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## The Primacy of Freedom Development as Human Emancipation

**Poul Wisborg**

*The idea behind 'development as freedom' is about the passage from a realm of necessity to a realm of freedom but it seems 'development aid' is about aiding an agonising transition from deprivation to repression.*

Nadarajah Shanmugaratnam, to colleagues 22 November 2010

### **Introduction: Talking About Freedom**

Human freedom is a cherished value and should perhaps be the central focus of development thinking and practice. How to integrate and balance an understanding of human freedom with an appreciation of the external conditions under which women and men strive for, and may attain, freedom is a major challenge in development theory, and is explored in the thinking of Professor Nadarajah Shanmugaratnam, Shan, among colleagues and friends. During lunches at Parkgården, Noragric's wooden building in the park, I have discussed global and local affairs with Shan and other colleagues. Being a liberal and somewhat blue-eyed believer in human rights, even seeing them as central in a justifiable conception of development, I have received fair criticism from more realistic, in some cases Marxist, colleagues. However, Shan has also increasingly expressed concern about what, in a world of intense

global competition and multiple crises, will happen to human rights and democracy, which neither the 'old' nor the 'emerging' powers appear to be willing to defend. In this text I mainly benefit from a recorded conversation with Shan, continuing a dialogical examination of ideas rather than giving an exegesis of Shan's work. I also quote from the talk he gave at the Noragric Winter Seminar 2011. Of his written work I refer to the article 'On the Meaning of Development: An Exploration of the Capability Approach' (Shanmugaratnam 2001) with its respectful and critical review of Amartya Sen's extraordinary contribution to development theory. Largely following the train of our conversation, I proceed by first noting how Shan places key sources of thinking about freedom and development in the European Enlightenment. I then move to some contemporary threats to freedom that Shan stressed, particularly the neo-liberal and securitisation discourses of recent decades. In responding to these threats, I note the way he integrated the capability approach with political economy and environmental considerations. Trying to avoid the unduly narrow meanings of freedom typical of liberal and neo-liberal discourses, he still gave human freedom a central place, perhaps primacy, in the meaning of development. However, Shan places the emphasis on democratic struggle, through which freedoms are defended and expanded, moving beyond 'development as freedom' as a purely normative thesis. Finally, I ask whether I may sum up Shan's thinking under the heading 'the primacy of freedom' – which could be seen as my 'liberal' projection – and if so, in what sense and with what qualifications. My answer is that, indeed, emancipation or freedom is a guiding idea and value in Shanmugaratnam's outlook and that his balanced appreciation of both human freedom and of the political economy and environmental contexts in which women and men defend and expand them, points a way forward for understanding and addressing challenges of development and social justice.

### **Enlightenment and Freedom as Emancipation**

Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote, 'Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they', pointing at the simultaneous un-freedom of the oppressed and the oppressors and anticipating the breaking of chains through political change in Europe (Rousseau 1762). In response to the broad question raised by me, Shan emphasised the historical role of the Enlightenment:

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*This connection between development and freedom has to do with the Enlightenment, which was supposed to be a grand project of emancipation of the human being. When Sen talks about it, in my view, he roots it very much in the liberal tradition of emancipation. At the same time he calls his approach a normative approach, he says that development can be seen as a process of the expansion of human capabilities, a process of emancipation. He takes the philosophical premise of the Enlightenment, which is also the premise of great thinkers like Marx, moving from a realm of necessity to a realm of freedom, so becoming free from certain necessities means that you are moving towards freedom, away from the constraints that one experiences because one is unable to meet basic needs.<sup>1</sup>*

The quote illustrates the quick moves from the historical to the analytical and the critical. Shan employs a history of ideas approach to development, one that thrives on debate. While it seeks a universalist analysis, it is unashamedly informed by Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Friedrich List. For example, he has paid attention to the way Adam Smith and his contemporaries saw the economy and economics as having a moral dimension. Marx also brought the aspirations of the Enlightenment to bear on the critical analysis of the economy and a visionary expectation of transformation, a key source for Shan's work. In 'On the Meaning of Development' (Shanmugaratnam 2001: 270), Shan quoted the young Marx's resentment of being confined to the narrow occupational roles in agrarian and industrial societies where everyone is either 'a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood'. Instead, Marx dreamt of freedom for individuals to choose and change roles in a communist society that regulates production 'and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic' (Marx 1845: IA.4).

