

# LAW AND LIBERTY

## Frederick Douglass and the Instinct for Liberty

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Last year, President Trump was roundly denounced when he praised Frederick Douglass at a Black History Month event, since his verb tense indicated he thought the great man still among the living. His ignorance has turned into prophecy. In this bicentennial year of his birth, Frederick Douglass is indeed “being recognized more and more” as “an example of somebody who has done an amazing job.” There have been birthday parties, jubilees, exhibits, concerts, celebrations, and conferences. One can “Meet Frederick Douglass” or attend “An Evening with Frederick Douglass.” There are unveilings of murals, sculptures, and wax figures. There is a Bicentennial Commission. And most lastingly, there are new editions of Douglass’s works, along with a slew of biographies and scholarly works either published or on the horizon. The most awaited is probably David W. Blight’s *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, due from Simon & Schuster in October.

As Blight’s subtitle indicates, freedom is central to any consideration of Douglass. Douglass himself titled the second version of his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Two prominent works examining Douglass as a political theorist, appearing within the last decade, followed Douglass’s lead in emphasizing the liberty angle. Peter C. Myers was first on the scene, with his outstanding *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (University Press of Kansas, 2008), followed by Nicholas Buccola’s noteworthy *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York University Press, 2012).

### The Meaning of Self-Making

A new entry, *Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man* by Timothy Sandefur (Cato Institute, 2018), also focuses on freedom, tracing how Douglass put his freedom to work in the service of self-improvement and societal progress. Sandefur’s subtitle refers to an extremely popular speech about the phenomenon of “Self-Made Men” that Douglass gave dozens of times during his postbellum career as a lecturer. By invoking the term “self-made,” Douglass was not embracing wild-eyed existentialism or anything like today’s transhumanist aspiration to unbounded self-creation. His speech starts with a discussion of the human essence, acknowledging our finite and limited nature, notwithstanding many “wondrous attributes and powers.” Douglass’s version of self-making is about the determined and responsible use of one’s time and talents in the acquisition of good character.

Just as he stops short of making man the measure of all things, Douglass does not elevate the individual to the detriment of the species. While Douglass was clearly an advocate of individualism (believing that rights inhered in the person), he was in no way denying or

neglecting the extent of human interconnectedness. Near the start of the speech, he admits that “Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. That term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist.” The passage continues: “I believe in individuality, but individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean. The highest order of genius is as dependent as is the lowest.”

Only after acknowledging that human beings are sub-ordinate within the cosmos and co-ordinate with one another does Douglass begin his celebrated tribute to self-made men. It is important to remind ourselves of these caveats, especially since today the notion of a self-made man seems to have become objectionable. Contemporary liberals react almost viscerally against it, as if the mere recognition of those who have succeeded against the odds is a form of blaming those who have not. The phrase is also anathema to feminists who believe it overlooks the women who really made the man great. A piece by David Blight *in the New York Times*, complaining of Sandefur’s “libertarian” appropriation of Douglass, takes this tack:

*[Douglass] forged a livelihood with his voice and pen, but fundamentally was not a self-made man as he painted himself in a famous speech, an image through which modern conservatives and libertarians have adopted him as a proponent of their brand of individualism.*

*On the surface Douglass does appear to be self-made—he was the escaped slave who willed his own freedom, stole the master’s language and wrote masterpieces of antislavery literature. But without many people, especially women (his grandmother, two wives, a daughter and countless abolitionist women who supported his career) as well as male mentors, both white and black, he would not have survived and become Douglass.*

The criticism, I think, misses Douglass’s meaning (and Sandefur’s as well). First, it should be noted that Douglass never mentions himself in “Self-Made Men,” although it is true that any listener, then or now, would be aware that the speaker met the definition set forth in the speech. Among the criteria are these:

*They [the self-made] are the men who owe little or nothing to birth, relationship, friendly surroundings; to wealth inherited or to early approved means of education; who are what they are, without the aid of any favoring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great results. In fact they are the men who are not brought up but who are obliged to come up, not only without the voluntary assistance or friendly co-operation of society, but often in open and derisive defiance of all the efforts of society and the tendency of circumstances to repress, retard and keep them down.*

