



Delgado, S. & Gautreaux, M. (2015). Film Review of *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives*. *Workplace*, 14, 52-57.

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FILM REVIEW OF
ECONOMIC FREEDOM IN ACTION: CHANGING LIVES

Tusty, J., Castle, M. (Director), & Free to Choose Network. (Producer). (2014). *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives* [Documentary]. United States: Columbia. In Canada: The Fraser Institute.

In my years researching this topic, I've seen example after example where people's lives have improved for the better because they had economic freedom.— Johan Norberg, host of *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives*.

At length I recollected the thoughtless saying of a great princess, who, on being informed that the country people had no bread, replied, "Then let them eat pastry!"— Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, Book VI, p. 159

Recently, an initiative led by the Fraser Institute (as part of the Free to Choose Network) has begun to further influence economics and business education in schools throughout Canada and the US. In February 2014, the Fraser Institute released an educational film titled *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives*, in Canada. This film follows the lives of five entrepreneurs from different countries (Zambia, South Korea, Slovakia and two stories from Chile) claiming that free market capitalism, "economic freedom" and individual entrepreneurship have allowed the protagonists to raise themselves out of poverty and achieve material wealth. However, the Fraser Institute ignores the problematic contradictions in its advocacy of free market capitalism and "economic freedom". Marie-Antoinette, not recognizing that grain markets control access to bread, the staple of common people, proposes they eat cake (*brioche*). Similarly, the Fraser Institute and other neoliberal think tanks, refusing to acknowledge that capitalism, free market or otherwise, is the cause of much of the material inequalities, propose free choice and individual entrepreneurship as solutions to global poverty and structural inequalities. Shortage of jobs? No access to grains? Let them eat cake.

With cultural and economic privilege, the Fraser Institute, is removed from "the people" and assumes that the solution to material inequality in the world is only a matter of "having economic freedom"— free choice and markets. The Fraser Institute and the Free to Choose network, which form part of a larger context of a neoliberal effort to campaign in schools for capitalism conveniently neglect the extreme inequality, poverty, slavery and hunger that characterizes capitalism in the twenty-first century.

In this review of *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives*, we first place this film in a larger historical context of propaganda in schools to promote and ensure the acceptance of free market capitalism in North America. Then we break down the central arguments of neoliberalism upon which the film is based. Using examples from the film, we show the contradictions and expose the film's anti-democratic intentions masked by language of free choice, individual empowerment and salvation. It is our hope that this film review informs teachers about capitalist propaganda in Social Studies, Business and Economics education, and inspires them to engage in critical analysis of source materials that come from neoliberal think tanks and corporations.

According to Niels Veldhuis' (President of the Fraser Institute) speech during the film's premiere event in Vancouver, B.C. in February 2014, this documentary is planned to be used as workshop material for teachers and students in Canada. In the US, the film was distributed by the National Educational Telecommunications Association. Teachers and students can also access this film via [izzit.org](http://www.izzit.org), an educational initiative of the Free To Choose Network that provides educational material and resources for schools, students and teachers. (<http://www.izzit.org>). The relationship between The Free to Choose Network and [izzit.org](http://www.izzit.org) forms part of a historical trend where free market think tanks and corporations produce and distribute films and other educational materials to influence and encourage students, teachers, and the public to embrace capitalism. *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives*, is one of the most recent examples of neoliberal and capitalist propaganda in schools.

Since World War II, US businesses and think tanks have vigorously campaigned in economics education in schools to influence and indoctrinate students and teachers in free market capitalism (Beder 2006). As Beder observes, "The use of school education to educate children to appreciate the free enterprise system was carefully thought out and a conscious strategy to win people over at an early and impressionable age" (p 49). For example, the American Economic Foundation (AEF) distributed economics education films promoting free market capitalism to 7,000 schools in the US in the 1940's (Beder, 2006). Think tanks and corporations have also been very instrumental in the curriculum development of economics education, making sure that textbooks promote free market capitalism and even banning any texts they felt represented a critical view of free market enterprise (Beder, 2006). For example, in the late 1930s, Harold Rugg's social studies textbook, *Man and His Changing Society*, was condemned as a threat to free enterprise for criticisms of capitalism.

This trend has been the object of analysis by several scholars who denounce the aggressive educational propaganda of corporations and free market think tanks to undermine collective values and ensure compliant consumers (Beder, 2006; Giroux 2001; Haas, 2008). As Beder (2006) observes, "Throughout the 20th century, business associations and coalitions coordinated mass propaganda campaigns that combined sophisticated public relations techniques developed in 20th century America with revitalized free market ideology originating in 18th century Europe" (p. 14). The purpose of schools is reduced to molding students into uncritical, free market adherents with faith in freedom of choice and markets as a mechanism to address global poverty and inequality. Students are provided few or no opportunities to question or protest the overprotection of the free markets from democratic control.