Shan uses the classical political economy tradition, both Marxist and liberal, to place and analyse contemporary thinkers and issues. For example, when we discussed China's development path he made a characteristic digression to reflect upon the contribution of Friedrich List (1856, orig. 1841), who wrote 'The National System of Political Economy', which inspired Marx and Engels to a scathing attack. As Shan noted, 'Marx rejected this idea of national capitalism. He was for capitalism to play itself out globally, and if Germany had to go down, let it go down, because then finally the conditions will be ripe for transformation'. Shan explained that List had both defended free trade and argued for industry protection. His policy approach turned out to be relevant

not only for Germany but also for Japan and the countries in East Asia, as stressed by economists such as Ha-Joon Chang and Erik Reinert. In 'Kicking Away the Ladder', Chang (2002) develops neo-Listian thinking and shows how Britain first used protectionism to nurture its industrial development; next, after conquering the world and establishing the Empire, it said 'Let's practice free trade'. The United States similarly used protectionism to prevent Britain from flooding its market with industrial goods, while preaching free trade. 'So we are digressing a bit', Shan said after this rapid excursion from China to List to Chang and Reinert, 'my point is that it is another model, and definitely it will lead to another development'. Thus, recapturing the moments when ideas were launched and became powerful is used to open up spaces for debate and for seeing alternatives: and in Shan's view, spaces for freedom, debate and socio-political change were opened in qualitatively new ways during the Enlightenment and the scholarship it engendered.

## Enlightenment Gone Astray – Threats to Human Freedom

### Development aid as trusteeship

'But there is a problem here', Shan continued, to elaborate the point that I have quoted above on Enlightenment, development and Sen. Despite his career in an institution that is a child of Norwegian development cooperation, Shan's outlook appears disillusioned with 'development aid'. As expressed in the epigraph to this chapter, this is precisely because the promise of 'development as freedom' has been replaced by 'aiding an agonising transition from deprivation to repression'. Why, in this rather harsh assessment, may 'development aid' have aided a transition to repression? The first reason is historical, as argued by Cowen and Shenton (1996), in that aid grew from colonial governance and never fundamentally broke ranks with it. Shan has largely embraced their analysis and argued:

*What is going on as development is a process of trusteeship and it is through development doctrines, which relate to policies and interventions to achieve certain aims, that development can be intentionally guided. But [Cowen and Shenton argue that] the whole problem about development is that development is entrapped in these doctrines, in trusteeship. So, freeing development from that is very important. ... From that point of view one may argue that the emancipatory potential of people is being suppressed by trusteeship.*

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Trusteeship, like paternalism, may have good intentions but underrates the freedom, agency and responsibility of the 'beneficiary'. Development cooperation has not managed to stay true to the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment – and more importantly the freedom of individuals and their institutions – but is rather a palliative that may even facilitate repression by supporting and legitimising authoritarian regimes. I see the decades of development support, particularly by the United States, to the authoritarian government of Egypt in this light. Tania Murray Li (2007: 8) interprets donor support to the Suharto regime in Indonesia (1965–1998) in a similar way. Development aid or 'cooperation' has frequently violated democratic freedoms because, by being donor driven, they marginalise democratic processes in countries that become 'recipients'. It also appears that in the 2000s the capability and human rights based approaches to development have lost the momentum that they had in the 1990s. Demands that international organisations funded by development aid should be democratically accountable and have representative leadership have not been realised. Shan's explanation for such a state of affairs hinges on the rise, reinventions and continued dominance of neo-liberal ideology.

