

America Is Still the Freest Country

Benedict Beckeld

November 10, 2022

Already, the title of this article is likely to make many readers smile condescendingly. They would like to remind its author that the United States is not even among the top ten on the world's freedom indices. But those freedom indices misunderstand something about American culture and freedom.

In the most recent round of indices of the world's freest countries, such as those of Freedom House and the Cato Institute, the United States has dropped into the teens. But, as so often, lists and rankings of this kind are compiled by those of my fellow academics who think that the world can be understood through numbers alone, whereas, in fact, if one truly wants to understand a culture or a society, one must be steeped in it; one must befriend and live among its people, almost to the point of becoming one of them.

The reason why North European countries such as Sweden and Germany score higher than the United States on press freedom, for example (as in the Reporters Without Borders index), is that—to put it only somewhat exaggeratedly—everybody in those countries basically thinks alike. From Norway to Italy, one does not even notice limitations on freedom, because so many people think the same way about so much. There is so little antagonism between the government on the one hand, and the press and private citizens on the other, that very little conflict arises. Press freedom in Sweden is often praised, but, again, this is because there is so little conflict between the press and the state. Culturally ignorant people interpret it as tolerance on part of the state, but the real reason is that everyone—the state and the press—have similar opinions about everything. What passes for polite conversation and acceptable opinion is much more limited in those countries than it is here in the United States, and so there is consequently much less room for conflict.

For example, most self-identified conservatives in Western Europe agree with progressives that one cannot claim that one's own culture is simply better than another culture, because they feel that such a claim would be xenophobic. This agreement, and countless other agreements, helps to create an illusion for some that European governments are more tolerant of the press and of private citizens than is the case in the United States. But if the Scandinavian or German press outlets, and their private citizens, were even only half as loud as people are in America, and represented even only half as many diverging opinions as are common to the United States, we would soon find that their governments are far more antagonistic than they otherwise seem. An indication of this is that in much of Europe, and in Canada, citizens are fined and sometimes even arrested for speech, which is, for now, still all but impossible in America.

The world saw a similar dynamic at play during Covid responses, revealed by comparing the federal systems of the United States and Germany. In Germany there appeared to be more harmony on Covid policy than in America, because the German state governors—the *Ministerpräsidenten*—all agreed with each other about cracking down on freedom, so there was much less antagonism between them and the central government. In the U.S., on the other hand, there continues to be a much broader range of thought and opinion. And so we find so much antagonism here in the United States between various entities because we do not agree with each other, and because the Overton window is much, much broader here than it is elsewhere. This antagonism makes us score lower on freedom indices, even though it is in fact a proof of the freedom of press and thought and of the intellectual diversity that still exists here in the United States.

In short, America today ranks poorly on freedom indices because it has more room for disagreement, and therefore for conflict. This conflict is measured as evidence of unfreedom, so that nations with less conflict—because they are less free to be diverse—are understood as freer. The principal reason, on a broad, historical level, that the accepted range of debate is narrower in Europe than in the United States is that European countries have already ceased to be great historical powers. The social pathology of oikophobia and self-effacement has already been victorious there, whereas here in the United States the struggle is still ongoing. The battle between progressives and conservatives in Europe might appear to be raging, for example, in the recent electoral victories of right-wing blocks in Sweden and Italy, but it has in fact already been fought and lost by the conservatives. For this is what happens when a society exits its great historical phase, unless it falls to violent fighting: it becomes placid, irrelevant, and petty, focusing on the very small.

During my most recent stay in Sweden, as the country was preparing for its parliamentary election, I had to smile at how minute the differences were between the campaign sloganeering of the left and right. This was centered around such innocuous claims as wanting to make Sweden better and stronger, while a few “conservative” and more daring parties argued that something must be done about the rise in gang violence, while still being queasy about saying what the main cause of such violence is. Perhaps Europeans will one day rouse themselves again and enter upon the world stage anew—a direct Russian attack or cultural humiliation from the continued influx of immigrants could possibly effectuate such a development. In that case we would again begin to see a far broader spectrum of perspectives represented among Europeans. But this is not yet where they are, and most European conservatives today would wince even at what in America is mere mainstream conservatism.

America is free, in part, because free speech is still the strongest here, and we have still preserved the broadest intellectual space for differing views. Cancel culture is very American, of course, but in Europe cancel culture is less “needed” by oikophobic radicals; the law is already on their side, and people are already much closer to each other ideologically. So, to those in America who are afraid to speak their minds, and especially to those of my fellow academics whose minds have not been entirely addled by modern education, I say, remember how lucky you are to live in America. Find a backbone, and speak up.