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# Free People Are Not Equal

Oct 22, 2019

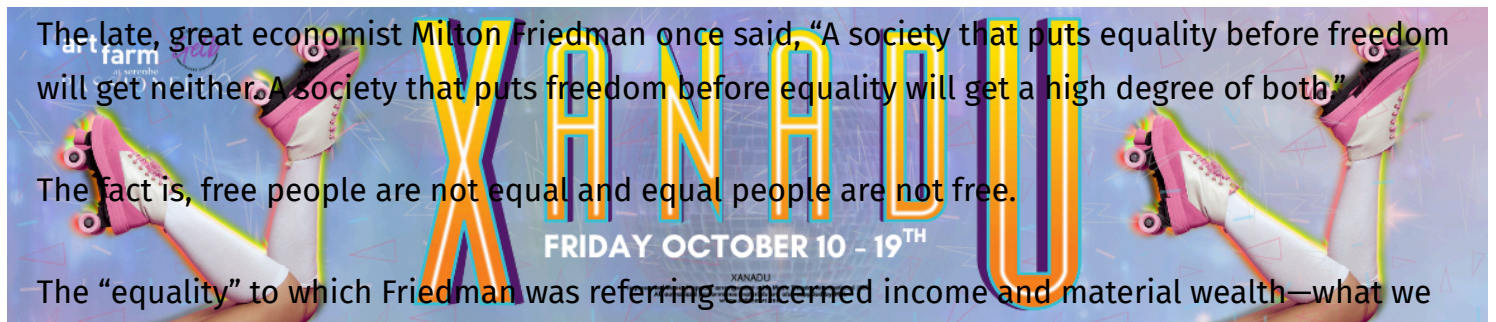
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The late, great economist Milton Friedman once said, “A society that puts equality before freedom will get neither. A society that puts freedom before equality will get a high degree of both.”

The fact is, free people are not equal and equal people are not free.

The “equality” to which Friedman was referring concerned income and material wealth—what we earn and acquire in the marketplace of work and trade. He was speaking of economic equality.

Free people are not equal in an economic sense, and that’s not a bad thing. When people are free to apply themselves to improve their well-being and that of their families, the result in the marketplace will not be an equality of outcomes. People will earn vastly different levels of income; they will accumulate vastly different levels of wealth. We’re not identical robots, after all.

While some lament this fact and complain about “the gap between rich and poor,” I think people being themselves in a free society is a wonderful thing. Each of us is a unique being, different in endless ways from any other single being living or dead. Why on earth should we expect our interactions in the marketplace to produce identical results?


We are different in terms of our talents. Some have more than others, or more valuable talents. Some don’t discover their highest talents until late in life, or not at all.

We are different in terms of our willingness to work. Some work harder, longer, and smarter than others. That makes for vast differences in how others value what we do and in how much they’re willing to pay for it.

We are different also in terms of our savings. If the president could somehow snap his fingers and equalize us all in terms of income and wealth tonight, we would be unequal again by this time tomorrow. Why? Because some of us would save it and some of us would spend it.

It’s also true that equal people are not free. Show me a people anywhere on the planet who are indeed equal economically, and I’ll show you a very unfree people. Why?

The only way in which you could equalize income and wealth is to put a gun to everyone’s head. You’d have to issue orders like this: Don’t excel. Don’t work harder or smarter than the next guy. Don’t save more wisely than anyone else. Don’t be there first with a new product. Don’t provide a good or service that people might want more than anything your competitor is offering.



Cambodia under the socialist Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s came close to that, and two million people died in less than four years. Freedom was sacrificed in a futile, bloody attempt to achieve equality.

We shouldn't get hung up on differences in income when they result from free people being themselves. If they result from artificial political barriers or government subsidies, then get rid of those barriers and subsidies. But don't try to take unequal people and equalize them by force.

Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, "You cannot pull a man up by dragging another man down."

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