#### The adaptive neo-liberalist hegemony

For someone who sees 'neo-liberalism' as a major obstacle to human development, any commitment to ideas of freedom would necessarily have to be guarded. This is true of Shan's position, viewing the recent three decades as deeply and fatally shaped by neo-liberal ideology and the actors that gain from it. At the Noragric Winter Seminar 2011 he argued that neo-liberalism has been going through repeated modifications in adaptation to a series of crises. In the 1980s, the market fundamentalist Washington Consensus set the agenda for development policy and development studies, whereas in the post-Cold War era of the 1990s a modified 'inclusive' neo-liberalism 'with a human face' was promulgated, wherein international financial institutions prescribed 'second generation' institutional reforms on good governance, accountability, poverty reduction and environmental management to the developing world. After the 9/11 tragedy further modifications and adaptations took place and the security–development nexus became the decisive factor. Shan argued that although the number of inter- and intra-state wars has gone down, the globalised security concept and effort are now organised around the threat of terrorism and prioritise state security: 'Although lip-service is being paid to human security, we see everyday insecurity of human life in many parts of the world'.

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Following the financial 'melt-down' from 2008, new modifications in neo-liberal strategies and the financial sector bailouts intensified the costs for workers and others in marginal positions:

*After the Second World War, considerable progress was made in democratisation and institutionalising social democracy in many countries in Western Europe ... but now there is a reversal taking place and the people who are paying the price, both in economic and political terms, are the working people: the problem of unemployment, the attacks on the welfare state and what a Foucauldian would call a neoliberal governmentality, a subjectification of the individual, so that their mentalities and rationalities are being re-shaped to become self-reliant, self-managing, self-planning individuals who are not looking to the state. This is what Thatcher wanted, and I think the development policies prescribed to the developing countries are very much based on this shift.*

Shan's nuanced, multi-staged account of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on governmentality and the making of a new human being – the socially produced, free actor – goes well beyond average leftist bashing of capitalism. Yet, in my view, the focus on ideology (the 'ism) may hide agency as much as it elucidates and explains. Such a focus, though critical, may exaggerate the degree to which neo-liberalism rules, indirectly supporting the proponents who say that 'There is No Alternative', as I have heard, for example, commercial farmers do when justifying harsh labour conditions on their farms. However, as I will return to later, in Shan's account resistance and struggle counterpoise ideology and create spaces for freedom.

### **Emerging powers and persistent authoritarianism**

A noteworthy challenge to power relations today, the emergence of powerful countries such as China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa, is not so far a challenge to neo-liberalism that radically expands spaces for individuals constrained by inequality and poverty. Acknowledging a vast growth in wealth during the development decades that followed the Second World War, Shan argued that the following are striking phenomena of today's world: (1) rising inequality within and between countries, both in the global North and South; (2) persistent military interventions in some parts of the world; (3) jobless growth; (4) large-scale acquisition of land, as a form of primitive accumulation by dispossession; (5) and the altering of global power relations, though not necessarily radically, through the emerging powers. At the same time that major Western countries and organisations have been promoting neo-

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liberal discourse and practices, they appear to have lost the power that gave them the confidence (or arrogance, as Julius Nyerere once said) to do so. Shan noted that China is now a bigger development lender than the World Bank. I asked whether the rising powers may bring alternative perspectives on justice that will challenge and improve 'Western' notions of development and freedom in a constructive way. I even ventured to suggest, as an example, that the Chinese emphasis on 'social harmony' could be linked to commendable efforts to address gender disparities and the widening gap between urban and rural areas – but Shan found such notions even more blue-eyed than my human rights sympathies:

*There is a lot of talk about 'social harmony' but actually the situation is one of contradiction. Especially in China where the inter-regional differences are quite big ... inequalities are increasing and there is the environmental problem. When some power preaches harmony, that means there is a lot of conflict and tension, and they [claim that they] have the solution and that China will handle it. But China uses a lot of oppressive measures. The Chinese approach is very, very authoritarian, so what kind of harmony is that?*

Shan corroborated that view a few days later:

*These countries or emerging powers are no great defenders of human rights or democracy. In fact, their record on this is appalling, to say the least. They are also involved in large-scale land acquisition in developing countries and in big oil and other high-value resource deals with governments in resource-rich African countries. (Winter Seminar, January 2011)*