This last point is manifested in its extreme form in this film when Chung-Ho Kim, economics professor at Yonsei University argues,

Political democracy does not always guarantee economic freedom. Very often the majority of the people want big government, [the] majority of the people want to tax the rich people and redistribute it among themselves. The name of that sentiment is the economic democracy, it's not economic freedom. So we have to be very careful about political democracy in order to protect economic freedom.

With a steadfast faith in the market and "economic freedom," Kim warns viewers about the hazards of progressive taxation and political democracy. Grounded in ideas of excessive individualism and self-ownership, he favors an economic freedom that in reality privileges the concentration of wealth in hands of a few. As reflected in Kim's statement above, this film works to convince people to accept economic

policies counter to their own self-interest and in favor of the appropriation of resources and the private control over the commons. According to Beder (2006), “The purpose of this propaganda onslaught has been to persuade a majority of people that it is in their interests to eschew their own power as workers and citizens, and forgo their democratic right to restrain and regulate business activity” (p. 14).

Moreover, propaganda has worked very to convince the public that the commons do not exist, or in Thatcher’s words “[t]here is no such thing [as society]! There are individual men and women” (Thatcher Foundation, 2014). Individualism and meritocracy delegitimize the welfare state. For neoliberals the state not only creates dependence but also acts unjustly in that it redistributes resources to people who “don’t deserve them.” This film professes that “big” governments are coercive and antithetical to freedom. Where neoliberalism is accepted and naturalized by the majority of the population, one often hears similar arguments supporting free market logic, such as “I work hard and they don’t,” “I deserve to keep what I earn”, or “the state shouldn’t redistribute what I earn to those who don’t want to work.” Jan Oravec, president of the Entrepreneurs Association in Slovakia, exemplifies this logic when he describes in the film how the most important transformation of Slovakia since the breakup of the Soviet Union has been the transition from “paternalism to individual responsibility.” Since neoliberalism rests upon a reductionist premise whereby the state is always inefficient and the market is always efficient (Screpanti & Zamagni, 2005), neoliberalism equates any sort of reference to a common good, the welfare state, or government assistance or intervention directly with paternalism, which is linked to big government, communism, or worse, and is therefore demonized.

Accordingly, this film argues that states have no business in the distribution of resources since they stifle economic freedom and constrain economic growth. Indeed, based on this premise, the Fraser’s *Economic Freedom of the World Report* includes a category titled “Size of Government,” where countries with “smaller” governments (i.e., less regulation) are considered more “free.” According to the report, “when governments tax some people in order to provide transfers to others, they reduce the freedom of individuals to keep what they earn” (p. 3). This film sustains the argument that taxes are an infringement upon “freedom” because they constrain the individuals’ privilege to accumulate resources and obtain economic power. What the Fraser Institute and the interviewees in the film neglect is the resulting inequality and misery that capitalism causes and when economic privilege of a few is obtained at the expense of many, which increases unequal access to basic resources needed to live with dignity.

Neoliberal economic freedom is a concept that emphasizes the individual over the collective, prioritizing the “right” for an individual to keep what he/she has earned at the expense of collective society. In other words, the interests of the privileged class overrule the common good and the protection of private property becomes the only accepted role for neoliberal states. For this reason, the neoliberal transformations in Zambia, Chile, Slovakia and South Korea are presented in the film as remarkable transformations of the states towards protection of private property and reduction of the government’s size. In fact, the overwhelming emphasis on private property is salient in the definition of economic freedom that appears in the Free The World website (<http://www.freetheworld.com/> site of the Fraser’s *Economic Freedom of the World Report*); They explain economic freedom in the following way: Individuals have economic freedom when property they acquire without the use of force, fraud, or theft is protected from physical invasions by others and they are free to use, exchange, or give their property as long as their actions do not violate the identical rights of others. An index of economic freedom should measure the extent to which rightly acquired property is protected and individuals are engaged in voluntary transactions (Gwartney, Lawson & Block, 1996, p. 12).

As this definition above illustrates, economic freedom emphasizes the protection of individual property, whereby the focus is entirely on the property, not the human being. Although this definition stresses the supposed ethical and just means used to acquire property, the film maintains complicity in the violence and excessive cruelty used by right wing dictatorships to guarantee economic privileges, access to lands and property rights for the well off. For example, the film faintly denounces the brutality of the Pinochet dictatorship, while praising the economic measures that Augusto Pinochet and the “Chicago Boys” implemented in Chile in the 1970’s. The “Chicago Boys” were Chilean economists who studied under

Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago. The “Chicago Boys” along with Pinochet, Friedman and the CIA, resorted to what Naomi Klein (2007) calls “economic shock therapy” and torture to pass neoliberal economic reforms, such as the privatization of the pension, education and health care system to name a few. The suffering the people endured as a result of the cuts to all social services, and the subsequent debt that Chileans were forced into are not mentioned in the film.

