Liberty and Freedom

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The thesis of this essay is: The choice today for the country is the same as it has been from the beginning: liberty for part of the population or freedom for all of the people.

As is often the case in the English language, the two words, liberty and freedom, seem to have the same meaning. Sometimes when English has two terms for the same thing, there is a class bias; the educated class prefer words derived from Latin and French while a word with Anglo-Saxon origin is judged to be vulgar. That simple class bias does not apply to freedom and liberty, although the Germanic *Freiheit* which gave us “freedom” has connotations that differ from the Latin *libertas* from which “liberty” is derived.

In the Germanic languages “freedom” has a philosophical meaning related to the nature of human beings. Freedom is a birthright of free people. A free people, equal before the law, can rule themselves. The Latin language’s “liberty” was derived from the Greek and Roman experience of a republic in which a superior class possessed liberty and provided it in varying degrees to other classes. In a republic, therefore, liberty and slavery were not incompatible. After the Norman conquest of England in 1066, these meanings of freedom and liberty became mixed together. The freedom of the Anglo-Saxon was in tension with liberties sought from the monarchy. The British came to speak of the liberties of their common law as the rights of every Englishman.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In 1989 the French threw a big party in Paris to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.* During the festivities, Margaret Thatcher struck a discordant note by saying that the British did not owe anything about rights and liberty to the French Revolution.[[2]](#endnote-2) Thatcher had considerable historical backing for her assertion about the origin of English rights and their relation to liberty. The English claim to liberties goes back as far as the twelfth century and found expression in a thirteenth-century document known as the Magna Carta. Its full Latin title is *Magna Carta Libertatum,* the Great Charter of Liberty. The English translations refer in the text to “liberties.”

When the colonists emigrated to America they were promised “to have and enjoy all liberties and immunities of free and natural subjects.” However, there was a difference between freedom and liberty that was eventually reflected in differences between southern and northern colonies. New England’s freedom meant a place of self-governing towns based on the equality of all citizens, although citizenship was not extended to African slaves. Virginia’s liberty implied hierarchy; the assertion of political liberties was compatible with indenture and slavery for some of the population. Out of that Virginia setting came many of the individuals (Washington, Jefferson, Madison) who gave an emphasis to liberty in the founding documents of the United States.

The meaning of liberty in the United States was filtered through the protections of English common law and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Liberty meant freedom from intrusion by the government into particular areas of personal life. The French Revolution gave a more radical twist to *liberté* which has affected the United States’ meaning of liberty. A word whose essential meaning is negative, that is, liberty as a *freedom from* oppression, became used as equivalent to freedom. Freedom includes *freedom for* something. Freedom is not restricted to political liberty; it can be a psychological, social or religious description of personal life.

A cry for liberty or liberation usually means resistance to an oppressor. Freedom comes later when the oppression ceases. When Sarah Grimké in the nineteenth century said “all that I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks,” she was not describing the freedom of women but rather an indispensable step of liberation before women could explore their own freedom.[[3]](#endnote-3) When Abraham Lincoln proclaimed an emancipation from slavery, he provided liberty from the condition that the slaves had experienced. Unfortunately, neither the North nor the South was prepared to guarantee that freedom would actually be experienced as a result of liberation, a freedom that would include food, shelter, health care and employment. Liberty was an instantaneous accomplishment; freedom has been a long journey.[[4]](#endnote-4)

What was remarkable about the British American colonies was the close link they sensed between asserting liberty from oppression and the constituting of an instrument for working toward freedom. That is, the colonies in 1776 declared their independence because their liberties had been violated. After a decade of experience with the liberty of independence, they decided to follow their declaration of liberty with a constitution of their freedom. John Adams said that “neither morals, nor riches, nor discipline of armies, nor all these together will do without a constitution.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

The authors of the U.S. Constitution sought to balance liberty from government with a freedom that requires governmental authority. There is a big difference between the usual pious picture of the nation’s founders and what many historians find regarding class and race biases in those founders. The debate is helped if one recognizes that the Declaration and the Constitution are about different topics. A tension between liberty and freedom is a more helpful discussion than democratic versus anti-democratic. The authors of the Constitution did not think that a “bill of rights” was necessary because the government belonged to the people. Nonetheless, a group that was suspicious of any government insisted on the need for the protection of rights. The second amendment, for example, was clearly about the belief that militias might have to defend the people against the government.

The British American and French Revolutions began the attempt to universalize rights. The meaning of liberty was altered by being made part of the declarations of rights inherent to “man”(not women and not all men). The first article of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* *and of the Citizen* declares that humans are *born free*. Perhaps that is a defensible claim but people might still need *liberating* from their present condition. Article four says that “liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else.” So defined, liberty becomes a desirable ideal for every human being but the place of government is left unclear.

