

Multiple Views of Liberty

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Liberty is one of the most commonly used words in the American political lexicon. But if you follow today's mainstream politics and current events, you might get the impression that liberty means only freedom from governmental interference and low taxes. While this is – and has always been – an important strand of American liberty, it is certainly not the only one. The modern, narrow sense of liberty misses the complex and multifaceted ways in which a diverse array of historical actors appropriated the language of liberty, often in conflicting and mutually exclusive ways. Liberty for the elite white planter was diametrically opposed to the slave's concept of liberty, which differed also from that of the industrial worker or white, middle-class women's suffragist. Students writing essays at the college level should do their best to clarify *specifically* what they mean by broad terms such as "liberty," "equality," and "freedom." For example, how is political equality (i.e. opening the right to vote for everyone) different than economic equality (i.e., guaranteeing a classless society)? From legal equality? Social equality? Racial equality? To understand the complexity of the American experience, we must realize that there is no singular definition of liberty or equality. The meaning of these terms varied considerably across space, time, and social status. As you read the excerpts below, keep these different concepts in mind.

Example 1: Middle-class women – Angelina Grimké:

"Our fathers waged a bloody conflict with England, because *they* were taxed without being represented. This is just what unmarried women of property now are....If then, *we* are taxed without being represented, and governed by laws *we* have no voice in making, then, surely, we ought to be permitted to remonstrate against every political measure that may tend to injure and oppress our sex."

Example 2: An industrial worker – John Mitchell¹

While the Declaration of Independence established civil and political liberty, it did not, as you all know, establish industrial liberty.... Liberty means more than the right to choose the field of one's employment. He is not a free man whose family must buy food today with the money that is earned tomorrow. He is not really free who is forced to work unduly long hours and for wages so low that he can not provide the necessaries of life for himself and his family; who must live in a crowded tenement and see his children go to work in the mills, the mines, and the factories before their bodies are developed and their minds trained. To have freedom a man must

¹ *American Federationist*, May 1910, pp. 405-10; Source: Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom*, Vol 2, Second edition (pp. 72-77).

be free from the harrowing fear of hunger and want; he must be in such a position that by the exercise of reasonable frugality he can provide his family with all the necessities and the reasonable comforts of life. He must be able to educate his children and to provide against sickness, accident, and old age....I have tried in this brief address to present at least one phase of the workingman's conception of industrial liberty, but my chief purpose has been to convey to you the spirit of patriotism which underlies the whole movement for better conditions of life and labor. The labor movement is primarily and fundamentally a moral movement. While attention is attracted to it by its strikes and its struggles yet the battles it fights in defense of the poor and the helpless are but phases of the great movement which is making for the physical, the mental, and the moral uplift of the people. Behind and above the demand for higher wages and shorter hours stands the greater movement for better men, for happier women, and for joyous children; for homes, for books, for pictures and music, for the things that make for culture and refinement. The labor movement stands for the essential principles of religion and morality; for temperance; for decency and dignity.

Example 3: a Native American chief – Tecumseh, a Shawnee leader, 1811

“Every year our white intruders become more greedy, exacting, oppressive, and overbearing.... Wants and oppressions are our lot....Are we not being stripped day by day of the little that remains of our ancient liberty?...Unless every tribe unanimously combines to give a check to the ambition and avarice of the whites, they will soon conquer us apart and disunited, and we will be driven away from our native country and scattered as autumnal leaves before the wind.”

Example 4: A South Carolina Slave in 1739 – James Oglethorpe, governor of Georgia, writing about the Stono Rebellion

On the 9th day of September last being Sunday which is the day the Planters allow them to work for themselves, Some Angola Negroes assembled, to the number of Twenty; and one who was called Jemmy was their Captain, they surprized a Warehouse belonging to Mr. Hutchenson at a place called Stonehow [sic—]; they there killed Mr. Robert Bathurst, and Mr. Gibbs, plundered the House and took a pretty many small Arms and Powder, which were there for Sale. Next they plundered and burnt Mr. Godfrey's house, and killed him, his Daughter and Son. They then turned back and marched Southward along Pons Pons, which is the Road through

