



Civil rights demonstrators in Orangeburg, South Carolina, 1960. (Cecil J. Williams)

Introduction

NO IDEA is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political vocabulary, "freedom"—or "liberty," with which it is almost always used interchangeably—is deeply embedded in the documentary record of our history and the language of everyday life. The Declaration of Independence lists liberty among mankind's inalienable rights; the Constitution announces as its purpose to secure liberty's blessings. The United States fought the Civil War to bring about a new birth of freedom, World War II for the Four Freedoms, and the Cold War to defend the Free World. Americans' love of liberty has been represented by poles, caps, and statues, and acted out by burning stamps and draft cards, running away from slavery, and demonstrating for the right to vote. If asked to explain or justify their actions, public or private, Americans are likely to respond, "It's a free country." "Every man in the street, white, black, red or yellow," wrote the educator and statesman Ralph Bunche in 1940, "knows that this is 'the land of the free' . . . 'the cradle of liberty.'"¹

Foreign visitors have frequently been struck not only by Americans' commitment to freedom but by their conviction, to quote the British writer James Bryce, that they are the "only people" truly to enjoy it. The idea does seem to occupy a more prominent place in our conceptual universe than in other countries. Questions such as the justice of the economic order or the relations between racial and ethnic groups, understood in many other places as problems of equality

or community, tend to be discussed here in the language of freedom. Today, when asked to choose between freedom and equality, three-quarters of Americans give priority to freedom, a far higher percentage than in Western Europe or Japan. "Being American is to be free," declared a participant in a recent survey of public opinion.²

Despite their devotion to freedom, Americans have not produced many abstract discussions of the concept. There is no equivalent in our literature to John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* or the essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," by Isaiah Berlin. American accounts of freedom tend to be historical rather than theoretical. Freedom has provided the most popular "master narrative" for accounts of our past, from textbooks with titles like *Land of the Free* to multivolume accounts of the unfolding of the idea of freedom on the North American continent. Such works, while valuable in situating the idea of freedom in historical experience, tend to give it a fixed definition and then trace how this has been worked out over time. Generally, they ground American freedom in ideas that have not changed essentially since the ancient world, or in forms of constitutional government and civil and political liberty inherited from England and institutionalized by the founding fathers. In effect, they drop a plumb line into the past, seeking the origins of one or another current definition of freedom while excluding numerous meanings that do not seem to meet the predetermined criteria. Such an approach too often fails to recognize how dissenting voices, rejected positions, and disparaged theories have also played a role in shaping the meaning of freedom. "Our story," declared the cultural critic Allan Bloom, "is the majestic and triumphant march of two principles: freedom and equality." But depicting the history of freedom as a narrative of linear progress fails to note that, as the abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson put it after the Civil War, "revolutions may go backward." While freedom can be achieved, it may also be taken away.³

In this book, the history of what the historian Carl Becker called this "magic but elusive word" is a tale of debates, disagreements, and struggles rather than a set of timeless categories or an evolutionary narrative toward a preordained goal. The very universality of the language of freedom camouflages a host of divergent connotations and applications. It is pointless to attempt to identify a single "real" meaning against which others are to be judged. Rather than seeing freedom as a fixed category or predetermined concept, I view it as an "essentially contested concept," one that by its very nature is the subject of disagreement. Use of such a concept automatically presupposes an ongoing dialogue with other, competing meanings.⁴

"The idea of liberty," writes the French historian Marc Bloch, "is one which

each epoch reshapes to its own liking."⁵ Rather than discussing freedom in the abstract, I attempt to locate it in particular historical circumstances, showing how at different periods of American history different ideas of freedom have been conceived and implemented, and how the clash between dominant and dissenting views has constantly reshaped the idea's meaning. Freedom has always been a terrain of conflict, subject to multiple and competing interpretations, its meaning constantly created and recreated. Definitions of freedom relegated to the margins in one era have become dominant in the next, and long-abandoned understandings have been resurrected when circumstances changed. The meaning of freedom has been constructed not only in congressional debates and political treatises but on plantations and picket lines, in parlors and bedrooms. The story of American freedom has a rich and varied cast of characters, from Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Sanger, Franklin D. Roosevelt to former slaves seeking to breathe substantive meaning into emancipation during the Civil War.