If one could count the uses of “freedom” and “liberty” in the history of the United States, liberty would be the clear winner. Certainly, the idea of liberty as a freedom from restriction was enthusiastically embraced by the United States. The revolution was fought in the name of the “sacred cause of liberty.” The Bill of Rights to the United States Constitution includes a series of rights as liberties. For most U.S. citizens the right to be left alone ranks near the top of the rights that they cherish.

*New York Magazine* once did a series of interviews with recent immigrants to the United States. One of them said: “What a marvelous country this is; you can say anything you want and nobody cares.” The statement captures an exhilarating feeling of being free but also the danger of equating freedom and liberty. If you are running from the secret police back home, the fact that no one cares what you say is a wonderful experience. If you are a widow with three children begging for help, the fact that no one cares about your plea is no help to feeding your family nor is it an experience of human freedom.

In the nineteenth century almost all U.S. citizens were “liberal,’ that is they were suspicious of any government intrusion into their lives. The government was kept small at the federal level; local organizations handled the day to day necessities of citizens. More than half of federal employees worked for the post office; indeed, the main contact that most citizens had with a federal government was the delivery of the mail. Until the civil war the term “United States” took a plural verb. An entity called the United States barely existed but the telegraph and the railroad would change that. Abraham Lincoln passionately believed in what he referred to as “the union;” he said in 1860 that if he had to choose between the union and slavery, he would choose the union. But by the end of his life he had come to see that a union could not be “half free and half slave.”

As the technology of travel and communication changed the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the need for larger organizations became inevitable. Large business organizations overshadowed families and local communities. Powerful individuals who were willing to use unscrupulous means to make a profit for themselves were not controlled by local ordinances. For workers, the threat to liberty now came from the business corporation that could dictate the conditions of work. Businesses were incorporated by state governments; to keep businesses content within the state’s borders, the state governments competed in having the fewest restrictions on business. The only force strong enough to protect the individual’s liberty from the power of the business corporation was the federal government which had previously been distrusted as a threat to liberty.

Progressive reformers sought to provide workers with better tools to function within the modern technologized society. Improvement of education for all citizens led the way in reform. Republican party politicians were the early leaders of a progressive movement. Evangelical Protestants provided the spark for reform although urban populations of immigrants continued to live in squalid conditions. The greatest progressive achievement of the nineteenth century was the government getting control of the water supply. Clean water to urban populations was the single most important health advance of the late nineteenth century. But while the government had succeeded in the stunning achievement of building a national railroad, it failed to take control of urban transit. The disgraceful condition of mass transit in the United States is a severe restriction on the liberty of city dwellers.

When the progressive movement was taken over by the Democratic Party, especially during a reincarnation of progressivism under Franklin Roosevelt, the main obstacle to freedom was seen to be the “free market” which was subject to inevitable depressions. Roosevelt saved the capitalist system by providing a control of the market’s forces through restraints of corporations. The passage of a “social security” act was an acknowledgment that government had to step in to aid individuals who were not able to cope on their own. The extension of the age span combined with changes in family structure left large segments of the population vulnerable. The worst poverty was largely eliminated although there was unending resistance to every step along the path of the richer part of the population helping the poor, the sick, the very young, and the very old.

The resistance to a national government that functions to help all the citizens has continued

unabated. It is easy to find fault with a national government; mistakes, sometimes very big mistakes, are inevitable. But what is the alternative in a big and complicated world? The opposition is directed to “big government” which is a misleading phrase. The question of size can only be determined by what the government is supposed to do. For the complexity of the country and world today, a big and complex government is needed. It is true that some personal needs are best met by local organization but the U.S. Constitution’s framework of state versus federal power is not the choice today. Many state governments are too big for what they actually accomplish and they are at least as out of touch with personal needs as is the federal government. Returning more power to the fifty states mostly succeeds in creating less efficiency and more government.

People who call themselves libertarian sound very reasonable when they are argue for individual liberty. Let individuals keep their money and decide for themselves how best to spend it rather than have the government take it and waste it. It would be a sensible plan if this were 1830. The choice is not between the individual and the government but whether or not there are adequate restraints on the business corporation’s control of the individual.

For producing household goods, a business corporation does the job best and the individual should be able to buy what he or she wishes. To think that health care is simply another object for sale is to gravely misunderstand the nature of sickness and age. Some medicines can be sold for a profit but the health of everyone ultimately depends on dedicated people, sharing of resources, and awareness of human vulnerabilities. Undeniably there is room for disagreements about how to structure a system of health care, but thinking that the central problem is individuals having the freedom to shop for their own health care is a prescription for a system that is inefficient and expensive. Eventually, even the richest people will not be able to buy clean air and drinkable water if the government does not restrict the liberty of a few in favor of freedom for all.

1. Colin Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Regional Cultures of North America* (New York: Viking Books, 2011), 54-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ian Buruma, *Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 31; Conor Cruise O’Brien, “The Decline and Fall of the French Revolution,” *New York Review of Books,* Feb. 15, 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For the devastating condition of the “freedmen” during and after the war, see Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)