

## **Property & Freedom**

**Pipes, Richard 1999**

**The Harvill Press, London. 328 pp.**

*Reviewed by Kole Omotoso*

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The freedom that property confers on the owner has always been recognised in all cultures. The words of a propertied person are valued over those of a person without property, the Yoruba of Nigeria like to say. Ancient societies in their wisdom allow only those with property to participate in the deliberations of the community. Why then was organised religion able to preach the total rejection of property? Why was it that the way forward for the world was not that everyone should have property in order to be free? Why is it that the development of the modern free market system deals with having and not having to keep the market going? Perhaps most important for those who hope for total liberation of humanity from all forms of bondage, why does the dream of the common ownership of property continue to be unrealisable?

Two important backgrounds seem to have propelled Professor Richard Pipes towards writing this pioneering book. As a historian – and he was professor of History in Harvard until his retirement in 1996 – he has written about British history and the history of Soviet Russia. But his study of these histories seemed to have taught him something other than what an unrepentant Utopian might want to learn from this book. Professor Pipes believes that

the histories of Britain and Russia are different simply because Britain permitted the ownership of property by as many people as possible while in Russia the Tsar and his family and officials owned everything. Pipes then maintains that “private ownership of the means of creating wealth is the only effective way of setting limits to state authority.” Professor Pipes believes that the early ownership of landed property in Britain led to the development of parliamentary democracy in that country. The opposite was the case in Russia.

The 328-page book has five chapters dealing with the idea of property, the institution of property, England and the birth of parliamentary democracy, patrimonial Russia, and the situation of property in the twentieth century. The conclusion which Professor Pipes reaches, is that attempts to resolve the problem of poverty in the 20th century have failed.

“Property and its offshoot, law, relate to liberty.” The most difficult assertion for those of us from the poor world is the following: “The weakening of property rights by such devices as wealth distribution for purposes of social welfare and interference with contractual rights for the sake of ‘civil rights’ undermines liberty...”

For me ownership of property might have brought about democracy, but democracy has not given those without property something with which to guarantee their freedom. Only the collective can guarantee the right of the individual to a decent existence. But, which type of state polity can ensure that everybody has enough property to guarantee their freedom? Or which type of state polity can limit the propensity of some people to have so much property as to endanger the freedom of others?

This book might not answer the questions, but it raises them and provokes the need to find other answers.