While I tend to agree with his disillusioned assessment of the 'emerging powers' as defenders of human rights, a sober analysis hardly lends any more legitimacy to the preceding era of Western dominance, where human rights rhetoric went hand in hand with support for authoritarian regimes, including those, such as Egypt, that are now crumbling under popular pressure. Shan's point about 'social harmony' was brought out in February 2011, when President Mubarak stated that he needed to stay in power to further pursue the 'harmonious dialogue' he was having with the country's youth. Evidently the youth did not see it that way. Mubarak announced his resignation on Friday, 11 February 2011, and a man in the street told a journalist: 'We can breathe fresh air, we can feel our freedom'.

## A Qualified Defence

### Development as freedom?

From the opening statement of our conversation (presented in an earlier section) it was clear that Shan's engagement with the work of Amartya Sen is pivotal to his thinking on freedom and development. In the article 'On the Meaning of Development' (2001), he proposed a modification of the capability approach of Sen by integrating political economy and environmental factors to avoid the deficient notions of freedom in liberal and neo-liberal development theory and practice. I have found it one of the most instructive exposés and critiques of Sen's work, and my students often quote its eloquent synthesis, for example:

*The paradigmatic significance of a capability approach lies greatly in the linkages it establishes between freedoms as both means and ends of development and the emphasis it puts on ethical values and social justice in building an acceptable society. From a capability perspective the answer to a question such as 'are democratic freedoms conducive to development?' would be a definitive yes. Expansion of the economy is not accorded a privileged position at the expense of political rights or the entitlements of the poor. (Shanmugaratnam 2001: 269)*

In my reading, Sen gives a sound, substantive account of human freedom, stressing the things individuals are able to do and be, paying attention to such qualities as being well-fed, housed and actually able to participate in decision-making, which are frequently problematic for those who lack resources. I asked Shan if the capability approach, with its more substantive account of human freedom, could not be used to critique neo-liberal attacks on workers and the welfare state, and he responded:

*Exactly, it can be argued that in a capability perspective, since the whole point of development is expansion of human capabilities, policies have to be framed with that as a central point, which means that the state will have a role to play, markets will have a role to play, civil society will have a role to play. We are back to some kind of a social democratic model, which of course Marxists will criticize, saying that you are again trying to prolong the life of this capitalist system instead of mobilising the workers and the other sections of society against the system, that this is a way of the class compromise. But I think the big question is how to do it. ... It is going to be very difficult to defend a social democratic order with the kind of social security that people enjoyed in the past, with the state playing the main role as the provider of social security. The right wing political*



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*parties will oppose it and if you look at what is going on in the US, where Obama is supposed to be a bit more progressive than the Republicans, but he is doing nothing progressive ...*

Shan observed that, 'Sen believes that it [freedom] can be achieved to a great extent within the existing capitalist order, with the aid of policies and public reason, as he would call it'. However, he argued, due to its philosophical and normative orientation, the capability approach tends to neglect the causal understanding of the links between real political economic contexts and people's lives. One may say that 'Development as Freedom' (Sen 1999) promoted the view that capitalist economies with liberal democratic orders had triumphed and were the best of all possible worlds. This facile belief in the match of capitalism and freedom was criticised at the time (Baxi 2001; Uvin 2002). When I asked Shan whether he finds that his 2001 article 'stands' today, his reply was somewhat dismissive, arguing that Sen's work, and his own review, neglect the role of social struggle in development:

*Well, I am a bit critical now of that article. What I wanted to do in the article was to give Sen due credit and to explore the capability approach and offer a constructive political economy critique of it, and how it can be used. I was also concerned, and even more concerned now than I was then, about the importance of struggles, mass-movements, for democratic freedoms. That is very important. So one has to go beyond the Sennian framework of development as freedom, of capability expansion as freedom, in terms of imagining the kind of political order [people are living within]. The key point here is struggle, because as we can see historically, the ruling class is not going to offer equality, equitable distribution of income and resources, just out of some humanitarian concern: all of these are the outcome of struggles, demands and pressures.*