Georgia to Augustine, they passed Mr. Wallace's Tavern towards day break, and said they would not hurt him, for he was a good Man and kind to his Slaves, but they broke open and plundered Mr. Lemy's House, and killed him, his wife and Child. They marched on towards Mr. Rose's resolving to kill him; but he was saved by a Negroe, who having hid him went out and pacified the others. Several Negroes joyned them, they calling out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, and two Drums beating, pursuing all the white people they met with, and killing Man Woman and Child when they could come up to them. Collonel Bull Lieutenant Governour of South Carolina, who was then riding along the Road, discovered them, was pursued, and with much difficulty escaped & raised the Countrey. They burnt Colonel Hext's house and killed his Overseer and his Wife. They then burnt Mr. Sprye's house, then Mr. Sacheverell's, and then Mr. Nash's house, all lying upon the Pons Pons Road, and killed all the white People they found in them. Mr. Bullock got off, but they burnt his House, by this time many of them were drunk with the Rum they had take in the Houses. They increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were above Sixty, some say a hundred, on which they halted in a field, and set to dancing, Singing and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them, thinking they were now victorious over the whole Province, having marched ten miles & burnt all before them without Opposition, but the Militia being raised, the Planters with great briskness pursued them and when they came up, dismounting; charged them on foot. The Negroes were soon routed, though they behaved boldly several being killed on the Spot, many ran back to their Plantations thinking they had not been missed, but they were there taken and [sic] Shot, Such as were taken in the field also, were after being examined, shot on the Spot, And this is to be said to the honour of the Carolina Planters, that notwithstanding the Provocation they had received from so many

Example 4: Elite southern planter – James Henry Hammond, *Letter to an English Abolitionist* (1845)

I indorse without reserve, the much abused sentiment of Gov. McDuffie, that "slavery is the corner-stone of our republican edifice"; while I repudiate, as ridiculously absurd, that much lauded but no where accredited dogma, of Mr. Jefferson, that "all men are born equal." No Society has ever yet existed, and I have already incidentally quoted the highest authority to show that none ever will exist, without a natural variety of classes. The most marked of these must in a country like ours, be the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant. It will scarcely be

disputed that the very poor have less leisure to prepare themselves for the proper discharge of public duties than the rich; and that the ignorant are wholly unfit for them at all. In all countries save ours, these two classes, or the poor rather, who are presumed to be necessarily ignorant, are by law expressly excluded from all participation in the management of public affairs. In a Republican Government this cannot be done. Universal suffrage, though not essential in theory, seems to be in fact, a necessary appendage to a republican system. Where universal suffrage obtains, it is obvious that the Government is in the hands of a numerical majority: and it is hardly necessary to say, that in every part of the world more than half the people are ignorant and poor. Though no one can look upon poverty as a crime, and we do not generally here regard it as any objection to a man in his individual capacity, still it must be admitted that it is a wretched and insecure government which is administered by its most ignorant citizens, and those who have the least at stake under it. Though intelligence and wealth have great influence here as everywhere, in keeping in check reckless and unenlightened numbers, yet it is evident to close observers, if not to all, that these are rapidly usurping all power in the non-slaveholding States, and threaten a fearful crisis in Republican Institutions there at no remote period. In the slaveholding States, however, nearly one half of the whole population, and those the poorest and most ignorant, have no political influence whatever, because they are slaves. Of the other half, a large proportion are both educated and independent in their circumstances, while those who unfortunately are not so, being still elevated far above the mass, are higher toned and more deeply interested in preserving a stable and well ordered government, than the same class in any other country. Hence, Slavery is truly the "corner-stone" and foundation of every well designed and durable "Republican edifice."...

Other examples?

Chief Justice Roger Taney: the liberty of slave owners, protected by the Fifth Amendment, to take their property (slaves) wherever they pleased, regardless of congressional legislation.

How might a religious reformer, abolitionist, or temperance advocate think of spiritual liberty?

See primary source by John Hope in response to Booker T. Washington

Legal personhood and the rights of corporations to exercise free speech?