others. They are still free to argue back at you and tell you what they think of your bigoted opinions. The fact that they or the state doesn't like what you are saying is irrelevant. You're not taking away anyone else's freedoms, so the state shouldn't restrict your freedom to speak your mind.

In short, Mill argued in defence of individual liberty and against allowing the state to override our individual freedoms, except in the defence of other people's freedoms.

In truth, Mill himself was not as firm on the key principles of liberty as perhaps he could have been. He was a 'utilitarian.' In other words, he argued on the basis that society would be better off if his libertarian principles were followed. This is different from arguing on the basis that liberty is or should be a fundamental human right.

Nevertheless, his work has been hugely influential in underpinning our ideas of fundamental human rights based upon a recognition that freedom matters. Liberty is at the heart of what makes us alive and is

the foundation of so much of what makes life worth living.

The Magna Carta

The word, 'document' normally refers to something rather dull and boring. Novels might be exciting, but 'documents' are generally very, very dull. Not so the Magna Carta. The Magna Carta (meaning simply, 'Great Charter') is one of the most important and most exciting documents in all of history.

The Magna Carta is a great document about freedom. It is considered by some to be the greatest, most important, most influential constitutional document of all time. Many great documents about the rights and principles of a fair and decent society can trace their ancestry back to the Magna Carta.

The original version of the Magna Carta was first issued in 1215. At the time, King John (of England) was unpopular with many of his subjects, including many of his powerful barons. Essentially, these barons and other powerful people got together and insisted and forced King John to agree to the conditions contained in the Magna Carta. He didn't actually sign it, but it was given the King's seal (an indentation of the King's symbol made in hot wax).

The impact of this document can be felt almost everywhere today in any reasonably civilised society. It is regarded as a ground-breaking document because it was a document about rights and liberties and freedoms. It said that the king could no longer do whatever the hell he wanted. It made the king, in some ways, accountable to those beneath him. It was, therefore, in a sense, revolutionary. It said that the king himself must be subject to the laws and rules of his country. It established that (free) people

should have certain fundamental rights and freedoms that even the king (or the state) had no right to take away. So many of the rights and freedoms many of us are lucky enough to enjoy today, trace their origins back to the Magna Carta.

It is important to realise that, for much of human history (and in much of the world even today), there have been many rulers who pretty much did what they pleased. This meant that life for the ordinary person, and even for barons, was always under threat from their rulers. You could not call your life your own. Whatever freedom you had, could be taken away at a moment's notice, by the people above you in the chain of command. 'The law' of the land was little more than the orders of the king. Your very life or that of your whole family could be snatched away because the king took a sudden and irrational and unjustifiable dislike to you, to something you did, to something you said or even just as the result of a nasty rumour. The Magna Carta, in time, changed all this.

The Magna Carta presses the idea that the law works both ways. It should be for everyone, including the King or the Prime Minister or the President. Even when the king is still allowed to make the laws of the country, he must still be subject to the laws himself. Not even the king is above the law. This basic principle is phenomenally important and is known as, 'The Rule of Law.'

'The Rule of Law' means that, if the king makes murder illegal, then he himself can be prosecuted if he murders someone. It may seem obvious that this ought to be the case, but for most countries throughout much of history, this has not been the case. Even in many supposedly democratic countries, today, the principle of the rule of law is often ignored.

The President or Prime Minister of the country is given immunity from prosecution under the laws that everyone else in the country is subject to. It is instructive to observe the high levels of corruption such countries often suffer from.

Many other important rights and freedoms, such as the right of an arrested person to be brought before a proper court for a fair trial (often referred to as the principle or right of 'habeas corpus') or the principle of 'innocent unless proven guilty,' may not have been clearly defined by the Magna Carta itself, but are arguably inferred by it or derived from it.

The actual historical events surrounding the 'signing' of the original Magna Carta can be over-romanticised. The original Magna Carta of 1215 was mainly a charter for a bunch for rich and privileged barons rather than ordinary people. It was also not the first document of its kind - it borrowed heavily from other, similar documents that preceded it. Furthermore, as soon as the barons had gone home, King John quickly reneged on the promises he had made in the Magna Carta. In this, he had the support of the pope, who ruled that the king was not bound by the commitments he had made.

Fortunately, however, King John soon died and a later version of the Magna Carta was formally incorporated into English law in 1297. This version remains part of English law to this day (although most of the actual clauses have been repealed). And, of course, the most important thing is not the document itself, but the principles that it supported. The Magna Carta was a key foundation stone for the responsibilities and freedoms that formed the basis of the free societies that developed over the next 800 years.

The legacy of the Magna Carta is not confined to England. When English colonists went abroad - to

America for example - colonies were sometimes founded using charters that established rights and freedoms similar to those in the Magna Carta. The US constitution is, in many parts, derived from the Magna Carta.

In a very obvious sense, the US Declaration of Independence represents a break from Britain. The US was leaving the British Empire. In a far more important sense, however, the declaration of independence represents a resounding affirmation of the values and principles of America's very British heritage.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Where do these ideas come from? What is this statement? Would it ever have been made if it were not for the ideas of rights and principles that were founded upon or derived from the Magna Carta?

It is ironic that America's declaration of independence from Britain should so emphatically endorse the shared principles of our two peoples. The disagreements between the two governments of the time have proven, over the centuries, to be as nothing compared to our shared beliefs in the key principles of freedom. The Declaration of Independence was a break from Britain, but it was a resounding affirmation of British values of justice and freedom.

To give you an idea of the esteem with which the Magna Carta is held and the importance attached to it and to the ideas it represents; in 2007, a copy of the 1297 version of the Magna Carta was sold for $21.3 million. There are four surviving original copies of the original 1215 document known to still exist.

One of these, held at Lincoln Cathedral in England, was actually sent to Fort Knox for safe keeping during the Second World War. If one of the 1215 copies was put up for sale, a roomful of Da Vinci's finest would probably not be sufficient to cover the expected auction value. If an original document sealed by King John were in existence, it would doubtless fetch a great deal more. This, however, is nothing, of course, next to the Magna Carta's real value as an inspiration and a symbol for those who fight for rights and freedoms.

But now we come to the worrying part. For a start, there's the shame that so many of the important rights or freedoms contained in the Magna Carta or developed thereafter in the tradition of the Magna Carta, have since been compromised, forgotten about, diluted or simply taken away.

Clause 38 stated that no-one could be put on trial based solely on the unsupported word of an official. It meant the state could not punish or imprison you based solely on the testimony of its own officials and own police officers, who have obvious vested interests in supporting the cases brought forward by their own employer. How many people have been fitted up by police for a crime they didn't commit since this clause was repealed?

The repealed Clause 40 disallowed the selling of justice, or its denial or delay. Yet, how many people today are denied justice because they can't afford the legal fees that would be required to get justice? Should we really have laws that are only accessible to very rich people?

And then, there's the problem of ignorance. The fact that most school-leavers would not have a clue what someone was talking about if they mentioned the Magna Carta, is very worrying and a sign of a

desperately impoverished education system. I wouldn't worry about it much, though, if these school-leavers knew and understood the important principles and values that were developed upon the foundation of the Magna Carta - but, most often, they don't! And when people no longer take an interest in the rights and principles that underpin the operation of a fair and decent society, it may not be long before they're no longer living in a fair and decent society.

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