While acknowledging this point on social struggle, I prefer Sen's and Shan's richer and more nuanced accounts to Marx's account of human freedom as reflected in the quoted image of the happily hunting, fishing, herding and philosophising individual, which appears to romanticise both his or her efforts to diversify livelihoods and communist society. Perhaps because he primarily wanted to build a structural framework for explanation and prediction, Marx focuses on the agency of class and appears less interested in individual agency and deliberative public policy within a capitalist society. While we need to understand the structures and driving forces we are up against – such as the crises of capitalism that are driving changing geographies of land, food and energy today – we also need agency-oriented analysis and ethical guidance on what

individuals do and can do. Partly through his collaboration with and influence by Martha Nussbaum (e.g. 2000a, 2000b), Sen has stressed how capabilities and capability failures are gendered. In a world of rampant gender inequality, Nussbaum (e.g. 2000a: 70–80) proposes a list of ‘central human capabilities’ that can be used in holding governments accountable, whereas Sen (1999: 78–79) wishes to let such a list be open to political processes. Both the capability and human rights approaches can inform empirical studies and policy analysis, but they would be more relevant in development if they paid heed to Shan’s critical comments above, that they must be understood in their political, economic and ecological contexts and that freedoms are fought for and become the conditions of further struggle.

### **Social struggle and democracy**

If it neglects social struggle and resistance, a development theory of freedom will turn into ideology, glossing over the contingent, fought-for nature of freedoms. While Sen argues that various development interventions can free people from the pre-capitalist shackles and forces, ‘the problem with Sen’, Shan argued, ‘is that he doesn’t go into how to achieve this. He talks about the freedoms, instrumental and substantive, but where, in capitalist countries, some of these freedoms have been realised, it happened through struggles, mass movements and mass campaigns’. Sen seeks a consensus that can embrace market economics and liberal politics but in a society in which capital and conflict are drivers of change, the political economy of rights struggles must be questioned and examined. One may argue that every right or freedom is at the same time a power relation and that the normative commitment to freedoms therefore requires a simultaneous analysis of the power relations that thwart or uphold them. This is the first and major qualification of my thesis that ‘the primacy of freedom’ is an apt way of summing up a Shanian position: ‘it happens through struggles’.

As mentioned by Shan, a contemporary struggle concerns land grabs around the world that threaten the freedom and security of men and women who depend on natural resources and may, he suggested, be seen as cases of accumulation by dispossession. In an early work on the impact of colonial plantation development in Sri Lanka, Shan distinguished between trajectories of proletarianisation versus pauperisation (Shanmugaratnam 1982). He argued that British colonisation had not led to a proletarianisation of the peasantry through a shift in the structural relations turning them into wage labourers; instead, through a pattern of pauperisation, former peasants entered a ‘vicious circle’ of

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loss of ownership, declining real incomes, landlessness or new, insecure tenancy relations (Shanmugaratnam 1982: 2). Since the peasants had means to get by, often as pauperised tenants, they could avoid becoming plantation workers, which is why the British colonial government chose to import labour from Tamil Nadu, India. Therefore, under conditions of 'underdevelopment' agricultural investment did not have a progressive effect on social formations, productivity and the creation of home markets. This analysis appears highly relevant for contemporary trans-national land appropriation in Africa and elsewhere. Here, investors and governments often claim that the deals bring opportunities for wage employment. However, the conditions for agriculture-led economic expansion are rarely properly analysed and the frequent use of expertise, labour and inputs from the investor country, and export to that country, appear to make it less likely. The risks and pathways of pauperisation are given little prior attention, which is where Shan's analysis would be relevant to protect the freedoms of the women, men and children who live on, or off, the lands in question. Their resistance and struggles are frequently invisible and depend on rights of citizenship such as to tenure security, gender equality, freedom of expression and political participation (Wisborg 2011).

