

Whose Freedom? A XXI Century Update

Prof. Gonzalo Santos, 8/29/24

I highly recommend this excellent [essay in *The Guardian*](#) by one of the foremost historians of the United States today, Eric Foner, Professor Emeritus of Columbia University.

Let me add a few observations, if I may, some historical, other contemporary.

The modern world was born with the long-gestating reimagining of three or four guiding universal, inalienable rights extended to all people, as proclaimed in many founding revolutionary texts: liberty (or freedom), equality, fraternity, pursuit of happiness.

These so-called "modern human rights" were actually first proclaimed in writing by the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great (559–530 BCE), long before they reappeared in places like the Iroquois Five Nations League in North America, and among the thinkers and writers of the 18th century French & American Enlightenment.

Freedom, though, as well as the other rights, became *nationalized* very quickly after the French and American revolutions, when these ideals were declared henceforth solely applicable to the "citizens" of the "sovereign nation." In many other places, despotic monarchs, colonial elites, and secular dictators ensured it never even got to that.

But who's a citizen? Well, in the U.S. it was not codified until the 14th amendment in 1868, but assumed to be restricted to free men of a certain age, race, and means, and born within a certain state jurisdiction. Soon after independence (1790), they added to the list of eligible citizens those foreign persons of the same characteristics who arrived and stayed a certain amount of time, but no one else.

Women were not included, even if white and born in the country. Indigenous people - even acculturated ones who settled as farmers - were declared not citizens at the time of Andrew Jackson, and were brutally expelled; as were free Blacks from the Antebellum South, too, even subject to re-enslavement. In 1857, the US Supreme Court declared all Blacks, even free ones, ineligible for citizenship.

The "freedom" of the American white planter to import African enslaved workers goes back to early colonial times (1619); this longstanding "freedom" was suddenly abolished unilaterally by the British in 1807, who set out with other European powers to colonize Africa. This promptly led to the first war of the new white settler American nation in 1812.

After the Americans were humiliated and defeated, the American planters were granted in the subsequent peace treaty the "freedom" to grow and exploit a vast domestic enslaved labor force (half a million) to produce cotton, in great demand at the giant mechanized textile

factories of Manchester in Great Britain. New York, which got a lion's share of the deal by monopolizing the cotton exports, approved. Soon both the North and the South prospered jointly. Everyone was satisfied for half a century - everyone, that is, except the slaves.

But trouble brew elsewhere. As the U.S. necessarily expanded west, the "freedom" of the Southern white planters was blocked once again - at the time of the Mexican-American war of 1846-48 - this time by the more expansive Northern, mostly white-immigrant-populated industrial section of the country. They passed a law - the Wilmot Proviso - forbidding the expansion of slavery into any new territories acquired.

The "freedom" to exploit enslaved labor was thus geographically restricted to the historic South (only Texas was added because it preceded the war and "freely" entered as a "republic" of white slaveholders, but the rest of the annexed Mexican lands were not). This was deemed an affront to Southern "liberty" and "equality" and an unsustainable restriction for its planters, who began to threaten civil war.

This is the egregious violation of the planters' "freedom" and "equality" that led to the American Civil War.

But the planters lost. Slavery was abolished in the U.S. with the passage of the 13th amendment in 1865. It would continue in Cuba and Brazil for two more decades - the former requiring a ten-year civil war (1876-86), the latter peacefully, by a mere imperial proclamation in 1888.

But soon after the abolition of slavery in the U.S., and for a whole century afterwards, the "freedom" of the descendants of the planters to socially segregate the descendants of enslaved Americans, politically disempower them, superexploit them through onerous "sharecropping" deals, and discriminate them in all areas of education, sports, media and culture, was upheld by state laws. The federal Bill of Rights was nullified for Blacks by the SCOTUS "Plessy" decision (1896) that granted sole jurisdiction to each state.

The long era of Jim Crow would only be dismantled in the 1950s and 60s. The only other country that practiced this racial order of "*Herrenvolk* democracy" was South Africa.

The Cold War ideological imperative for the U.S. global hegemonic state to abolish the domestic Apartheid system it erected, combined with the mighty insurrection of the formerly enslaved, African Americans still treated as 2nd. class citizens, led to a new multiracial democratic pact: freedom to *all* its citizens! Soon women and other people of color signed on. Domestic tranquility - a constitutional goal - seem to be ensured for the foreseeable future, at long last.

But oops, not so fast! First was the pesky business of acting as a self-appointed empire, a superpower launching wars of counterinsurgency and coup d'etats at leisure, like the war in Vietnam or the overthrow of democratic regimes in Iran, Guatemala, Chile, etc. All that created domestic disturbances.

But a bigger one came roaring to the fore by the late 1970s: what about the non-citizens coming here, the "huddled masses, tempest tossed, coming to our shores yearning to be free"?

Well, they will still need *state permission* to be free, came the answer (really?). And they had to secure it from those that through the laws they passed, may consider them undesirable and demand the national sovereign "freedom" to deny them entry -- never mind that the U.S. is meddling everywhere in the world, invited or not, and *causing* many of these migrant flows.

Undocumented immigrants have also had to deal with the "freedom" of U.S. employers to superexploit them - using an innovation in the criminalization and devaluation of labor that began in the 1920s with the bureaucratic requirement of visas, restricted "national quotas", deportations, etc. - a "freedom" which clashes with the "freedom" of the nativists and white nationalists to restrict and ban immigration, legal or illegal.

Immigrants, for their part, engage in their own creative and bold self-defense strategies and tactics, legal and otherwise, to secure their many inalienable "freedoms" - freedom from want, from persecution, and freedom to pursue happiness. What could be more modern? And what could be more "free," justified, and liberating than to disobey unjust and inhumane law? Who's going to stop them?

In summary:

The problem of the XX century was the color line, said W.E.B. Du Bois. Though not entirely solved, this particular challenge did make important strides. The problem of the XXI century, the one currently disrupting the world and every region and country, is the border line.

Those that seek to deny "freedom," "equality," and "the pursuit of happiness" to others merely on the accident of birthplace in an hierarchical world order, though they may have all the power and the law on their side, will eventually lose as surely as those that sought to deny freedom to others for centuries merely on the arbitrary marker of the color of their skins.

To deny the universal humanity of an already integrated but unjust world today is to plow the sea. Humanity is now on the move, from the Global South to the Global North, from the man-made imploded and exploded areas to the areas of refuge, safety, and well-being. This humanity, ever more conscious of itself as a new actor on the stage of history, shall not be stopped by foolish and outdated barriers of any kind - ideological or physical.

They, the forcibly displaced families and communities uprooted by the human folly of capitalist greed and geopolitical power, victims of a deeply flawed world social system guided by obsolete and divisive ideologies of absolute difference, have armed themselves with the armor piercing ammunition and the impenetrable shields of truth and justice; and in their arrow quivers they carry all the other inalienable rights past generations of freedom fighters sharpened and bequeathed them.

Humanity on the march cannot and will not be fooled, nor suppressed. In the epochal titanic battle of opposite "freedoms" today and for the remainder of this new century, the only question is: which side are you on, with those that claim the "freedom" to oppress, or those that claim the "freedom" to build a more just and happy world for everyone?

#AnotherWorldIsPossible #AnotherNorthAmericasNecessary #AnotherVisionIsRequired
#JusticeAndFreedomForAll

ARTICLE: **The US presidential race will be fought over competing definitions of 'freedom'**

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