By ignoring how neoliberal economic policies have negatively affected the people, especially the poor, in countries such as Chile, this film rests upon the assumption that everyone has an equal opportunity and personal responsibility for achieving economic success. According to neoliberal logic, individuals accept the “personal responsibility for the economic consequences of one’s own actions,” which produces a social need or desirability of “incentives” that foster personal capabilities for looking after themselves instead of pursuing systemic changes or social opportunities for collective action (Armstrong, 2005, p. 7). Therefore, whatever an individual achieves is by his or her own merit which means that success is a result of well-made individual decisions meanwhile suffering is assumed as an entirely personal responsibility.

Meritocracy is evident in the film in all of the protagonists’ story lines. It is particularly salient in the testimony of Katarina Rybáriková, a store owner from Slovakia. She says: “If I make a decision and if it's not the best one, then I’m the one who's going to suffer. So this was the tough part that I didn't think before.” The isolated individual that Katrina identifies as, is completely responsible for and is capable of controlling her present and future. Any misfortune that may have happened to her would have been a result of her bad decision and her suffering would be reasonably explained and justified, with no one to blame but herself.

This individualism and secluded journey on which the protagonists embark is supported by a negative connotation of dependency. For example in the film, Sylvia Banda, who also has internalized the neoliberal logic of individualism and meritocracy, says:

in Zambia there was a time when we had droughts, for two years, and this is the period where we started receiving free food and people became handicapped. I think the “dependence syndrome” was quite high because we were receiving food from the government and people did not want to go back to the land. They wanted to continue just receiving the food...

Banda’s comments illustrate that even in cases of natural disaster, receiving help from others or the government is seen as a lack of ability and initiative. Pulling oneself up is an obligation and a responsibility and there is no place for anyone to feel powerlessness. Banda as a citizen who embraces the neoliberal state does not see the state as having any obligation to its people. In her eyes, receiving help from the state in times of disaster generates the “dependency syndrome.” Furthermore, her use of the word “syndrome” relates dependency to a condition of illness. Banda’s use of health vocabulary with judgmental purpose, she creates a wellness/illness binary based on an able-bodied conception of wellness, where being handicapped is considered as negative; in this case, handicapped is a category Banda has created for people who receive food and help from the Zambian government. Hence, wellness is understood in an extremely limited way. According to neoliberal logic, a person is well if he or she can produce. There is only space for able bodied, entrepreneurial individuals and all others are considered to be ill and inferior. Therefore, the self-sufficient entrepreneur becomes the subject of comparison by which everyone else is measured. Any individual who doesn’t measure up to this standard “carries an immense burden of self-justification” and is personally denigrated (Apple, 1996, p. 111). In such a dehumanizing system, a person’s worth lies in what he/she can produce or achieve economically.

This film is part of a larger context of neoliberal propaganda the purpose of which is to persuade both students and teachers into accepting and embracing free market capitalism. *Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives* emphasizes the protection of property rights over the rights of people and portrays the successful, productive entrepreneur as a cultural icon. Although the focus is on property and material acquisition, the film makes an attempt at false empathy, employing language of humanity and empowerment to advocate for free choice and markets. For example, in the film Johan Norberg states that economic freedom is the “most powerful force... for empowering people.” This last argument, reinforced

in the narratives of the five entrepreneurs, attributes the material success of a few select individuals to their personal and economic ambition and “activism” in the market. Here, activism is removed from the notion of social consciousness and reduced to entrepreneurial action and selfishness, de-radicalized and depoliticized.

In light of the current global economic crisis and the dominance of neoliberalism, there is a need to rethink how we define and understand “economic freedom” and how educators teach economics education (Delgado-Betancourth, 2014). As Screpanti and Zamagni (2005) argue, economists nowadays understand that “markets do not have to be a jungle” and the economy is not governed by “natural” laws” (p. 460). Likewise, the Post-Crash Economics Society, a group of economics students at The University of Manchester who lead the students movement campaign for changing the economics curriculum, argue that “the mainstream within the discipline (neoclassical economics) has excluded all dissenting opinion, and the crisis is arguably the ultimate price of this exclusion. Alternative approaches such as Post-Keynesian, Marxist, and Austrian economics (as well as many others) have been marginalized. The same can be said of the history of the discipline” (<http://www.post-crasheconomics.com/>). This excerpt illustrates the lack of theoretical and epistemological plurality in the way economics is presented and taught in schools.

Educational media are advertised and marketed to teachers and their “benefit” for learning is the part that is emphasized. However, the various interests behind the creation and promotion of certain media are often hidden. The uncritical use of this film in the classroom—whether in Social Studies or Business, and Economics Education—overlooks a timely opportunity to encourage students to research capitalism and activist movements generating resistance and alternatives to free choice and markets. We are advocating for teachers to understand the historical legacy of capitalist propaganda in schools and to critically examine curriculum produced and promoted by neoliberal think tanks in schools today.

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