More generally, democracy is the social, economic and political framework in which 'normative' rights and capabilities can be realised in a material way. Shan is firmly committed to democratic freedoms as the ideal and necessary conditions for struggle. As noted, he rejects a utilitarian priority for aggregate outcomes, such as economic growth, at the expense of individual freedoms and entitlements (Shanmugaratnam 2001: 269). Marx (1845: IA.4) writes that struggle against aristocracy and for democracy and the franchise 'are merely the illusory form in which the real struggles between different classes are fought out among one another'. I asked whether such an apparent devaluation of civil and political rights made his work open to abuse by authoritarian regime but Shan placed that responsibility squarely with authoritarian parties and leaders:

*It is not fair to hold Marx responsible for that. I think we have to go into the history of how, for instance, the Soviet system came into being, the inner party struggle in the Soviet communist party. How in the initial phases they had open debates, more free exchange of views, how to build socialism and so on. But then there was the rise of authoritarianism within the party. This makes us wonder if a one-party system is the right approach to socialism. I have not come across any kind of prescription like that from Marx. Of course, Marx and Engels talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat, and it can be interpreted in different ways, but*

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*finally what happened turned out to be the dictatorship of the communist party, and within that party the central committee, and often it finally boiled down to one person.*

The emphasis on democracy informs a non-dogmatic attitude. Shan argued that, although the 'party ideologues' would not like it, 'that was nineteenth century. But you have to go beyond Marx, particularly to be able to imagine alternative social systems and construct new social orders. Marx offers a lot of fundamental guidelines, but we must not turn that into a dogma'. Rejecting authoritarianism and dogmatism is linked to his analysis of development achievements during the second half of the twentieth century, among others in the social democratic Nordic countries, where multi-party democracy, associational freedoms and negotiated change played key roles. He argued:

*If you look at this whole notion of freedom, in Western Europe after the Second World War, with the rise of the social democratic welfare state, people began to enjoy a lot of freedom and it is interesting that it was not in the economy but in the non-economic field that freedoms flourished. For that to happen the economy had to be regulated, the state had to play a fairly active and constructive role, taxes had to be collected, the social welfare system had to be made functional, universities had to be well funded, education made accessible to all. So you find that after the Second World War and until the recent rise of the neoliberal policies, there was the sexual revolution, various student struggles, new experiments with cinema, film: in those areas there was lot of human freedom, but not in the economy. That is the lesson of that period within capitalism: for human freedoms to move ahead and for people to enjoy human freedom, it seems to me that between the economy and the society there has to be some kind of regulation of the economy.*

Therefore, in addition to class struggle, democratic state-building depends on highly diverse spaces of freedom, expanded through the youth revolt and struggles for gender equality and sexual tolerance among others. On this view, we should subordinate the economy to social purposes and turn around conventional conceptions of human freedom as primarily those of economic agents (property, contract and trade). This is in line with Sen's expansion of our thinking about capabilities as freedoms, but goes further in suggesting that we need cultural creativity and restlessness in order to resist the way that economic discourses encroach upon political processes and our ability to think. Referring to the work of Gramsci, Shan argued that under advanced capitalism, 'the bourgeoisie learns the art of constructing hegemony, soft power'.

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However, this soft power requires cultural freedom, which gives 'spaces for counter-hegemonic activities', which should include spaces where intellectuals can think critically and independently.

### On Academic Freedom

Authoritarian societies seek to control scholarship and education and censor freedom of expression. More insidiously, rulers may pay actors to advocate their views. This is the role of spin, of course, but may also be that of consultants, journalists, academics and others who get a secret place on the payroll of governments. Former United States President George W. Bush paid former military personnel under the guise of independent analysts to provide US government friendly commentaries on the Iraq war (Washington 2011). This may promote the public relations of governments but compromises government accountability and, more perniciously, erodes public trust in information and debate. In social democratic societies – in which Shan sees perhaps the most realistic way to expand human freedoms – academic institutions have close relations to, and are often financially dependent on, the state. The funding through public research councils and ministry-monitored education programmes creates the risk that academics adapt their thinking and writing to the priorities, interests and views of governments. For these governments too it can be effective to have 'independent' actors who represent their viewpoints in camouflaged ways: it communicates that the landscape of knowledge has shifted, not just the priorities and choices of a particular government. For example, in recent years global changes and the Norwegian government's 'obsession' (the word was used by a diplomat) with climate change has come close to portraying this phenomenon as the major problem faced by poor people in poor countries and is a uniquely laudable subject of research. Terje Tvedt (2003) has argued that the funding arrangements in Norway's development sector, and the links between bureaucrats, civil society organisations and academics, threaten academic freedom. While there are advantages of these networks, no one in development research institutions in Norway today can be free of the potential harm to academic freedom.

