

Is Freedom a Radical Idea?

The answer to the question “Is freedom a radical idea” is: no and yes. Let me explain.

Starting with the “no”: Most children grow up learning the libertarian, or nonaggression, ethic. Parents say: “Don’t hit, don’t take other kids’ stuff without asking, and don’t break your promises.” Nothing radical – in the sense of out of the mainstream – there. It neatly translates into: Respect life, liberty, and property, and honor your contracts.

Most people carry these principles with them into adulthood. They avoid common-law crimes against persons and property, not because they are afraid of the cops but because criminal behavior conflicts with living the life they want to live.

Libertarianism can be seen therefore as merely a plea for the consistent application of these rules to and for everyone. It’s Spencer’s [Law of Equal Liberty](#).

Now let’s move on to the “yes.” In the political realm, freedom has been a radical idea indeed, the exception. There the rules are different. The State – that is, certain special individuals – may “legitimately” do what you and I can’t do. If you or I kill when our lives are not in mortal danger, it is called murder. When the State does it, it is called war, or counterinsurgency, or capital punishment. If you or I, threatening force, demand money from our neighbors for their protection or to do good works, it is called robbery. When the State does it, it’s called taxation. If you or I impress someone into service against his or her will, it’s called slavery. If the State does it, it’s called conscription or national service. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Why these differences? Many reasons have been offered throughout the millennia. The State was said to be the deity’s agent on earth. It was said to embody the general will. And it

was said to operate by the consent of the governed.

Regardless of the rationalization, the State, by a process of moral alchemy, or moral laundering, claims to turn bad things into good. By this ideology, rulers have kept the idea of freedom tightly contained, when it is in effect at all.

Freedom Far Removed

Thus throughout history, and with only the rarest of exceptions, freedom has been far removed from the center of political events – even during that ostensibly exceptional period, say, 1776-1901. This is not to say the idea of freedom played no role whatever (the Declaration of Independence was a gleaming embodiment of the idea), but most of the time, it did not play the fundamental role that we tend to believe.

Contrary to popular sentiment, for example, freedom was not the driving force along the road to the [Constitution](#) (pdf), which has been fairly called a counterrevolution. We need only remind ourselves that the Constitution came *after* the [Articles of Confederation](#), which (for all its faults) had deprived the national quasigovernment of both the *power to tax* and the [power to regulate trade](#). (Can you imagine?) Those omissions, which Madison, Hamilton, and other leading founders regretted so badly, were “corrected” in Philadelphia in 1787. (Albert Jay Nock called it a coup d’état.) The warnings of the prophetic Antifederalists were ignored, and except for Jeffersonian respites now and again, we’ve lived with the predictable consequences ever since. John Taylor of Caroline and others were complaining about big government in the early 1800s!

Well, as historian Merrill Jensen put it, the “founding fathers who wrote the Constitution of 1787 were quite a different set of men from those who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776.”

Violations of Freedom

The U.S. government of course sanctioned chattel slavery for Africans until 1865 (with lesser oppressions later), the Indians were brutalized, and the rights of women were not recognized. These things and substantial economic intervention by the states kept freedom from its rightful place. And the period from 1870 to whenever the Progressive Era started? War is the health of the State, Randolph Bourne wisely wrote. That would cover Civil Wars too. Lincoln came to power filled with enthusiasm for the Whig Henry Clay's American System: internal improvements, protective tariffs, and central banking. Intellectual monopoly (patents and copyrights), business subsidies, and land grants to cronies were cut from the same cloth. Add the war, the income tax (which later expired), the veterans pension program, and you have the makings of one big government. The benefits of a big business-big government relationship were not lost on those with power and influence. ("The tariff is the mother of trusts.")

Here's how [Arthur A. Ekirch Jr.](#) summed up the touted golden age of freedom in his not-to-be-missed classic, [The Decline of American Liberalism](#) (newly reissued):

[I]n the America of the [eighteen] eighties and nineties, doctrines of laissez faire and of the limited state were being twisted and distorted from their original meaning. Businessmen and judges took up the individualism of Jefferson and [Herbert] Spencer and converted it into a rationale for materialist exploitation. Resisting public intervention or government regulation when it confined or restrained special interests, the business community, however, could see no inconsistency in an acceptance of the stream of subsidies and tariffs, of which Henry George and other individualists complained.

It turns out that most business people in that period were like most in any period. If you can gain some shelter from competition through the State, why not? Rent-seekers exist at

all times, and rulers happily oblige them. (Jonathan R. T. Hughes's *The Governmental Habit Redux* is instructive. See also this perceptive 1984 *Freeman* article by Edmund Opitz, "The Robber Barons and the Real Gilded Age.")

Undeniably, material conditions improved for most Americans throughout this time. A degree of economic freedom goes a long way, and entrepreneurship found ways around the powers that be. But in a fully competitive economy, living standards would have risen – but without the distortions of [monopoly](#) (as identified by Benjamin Tucker), protection, and subsidies (most egregiously and consequentially in [transportation](#)) – and with more opportunity, later on, to make a living independent of any corporate hierarchy. (Yet who would not accept a slower acceleration in living standards as the price for a greater degree of freedom and independence?)

What does this tell us about freedom? It tells us that the good old days still lie ahead.

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