"New circumstances," Jefferson observed in 1813, "... call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects." The history of freedom offers a unique vantage point from which to probe the depths of American culture, and to view the interconnection between changing patterns of thought and social experience in American history. Because of the word's very ubiquity, the study of freedom is more than a semantic exercise. "History," wrote the social critic Henry Demarest Lloyd a century ago, "is condensed in the catchwords of the people."⁶ Freedom is so central to our political language that it is impossible to understand American history without knowledge of the multifaceted debates over its meaning. This history of the idea of freedom does not claim to offer a comprehensive narrative of the American past. It does contend, however, that viewing that history with freedom as the organizing theme enables us to highlight unfamiliar elements, and to see familiar events and periods in new ways. The history of freedom sheds light on the ideas and purposes of social and political movements. It shows how crises like the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Cold War, when the language of freedom suffused politics and society, have permanently transformed the political culture. What is important is not so much the evolution of a single definition as the multiple purposes to which the idea of freedom has been put, and the broader belief systems these usages illuminate.

Since freedom embodies not a single idea but a complex of values, the struggle to define its meaning is simultaneously an intellectual, social, economic, and political contest. A morally charged idea, freedom has been used to convey and claim legitimacy for all kinds of grievances and hopes, fears about the present

and visions of the future. Freedom is the oldest of clichés and the most modern of aspirations. At various times in our history it has served as a “protest ideal” and as a justification of the status quo. Freedom helps bind our culture together and exposes the contradictions between what America claims to be and what it actually is. As groups from the abolitionists to modern-day conservatives have realized, to “capture” a word like freedom is to acquire a formidable position of strength in political conflicts. “People have so manipulated the concept of freedom,” the philosopher Theodor Adorno complained at the dawn of the Cold War, “that it finally boils down to the right of the stronger and richer to take from the weaker and poorer whatever they have left.” Yet, not long after these words were written, the greatest mass movement of this century reinvigorated the language of freedom with its freedom rides, freedom schools, and the insistent cry, “Freedom Now.”⁷

As with other central elements of our political language—independence, equality, and citizenship, for example—freedom has been defined and redefined with reference to its putative opposite. The meaning of “independence” requires a concept of dependency, “white” depends on the definition of black, and the meaning of “freedom” on the definition of unfreedom. Such binary oppositions have ordered Americans’ understanding of the world, simultaneously illuminating some parts of that reality and glossing over others, while obscuring the extent to which ideas conceived as mutually exclusive are in fact ideologically interconnected.⁸ Slavery helped to define American understandings of freedom in the colonial era and the nineteenth century. Indeed, much of the first part of this book explores how the existence of slavery helped to shape a racially exclusive definition of freedom, while at the same time offering those who believed themselves denied full liberty—laborers complaining of “wage slavery,” women protesting the “slavery of sex”—a language with which to express their own grievances. More recently, communism helped to define American freedom when the United States declared itself the leader of the Free World.

No study of a subject as complex and multifaceted as freedom can claim to be definitive. A book of this sort inevitably reflects the personal interests and choices of the author; another historian would undoubtedly produce a very different volume. My approach to the history of freedom centers on three interrelated themes: the meanings of freedom; the social conditions that make freedom possible; and the boundaries of freedom—the definition, that is, of who is entitled to enjoy it.

In studying the first theme—how Americans have understood the idea of

freedom—my concern is less with abstract definitions than with the debates and struggles through which freedom acquires concrete meanings, and how understandings of freedom are shaped by, and in turn help to shape, social movements and political and economic events. No overarching definition or single set of categories can capture the elusive meaning of freedom. Nonetheless, if freedom is a contested concept, it is not merely an empty vessel. American understandings of freedom have changed many times, but the debate itself has tended to focus on certain dimensions of the idea. That history has determined which elements of freedom I have chosen to focus on throughout the book.

One critical dimension is political freedom, or the right to participate in public affairs. The narrative begins with the American Revolution, when the prevailing understanding of freedom centered on a community’s right to political self-determination. In the nineteenth century, political democracy (defined until after the Civil War as white male suffrage) became central to the meaning of freedom, and it was in the language of freedom that excluded groups claimed the right to vote. Even today, when more privatized meanings prevail, the idea of freedom as active engagement in public life has not entirely disappeared from our political culture. The question of political freedom is intimately connected to an issue that recurs throughout our history—the relationship between freedom and political institutions. Freedom is both an idea and a practice, a complex of values and an experience implemented in law and public policy. Governmental power has been seen by some Americans as a danger to liberty, and by others as a means toward what John Dewey called “effective freedom”—the ability to shape the institutions that determine the lineaments of freedom.⁹

Americans’ love-hate relationship with government is reflected in another crucial strand of the history of freedom: the evolution of civil liberties, or rights that individuals can assert against authority. Today, the liberties enshrined in the Bill of Rights are central to Americans’ conception of freedom. This has not always been the case; indeed, at many moments in our history, from the suppression of abolitionist meetings in the 1830s to the Red Scare after World War I and the depredations of McCarthyism during the Cold War, individual rights have been seriously curtailed—often in the name of freedom. The growth of civil liberties in this country is not a story of linear progress or simply a series of Supreme Court decisions, but a highly uneven and bitterly contested part of the story of American freedom.