As a researcher and research leader, Shan has guarded academic freedom and encouraged colleagues to be vigilant about management-led and market-oriented university reforms: 'a market mentality or market mindset governs the running of academic institutions when it comes to the understanding of efficiency in terms of some kind of input-output relation converted into monetary terms' (Winter seminar,

24 January 2011). He urged us to value critical thinking as complementary to instrumental rationality, being able not only to solve a problem but also to critique the way it has been posed. With a principled respect for intellectual freedom, Shan's interaction with colleagues is lively and stimulating across ideological standpoints. He has set an example for colleagues and students by, among others, seeking debate and contradictions; by refraining from worshipping his intellectual heroes; by teaching with passion; being in the forefront of debates and promoting intellectual non-equilibrium at Noragric; and by responding with a critical and admirably evasive attitude to contemporary university reforms.

### **Conclusion: The Primacy of Freedom**

May one sum up Shanmugaratnam's thinking under the heading 'the primacy of freedom', or is this a projection of my own liberal biases? And if one may, in what sense and with what qualifications might it be a true and fair assessment? My answer is, yes, not only is emancipation or freedom a guiding idea in Shanmugaratnam's outlook but he has also lived this freedom as a courageous thinker, researcher and teacher. Rather than a Marxist wolf in liberal clothing, or a liberal wolf in Marxist clothing, in his appreciation of human freedom as a primary value as well as of the political economies and practices through which freedom is realised, Shanmugaratnam points a way forward for the analysis of contemporary problems of social justice and development. While dominant, neo-liberal political and development ideologies brandish various notions of freedom, the critical and normative understanding of rights, development and freedom appear to be on the defensive, politically and academically. Many political philosophies and some development theories also neglect power inequalities, social struggles and the material roles of democratic freedoms, including intellectual freedom, in these struggles. While a utilitarian ethics of self-interest prevails today – arguing that the rich should end oppression and injustice because it is in their long-term interest – Shanmugaratnam has argued, in line with Marx, that it is not the moral deliberations of the powerful but rather social struggle that has been and will remain the driver. At this point the materialist perspective may dismiss human rights or individual capabilities altogether, for there are certainly tensions, and perhaps contradictions, between the perspectives I have discussed. While human rights are political constructs, the most comprehensive and globally penetrating set of moral and legal norms that we have, the capability approach is a different moral and theoretical endeavour. It makes a valuable contribu-

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tion, in my view, and Shanmugaratnam has drawn upon, criticised and expanded it in a constructive way by grounding it in political economy and the environment. He has also questioned its lack of attention to struggle since 'the ruling class is not going to offer equality, equitable distribution of income and resources, just out of some humanitarian concern', a critique that applies to human rights as well. As actors and analysts we need ethical ideas but may easily expect too much from ethical deliberation. We need to understand the power relations that shape struggles and are the leveraging points for changing them. Democratic freedoms of expression, participation and public support are among the conditions and leveraging points of these struggles. In a double move, struggle connects political economy with freedoms as both facilitating conditions and normative ends. In the conversation I have reflected upon here, Shanmugaratnam stressed the diverse cultural struggles that complement economic drivers of change. His expressed concern about the fate of human rights deserves further critical analysis in a world shaped by age-old divisions of gender and race and, these years, an intensified competition between old and emerging powers. If Rousseau (1762) was right when saying that those who think themselves masters are 'the greater slave', then those who accept oppressive structures and practices not only constrain the freedom of the oppressed, but themselves become less capable of being free and responsible. It is in these respects, among others, that Shanmugaratnam's work suggests the primacy of freedom in the struggles for social justice and development.

#### Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, quotes are from my interview with Shan on 21 January 2011.

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