What Americans are finally learning about freedom

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Americans are supposedly a freedom-loving people. This, we tell ourselves, is why we rose up against the British, and founded a new country "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Yet Americans are in fact an extraordinarily unfree people, oppressed and downtrodden on all sides, and have generally just sat and taken it. This is in part because our typical notion of freedom, based entirely around the ability of the individual to do what he or she wants free of government interference, is a preposterous fiction. Americans have been brainwashed into thinking that freedom from government is the highest ideal, when in fact government is the only way that any kind of freedom can be realized.

America's fraudulent notion of freedom emerges from philosophers like Isaiah Berlin who attempted to make a distinction between negative and positive liberty. Libertarians like the Cato Institute's Aaron Ross Powell have popularized and simplified this conception, and he explains it roughly as the difference between "freedom from" and "capacity to." Thus one has negative liberty (freedom from) if the government doesn't do things like suppress your speech, and one has positive liberty (capacity to) if one has the actual capability (like money) to do what one desires.

But this distinction collapses on close scrutiny. Consider the economy, which of necessity sets the conditions of daily life. People need food, water, clothing, and shelter to live their lives. For this they must have a job or some other source of income — obtained in an economic system that cannot help but be based on the foundation of government laws and rules imposed on the people. There *cannot be* any "freedom from" a state decision about how to set up the economy, and therefore how to distribute resources.

Ross argues against things like taxes because "in order to give some people the resources they need to get what they want, it must take those resources from others." In reality, ownership of resources is itself a state legal construct which could be changed at any time. Ownership is not a relationship between a person and an object, it is a relationship between people — if I own something, it means I have the legal right to call the police or sue if someone tries to take it without my permission. In other words, access to the state's violent authority is *what it means* to own something — so if the tax rate on Warren Buffet's capital gains income goes up, that means the taxed portion *no longer belongs to him*.

More broadly, whether any dollar of income goes to one person or another depends almost entirely on how the state has constructed and shaped the economy, through its laws on property, corporations, labor, taxes, welfare, finance, and so forth. Today, the vast majority of Americans

get their daily bread through a production system which is rigged against them in a hundred obvious ways. Wages have been stagnant for decades thanks to anti-union laws, declining taxes on the rich (indeed, the ultra-wealthy now pay a lower rate of tax than the poor), slanted trade deals, and other mechanisms by which the rich funnel money to the top. We pay a great deal of tax but receive little for it in the way of social services. Welfare benefits are meager, with the explicit intention of starving people into accepting low wages and making profits for the rich.

America's extreme inequality is, in other words, *a priori* evidence of a vast and implacable tyranny — a nation of the one percent, by the one percent, for the one percent.

Critics of negative liberty sometimes say a positive version is better. And most people would agree that it would be good to set up a society in which everyone has plenty of time and money to do whatever they feel like doing. But to actually achieve this, Americans must squarely face the fact that it can be done solely through *collective* decisions about which kind of society is just, imposed by force of law.

Nevertheless, an especially blinkered, individualist sense of negative liberty has won out in the popular American consciousness. For Americans, freedom basically means the ability to go about one's business free of government "meddling." We see this in its most extreme form in anti-mask protests, whereby conservatives portray themselves as the victims of government tyranny because of regulations implemented to control the pandemic.

This makes no sense even on its own terms, for even advocates of negative liberty admit that one cannot be free to do harm to another, and the main function of a mask is to prevent infecting others. But this idea can still be seen in the way that Americans tend to react to a turn of bad luck: by blaming themselves. According to our notion of freedom, you are free to do what you want, but you are not entitled to help doing it. Therefore, if you don't have a job or income, it must be *your fault*. Even when it is undeniable that misfortune is the result of a general calamity (like today) Americans still struggle to muster the appropriate response of a furious demand for state relief.

It is not just the economy where the inherently collective nature of freedom is manifest. Our freedom of travel has been radically constrained for the indefinite future because President Trump has done almost nothing to contain the coronavirus pandemic. Other countries recognized that defeating the virus required a big collective sacrifice and state action — by putting their lives on hold, and accepting drastic limitations on their activities, Germans, New Zealanders, and Italians helped contain the outbreaks in their countries, and thus gave their governments time to mobilize frantically and build systems to keep the virus contained, which they did. All those peoples are now getting their previous lives back, because that was the only way it could be done.

Now, most Americans also did the right thing in the pinch. But many did not. Worse, the Republican Party has been drinking the "government equals tyranny" turpentine for so long it is now completely unable to think or act, and the Democrats still reflexively hesitate to deploy state power. As a result, most of that sacrifice was squandered, over 140,000 people and counting are dead, and America is now a plague land, its disease-ridden citizens shunned around the world.

So the fraudulent American sense of freedom in practice shows a twofold character: On the one hand, there is a staggering sense of entitlement on the far right, which screams itself hoarse over

whatever government regulation it happens to disagree with — rarely howling about actual violations of civil liberties, like police lawlessness or the NSA dragnet surveillance program, but instead typically things that would help the poor or the sick. On the other hand, there is an incredible docility among most of the rest of the population, which expects almost nothing from government, and generally gets exactly that. As Alex Pareene writes at *The New Republic*, liberal New Yorkers are largely happy and contented with the performance of Governor Andrew Cuomo, who so horrendously botched the response to the coronavirus outbreak that 32,000 of his constituents are dead. He faces no groundswell of infuriated demands for accountability, and thus expresses no shame about his monumental failure.

In most rich democracies, in fact, any of about a dozen ways the American state ignores or injures its people would cause widespread furious outrage. When the centrist government of Finland attempted to cut the wages of a few hundred postal workers last year, sympathy strikes toppled the prime minister. When French President Emmanel Macron attempted to cut public pensions, he faced a transport strike and multiple waves of furious mass protest; the reforms have been shelved until next year at the earliest.

All that said, our current upside-down idea of freedom is not the only one in American history. Probably the most remarkable example is the roughly 200,000 Black Americans, many of them former slaves, who took up arms to defeat the Confederate slave empire. These men fought not only to strike off the chains of their own race, but also to make the United States a place that lived up to its founding principles for all its citizens. They fought and died for a country that a few years previously had been perfectly willing to see them left in bondage indefinitely — and without their strength, the traitors may not have been beaten. To get their freedom, they had to help take it by force.

We see that older American spirit of freedom today in the Black Lives Matter protests, which have seen tens of millions of Americans of all races and backgrounds participating. It is perhaps a glimmering of a new militant realization that only through collective action — coordinated above all through state power — can we actually experience anything like the freedom America supposedly stands for. With some luck, American politicians will once again come to fear their constituents, as they should.

A free people does not take injustice lying down.