The self-made are simply those who rise despite adversity. They turn obstacles into opportunities. Neither in the speech nor in his life did Douglass manifest any reluctance to acknowledge the important role played by those, few though they might be, who provide kindly assistance (like the slave mistress who began to teach a curious child the alphabet). Yet even with such assistance, the conditions of Douglass’s early life could never be called “favorable.” He was “under peculiar difficulties” stemming from the “peculiar institution.” As Blight notes, helpful women surrounded Douglass along the way (and the biographical details are fascinating). Nonetheless, at risk of outraging the sisterhood and its male affiliates, I think it is quite possible that Douglass elicited such devoted feminine support because he was already in some sense “Douglass.” Being who he was, he *commanded* support, not by barking orders, but rather by his undeniable personal magnetism—his manliness, if you like. It is certainly true that, even as a

youngster, Freddie Bailey manifested remarkable force of character. Those who struggled to keep him in slavery were quite aware of his native gifts.

Interestingly, Douglass does not insist that the self-made man be outstanding or attain the highest ranks of fame and fortune. His focus is on more mundane instances of self-making, rather in the mode of Ben Franklin, the original avatar of self-help, who though himself a man of genius downplayed its role in worldly success. Similarly, Douglass insists that “allowing only ordinary ability and opportunity, we may explain success mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!!.”

It’s important to note that “Self-Made Men” was a speech that Douglass usually delivered before black audiences. Far from being a thinly disguised presentation of self, it was a speech tailored to what he believed were the urgent needs of his audience. He is quite explicit about the inspirational effect of these lives of modest, hard-won achievement, whether of “professors or plowmen”:

*Every instance of such success is an example and a help to humanity. . . . It dignifies labor, honors application, lessens pain and depression, dispels gloom from the brow of the destitute and weariness from the heart of him about to faint, and enables man to take hold of the roughest and flintiest hardships incident to the battle of life, with a lighter heart, with higher hopes and a larger courage.*

This message is now considered “conservative” (or perhaps even an illusion based on a fraudulent “American Dream”). Douglass, however, saw it as eminently progressive. To him, this was the rhetoric of empowerment, which spurred personal growth and society-wide transformation because it accorded with an eternal truth: Freedom can and can only begin from within. Douglass never tired of reciting these lines from the poet of freedom, Lord Byron: “Hereditary bondsmen! Know ye not/Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?”

Douglass’s belief in the spiritual aspect of freedom does not mean that he overlooks the role of government in providing protection and scope for individual initiative. Thus, he notes that “America is said, and not without reason, to be preeminently the home and patron of self-made men,” although he also notes the centuries-long failure to allow this expansive political and social freedom to blacks. In calling for a new regime of “fair play,” he sets forth his view of rectificatory justice: “The nearest approach to justice to the negro for the past is to do him justice in the present. Throw open to him the doors of the schools, the factories, the workshops, and of all mechanical industries.”

Perhaps because of the profoundly dispiriting direction of the post-Reconstruction period, Douglass rather quickly pivots away from fresh hopes of government-enforced fairness. While such fairness must continue to be demanded (and Douglass was unrelenting in his activism), it would be a strategic error, in Douglass’s view, to lead his fellow blacks to believe that their advancement was dependent on political forces outside their control. He instead offers a testimonial to Necessity—“urgent, pinching, imperious”—as the “mainspring of exertion.” Nor is this necessity purely abstract; so convinced is he that good might be wrung out of evil that he draws this conclusion:

*From practical benefit we are often about as much indebted to our enemies, as to our friends; as much to the men who hiss, as to those who applaud; for it may be with men as some one has said about tea; that if you wish to get its strength, you must put it into hot water.*