Yet another understanding that has enjoyed a persistent presence in American life is a moral or “Christian” ideal of freedom. From the Puritan settlers

to many modern conservatives, freedom has meant above all the capacity to act according to an ethical standard. This definition stands in uneasy tension with another recurring dimension—personal freedom, or the ability to make crucial individual choices free from outside coercion. In the revolutionary era, freedom as personal choice referred mainly to the realms of democratic politics and religious affiliation. In the nineteenth century, personal freedom came to mean each person's opportunity to develop to the fullest his or her innate talents. In the twentieth, the "ability to choose" has become perhaps the dominant understanding of freedom, a development abetted by the explosive growth of the consumer marketplace. In the name of personal liberation, the 1960s, a crucial chapter in the history of American freedom, extended freedom of choice into virtually every realm, from attire and "lifestyle" to relations between the sexes.

A final dimension is economic freedom: what kinds of economic relations constitute freedom for individuals in their working lives. The meaning of economic freedom has changed dramatically over the course of American history. For more than a century after independence, this idea centered on economic autonomy, enshrined in the glorification of the independent small producer at the time of the Revolution and the antebellum celebration of "free labor." As the industrial economy matured and the goal of proprietorship faded for most Americans, alternative definitions of economic freedom came to the fore: "liberty of contract" in the Gilded Age; "industrial freedom" (a say in corporate decision-making) in the Progressive era; economic security during the New Deal; and, more recently, the ability to partake of mass consumption within a market economy.

Useful as a method of imposing order on the myriad ways the idea has been understood and deployed, these dimensions of freedom must not be seen as either unchanging or mutually exclusive. No fixed set of categories can fully capture how freedom is actually experienced and interpreted by individuals embedded in history, or how each definition of freedom influences the others. A protean concept, freedom overflows the scholar's carefully constructed boundaries. Many people have held seemingly contradictory definitions of freedom at the same time—"negative" and "positive" liberty, for example (a distinction popularized by Isaiah Berlin), or freedom as a set of individual rights and freedom as group or national empowerment. Freedom has been applied to individuals, communities, families, persons within the family, and to the nation itself, and has been pursued through individual action and collective struggles. What is constant is the debate itself; yet the very preoccupation with freedom provides a point of unity in understanding the American past.

Discussions of freedom inevitably raise the question of what circumstances must exist to allow freedom to flourish. This issue—the social conditions of freedom—constitutes the book's second major theme. Even those who adopt a purely "negative" definition of freedom as the absence of external coercion rather than, for example, economic autonomy or political empowerment, must identify what constitutes illegitimate coercion. At one time or another, Americans have identified as obstacles to the enjoyment of individual freedom governmental authority, social pressures for conformity, bureaucratic institutions, "private" arrangements like the traditional family, and concentrated economic power. Efforts to delineate the conditions of freedom extend from the era of the Revolution, when ownership of productive property was widely seen as essential to individual autonomy, to the twentieth, when feminists sought to recast gender relations in order to afford women the same freedom as men, and Americans divided over whether poverty and lack of economic security should be seen as deprivations of freedom that the government has an obligation to alleviate. Such debates underscore the fact that discussions of freedom are inescapably political, since under almost any definition they lead directly to questions concerning how public institutions and economic and social relations affect the nature and extent of the options available to individuals. Through consideration of the social conditions of freedom, therefore, the word enters what the historian J. R. Pole has called "the language of justice."¹⁰

If freedom has been a battleground throughout our history, so too has been the book's third theme—the definition of those entitled to enjoy its blessings. It is hardly original to point out that the United States, founded on the premise that liberty is an entitlement of all humanity, blatantly deprived many of its own people of freedom. Less immediately apparent is how the study of freedom calls into question the universalities of what Gunnar Myrdal called "the American Creed"—a belief in the essential dignity of all human beings and their inalienable right to democracy, liberty, and equal opportunity. Many recent writers view this creed as a common theme of our history, a way of transcending the fragmentation that allegedly affects both the study of history and society itself. The study of freedom does, indeed, offer a way of responding to the criticism that the writing of history has become so fragmented and trivialized that it is no longer possible to view American society whole. Our history is more than the sum total of the experiences of the sometimes fractious groups that make up our population. Yet the history of freedom also suggests that the search for a unifying account of the American past needs to be conducted in new ways. It highlights how the universalities of our common culture have

been constructed on the basis of difference and on the exclusion of considerable numbers of Americans from their benefits. "Liberty," said Louis D. Brandeis in 1915, "has knit us together as Americans."¹¹ But the boundaries of freedom have been as contested as the word's definition itself.

