

# The Meaning of Freedom in the Modern World

by Alan Singer, editor, Social Science Docket, 1 (1) Winter-Spring 2001

For centuries, philosophers (inside and outside of high school social studies classrooms) have struggled with defining the meaning of freedom and tracing its historical development. In the United States, most citizens have accepted some social restraints on their actions, though they frequently disagree over what the limits should be. Libertarians identify freedom with the absolute right of individuals to control their own lives and want sharp restrictions on the power of government to interfere with the social and economic market place. On the other hand, religious conservatives often want governments to severely limit the options available to women who want to terminate pregnancies and oppose extending certain legal rights, including health benefits for partners and the right to marry the person they choose, to homosexuals.

The debate over the meaning of freedom is not restricted to the United States. In communist countries such as China and the former Soviet Union, freedom was defined as a collective or social value. Individual choices were circumscribed in order to achieve the more egalitarian distribution of goods and services like education and health care. In some contemporary Islamic nations, individual freedom must conform to religious practices. Individual behavior is also restricted by religious belief in Israel on the Jewish Sabbath and religious holidays and in some communities in the United States on Sundays because of Christian beliefs.

In *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (1991), Orlando Patterson declared, "today freedom stands unchallenged as the supreme value of the Western world (ix)." However, he also acknowledged a problem with discussions of the meaning of freedom, because "like love and beauty, (it) is one of those values better experienced than defined...Nearly everyone in the Western world worships freedom and will declare herself willing to die for it. Like all intensely held beliefs, it is assumed to be so self-evident that there is no need for explicitness" (1).

Patterson believes that what the contemporary world understands by the concept of freedom is actually a three part composite of ideas that initially emerged in ancient Greece and have developed during the last two millennium of western history. His book traces the idea of freedom in Western civilization and seeks to identify its survival and evolution in different historical epochs.

Patterson identifies the three ideas associated with our modern concept of freedom as "personal", "sovereign" and "civic" freedoms. He believes these ideas can be in conflict within any given society, making human freedom a matter of degree, rather than an absolute value.

According to Patterson, personal freedom means not being coerced by individuals or governments and having the ability, within acceptable limits, to "do as one pleases." Sovereign freedom can mean the ability to restrict the personal freedom of others in order to enhance your own economic or social benefits. This includes the power of the master over the slave and of the capitalist over the worker. Contradictions between personal and sovereign freedom explain how the Southern states could secede from the United States in defense of both freedom and slavery.

Patterson describes civic freedom as "the capacity of adult members of a community to participate in its life and governance." This concept of freedom implies a political community with "clearly defined rights and obligations for every citizen." Patterson points out that some societies in the past (e.g., Greece and Rome) have valued personal and sovereign freedom, but have restricted civic freedom to narrowly defined groups of the elite. Other societies, especially tribal communities, have permitted general male participation in governance. However, because of the weight of custom, they have severely circumscribed the ideas and behaviors of members.

In *The Story of American Freedom* (1998), Eric Foner examines the historical development of freedom in the United States. Foner joins Patterson in arguing that freedom must be understood as a complex of values that have changed over time. However, he is more concerned with examining conflict over the meaning of freedom than in tracing its lineage. According to Foner, “at different periods of American history different ideas of freedom have been conceived and implemented” and “the clash between dominant and dissenting views has constantly reshaped the idea’s meaning” (xv). Americans have witnessed the expansion of both participation and the protection of individual rights, not through the evolution of an idea, but as a result of two centuries of political struggle for equality and justice. Foner concludes that “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 mockery for others. For some, freedom was a birthright taken for granted. For others, it is ‘not a gift, but an achievement...’” (xxi). Foner wants students to recognize that the history of American freedom includes both significant accomplishments and major failures. It is a continuing story, and within limits, “we can decide for ourselves what freedom is” (332).

A different perspective on the idea of freedom is offered by Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen. His concern is substantive (quality of life), rather than limited procedural, freedom (voting). Sen believes there is a fundamental relationship between individual and political freedom and economic development, with the “expansion of freedom” serving as both “the primary end and the principal means of development.” Sen argues that a meaningful concept of freedom for the twenty-first century cannot separate political rights from the opportunity to have an education, receive adequate health care and live in safety. Any society that calls itself free must insure that its citizens enjoy this broader substantive freedom. He is critical of a wealthy country like the United States, where life expectancy, child mortality and the availability of health care differ markedly for different racial and ethnic groups (96-98).

Significantly, Sen also disagrees with traditional communist regimes that limited democratic rights in the name of promoting economic development. He argues that the suppression of personal and civic freedom, whether perceived of as temporary or not, undermined the ability of those societies to respond to the needs of their citizens, limiting both procedural and substantive freedom. Sen believes that in recent human history, famines were the result, not of food shortages, but the failure of governments to respond to human needs under dire circumstances. They were most likely to occur under dictatorial regimes because people in authority did not feel the obligation to respond to public opinion or market conditions (164-175).

Defining freedom in the modern world is complicated. The activities that follow are designed to help high school students explore the complex meaning of freedom. The first activity provides students with a series of definitions of freedom from the past and present. It asks students, working either individually or in groups, to evaluate the definitions and arrive at their own. The second activity uses Amartya Sen’s idea of substantive freedom to help students critically evaluate international ratings presented in Freedom House’s 1999-2000 survey *Freedom in the World*. Again, students can work either individually or in groups.

## References

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