This belief in the character-perfecting power of detraction is a regular element in Douglass's thought. On a personal level, it led him to extend gratitude to those who deliberately sought to hinder him. Perhaps the earliest instance of such startling magnanimity is found in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. When the master set himself against the slave boy's interest in the alphabet, Douglass's determination to acquire the forbidden (and liberating) instrument increased. Thus, "in learning to read," says Douglass, "I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both." Of course, this is not an endorsement of continued oppression. But it is a refusal to be hobbled by the malicious intentions of others. So long as racism remains (whether explicit or unconscious, whether personal or structural, whether pervasive or residual), the ability to take courage through resistance opens a crucial pathway to a more self-determining future. Although formulated with special reference to the situation of blacks in America, the lesson about the true nature of freedom applies to all.

### **A Classical Liberal**

With Douglass so much in the spotlight, there is a bit of a scramble going on to marshal his undeniable moral authority for various partisan purposes. Sandefur's book has become caught up in these ideological disputes, somewhat unfairly I think. Although the work is published by the Cato Institute, in fact, the author is careful with his labels. Sandefur seems aware that any attempt to begin from contemporary terminology risks skewing or narrowing the inquiry into Douglass's thought. Proceeding chronologically, Sandefur gives an admirably succinct, Plutarchian account of Douglass's life, explicating the principles and ideas important to Douglass as they come to sight. Far from imposing a present-minded template, Sandefur is two-thirds of the way into the book before he hazards this summary:

*In short, Douglass's political views are, with some exceptions, best described as 'classical liberal'—today often called 'libertarian.' That is why, like today's libertarians, he sometimes sounds conservative and sometimes liberal.*

Sandefur notes the applicability of other labels as well, especially "radical," "revolutionary," and "feminist." So far as appropriations go, this seems both broad-minded and modest.

Sandefur doesn't so much claim Douglass for "libertarianism," as demonstrate Douglass's belief in the dignity of the individual, the value of free labor, and the necessity for limited, non-despotic government—all of which seems accurate. The controversies are in the details, I suppose. Douglass believed in the free market, but he was no anarcho-capitalist in the extreme libertarian mode. He believed in progress (comprehensive progress—moral and political), but he was no *dirigiste* socialist in the extreme progressive mode. Instead of quarreling over how our categories apply or don't apply to him, it might be better to trace his own affiliations, from radical abolitionist to Republican stalwart. There were some key shifts in Douglass's views, the most significant being his rigorous re-consideration of the character of the U.S. Constitution. After close study of the competing schools of interpretation, Douglass in 1851 abandoned the anti-Constitution wing of abolitionism associated with William Lloyd Garrison in favor of the anti-slavery, pro-Constitution approach of the Liberty Party. This evolution in the direction of

greater political prudence continued after the war as well; while not predictive of where Douglass would stand today, it shouldn't be forgotten either. Just as notable is the deep consistency (in itself and over time) in Douglass's thoughts about human nature and the nature of government, including his views on when violent resistance is legitimate (see, for instance, his response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, "Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?").

Sandefur gets most of this right. Plus, his slim volume is highly readable. Condensation does have a downside: there are a couple of misperceptions created by the rapidity of the survey, although these involve figures other than Douglass. For instance, Abraham Lincoln's views on colonization and his actions in response to the Confederacy's horrendous mistreatment of captured black soldiers are not relayed quite accurately. Also irritating was the reference to Booker T. Washington's "notorious" Atlanta Exposition speech (in the otherwise excellent "Legacy" chapter). Calling that speech "notorious" is either a misuse of the word (like thinking that "infamous" and "famous" are synonyms) or an unfortunate signing on to W.E.B. DuBois's dismissive and unfair critique of Washington as too "accommodationist"—a view that became leftist dogma in the later Black Power era.

Given the subtitle of Sandefur's book, it would have been nice to find a more extended analysis of the namesake speech. *Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man* is not, however, a work of textual explication. It is a lively and compelling overview of Douglass's life and legacy—an overview that like every good secondary work should send us back to the primary source, the speeches and writings of Douglass himself, so that he can continue the "amazing job" he has been doing and be "recognized more and more."