A nation, in the political scientist Benedict Anderson's celebrated definition, is more than a political entity. It is also a state of mind, "an imagined political community," with borders that are as much intellectual as geographic.¹² The greater the substantive meaning of freedom, the more important the lines of inclusion and exclusion that define American nationality. Since freedom, among other things, is a set of practical rights and entitlements that go along with being an American, its boundaries take on extreme significance. Throughout the book, therefore, I have devoted attention to the debate over a question that has never been fully resolved: who is an American (and therefore entitled to enjoy American freedom)?

If the universalistic American Creed has been a persistent feature of our history, so too have been efforts to delimit freedom along one or another axis of social existence.¹³ Of the lines circumscribing the enjoyment of freedom, none have been more persistent than those drawn on the basis of race, gender, and class. I invoke these categories, whose meanings themselves have changed over time, not as a fashionable mantra but because these are among the most crucial fault lines along which limitations on freedom have so often been demarcated. Non-whites, women, and laborers experienced firsthand the paradox that one person's freedom has frequently been linked to another's servitude. The master's freedom rested on the reality of slavery, the vaunted autonomy of men on the subordinate position of women. By the same token, it has been through battles at the boundaries—the efforts of racial minorities, women, and workers to secure freedom as they understood it—that the meaning (and hence the experience) of freedom has been both deepened and transformed, and the concept extended to realms for which it was not originally intended.

The story of American freedom is not simply a saga of a fixed set of rights to which one group after another has gained access. Time and again in our history, the definition of those rights has been transformed by the demands of excluded groups for inclusion. The authors of the notion of freedom as a universal birthright, a truly human ideal, were not so much the founding fathers, who created a nation dedicated to liberty but resting in large measure on slavery, but abolitionists who sought to extend the blessings of liberty to encompass blacks, slave and free; women who seized upon the rhetoric of democratic freedom to demand the right to vote; and immigrant groups who insisted that

nativity and culture ought not to form boundaries of exclusion. The struggles of such groups for freedom elevated equality to a central place in the language of liberty, challenging the views of other Americans who held that equality is the antithesis of freedom. The principles of birthright citizenship and equal protection of the law without regard to race, which became central elements of American freedom, were products of the antislavery struggle and the Civil War. The women's movement challenged the prevailing separation of public and private spheres, thereby pioneering the application of the idea of freedom to the most intimate relations of life. Judicial recognition of Americans' civil liberties originated in part in court decisions overturning World War I laws—directed against the new immigrants—that required that instruction in public and private schools be conducted in English.

The title of this book, as is perhaps obvious, is meant to be ambiguous or ironic (one might even call it postmodern). A story is both a history of actual events and an invention. Over the course of our history, American freedom has been both a reality and a mythic ideal—a living truth for millions of Americans; a cruel mockery for others. For some, freedom has been a birthright taken for granted. For others, it is "not a gift but an achievement," in the words of the philosopher Samuel DuBois Cook, a close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr. "Historically and morally speaking," Cook added, freedom "is the fruit of struggles, tragic failures, tears, sacrifices, and sorrow."¹⁴

Freedom, and struggles to define its meaning, have long been central to my own work as a historian. My first published article concerned the Free Soil Party and three of my previous books have had the words "Free" or "Freedom" in their titles. My graduate training at Columbia University, under the direction of Richard Hofstadter, instilled an enduring concern with the complex relationships between ideas and experience, and between social movements and political and economic institutions. The scholarship of the past thirty years has made historians far more aware than Hofstadter and his generation of the value, indeed the necessity, of bringing the varied perspectives of different Americans to bear on any account of the nation's past. But the ambition that inspires this study—to produce a coherent narrative that illuminates the evolution of American political culture and its distinctive language of politics—is much the same as theirs.

Today, chroniclers of the past are frequently called upon to contribute to a sense of common national identity by devising a unifying account based on the ideal of freedom. Historians, however, in the words of one of the preeminent practitioners of the craft, Eric Hobsbawm, are the "professional remembrancers

of what their fellow citizens wish to forget.”¹⁵ Americans sometimes “forget” that things which we consider fixed and timeless are in fact constantly changing and contested. The story of freedom is not a mythic saga with a predetermined beginning and conclusion, but an open-ended history of accomplishment and failure, a record of a people forever contending about the crucial ideas of their political culture. In this extended conversation over time, the meaning of freedom is as multifaceted, contentious, and ever-changing as America itself.



The Story of American Freedom