

NATIONAL REVIEW

Real Conservatives and Frederick Douglass

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Professor David Blight of Yale complains that modern conservatives and libertarians have coopted Frederick Douglass. Professor Blight, the author of a new book on Douglass, surely knows a great deal about what Douglass thought and believed. I wonder if he knows what modern conservatives and libertarians believe.

Consider the evidence that Professor Blight marshals in his argument: “Douglass,” he writes, “believed that freedom was safe only within the state and under law.” Well. I can think of a very few modern thinkers who might broadly be described as “libertarian” — anarchists such as David Friedman or the late Murray Rothbard — who might argue otherwise, but most libertarians and libertarian-leaning conservatives are not anarchists, even if some such as Albert Jay Nock might emphasize the evil in their account of the state as a necessary evil. The belief that freedom is “safe only within the state and under law” could as easily be attributed to F. A. Hayek as to Ronald Reagan, Barry Goldwater, Robert Taft, or Ramesh Ponnuru — to say nothing of John Adams or such figures as far removed from the American Right as Manmohan Singh, Pope Francis, or Alain Berset.

It is unclear whether Professor Blight is employing the straw-man strategy with malice aforethought or whether he is simply truly and deeply ignorant about what conservatives believe. Blight on Douglass: “He strongly believed in self-reliance but demanded an interventionist government to free slaves, defeat the Confederacy and protect black citizens from terror and discrimination. He was a radical newspaper editor and writer, and also a pragmatist, a perspective he learned in the political crises over slavery in the 1850s.” William F. Buckley Jr. was a radical editor and writer, and also a pragmatist, a perspective he learned in the political crises of the 1950s, who strongly believed in self-reliance but demanded an interventionist government (the great malefactor of his time was the Communist bloc, not the Confederacy), and who, from at least the early 1960s onward, came to believe in the value of using that interventionist government to protect black citizens from terror and discrimination. Substitute a political career for Buckley’s journalistic one and much the same might be said of George W. Bush.

The proximate cause of Professor Blight’s displeasure is *Self-Made Man*, a recent book written by Timothy Sandefur and published by the Cato Institute. “Self-Made Men” was the title of

Douglass's most famous lecture. In it, as Cato puts it, "Douglass praised those who rise through their own effort and devotion rather than the circumstances of their privilege. For him, independence, pride, and personal and economic freedom were the natural consequences of the equality that lay at the heart of the American dream — a dream that all people, regardless of race, gender, or class, deserved a chance to pursue." But Professor Blight is having none of it:

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. In private, he easily admitted his reliance on friends and associates, and he believed in a theory of history rooted in the Old Testament, in the Exodus story, in collective liberation by God and by events.

Sandefur, like many libertarian-minded polemicists, juxtaposes the ideas of individualism and collectivism, but it is not at all clear that he means by those what Professor Blight wants him to mean — needs him to mean, for rhetorical purposes. Individualism is a way of understanding the political world: In the Anglo-American (Oh, dear!) tradition, rights adhere to the individual, as does property, and it is the individual who is owed due process, who enjoys the privileges and immunities of citizenship, etc. This is not necessarily an atomistic philosophy. We are members of families and communities, we have friends, we receive aid and give it, rely on the protection of the law rather than our own individual power, etc. None of that is what is meant by "collectivism," and none of that has any real moral or philosophical bearing on individualism properly understood. Douglass rejected on principle the idea of a society in which one's condition — of privilege or subjugation — was an accident of one's birth in a particular class of people. Modern conservatives and libertarians categorically reject that as well, as indeed do most of those on the left who still deserve the name "liberal," even if a few sophomores bewitched by the rhetoric of intersectionality have elevated ad hominem (ex homine, really) to a comprehensive political creed.

For a certain kind of adolescent Randian (and not all adolescents are young), the meretricious idea of being homo novus, free from any obligation, influence, or history of having received an act of generosity or kindness, is very attractive. But that isn't conservatism or libertarianism — it is half-digested Nietzsche. It is capital-R Romanticism, something about which my colleague Jonah Goldberg has a great deal to say. If by conservatism-libertarianism in the American context we mean the large and complex Venn diagram mapping out the ideas of (among many others) William F. Buckley and the writers associated with National Review over the years, their counterparts at more libertarian outlets such as Reason, Ronald Reagan and likeminded Republican political figures, Hayek and the other Austrians, Taft and the rest of the Old Right, George Will, T. S. Eliot, Russell Kirk, Milton Friedman, the ladies and gentlemen of the American Enterprise Institute, FEE, etc., then it is very difficult to make the case that Frederick Douglass is outside that tradition because he had friends and mentors and believed in the rule of law. It probably is worth noting the lamentable fact that at the moment the arc of conservatism

has been bent away from individualism and toward collectivism with the rise of Donald Trump's nationalism-populism.

Which is not to say that Frederick Douglass would find himself at home in today's Republican party. A great many conservatives, libertarians, classical liberals, and other like-minded partisans of individual liberties and individual rights — myself included — recoil in disgust from that debased and debasing carcass of a political organization. Nor is it to say that one might draw a straight line from Douglass to 21st-century classical liberals — the capitalism of our time is not very much like the capitalism of the 19th century — though there is much that connects them with Douglass.

What we find in Douglass is not an identity of beliefs but a coincidence of them, one that speaks well of the modern libertarian emphasis on economic prosperity, self-improvement, free enterprise, property rights, and the equality of — yes — individuals before the law and the state. And we might even consider that in the light of the fact that the most powerful proponents of segregation and Jim Crow were New Dealers and progressives on the Wilsonian model.

The conflict at the heart of the modern conservative movement is not between the individual and the state but between liberty and totalitarianism — the American Right, especially, has its intellectual foundations in the war against European Fascism and the long confrontation with international Communism. (Perhaps those touchstones do not serve us as well as they once did.) Its enemies are not to be found so much in the work of Ayn Rand as in that of Franz Kafka and George Orwell. The Right's great fear is an almighty state whose dominion over individuals is as total as Thomas Auld's was over Frederick Douglass.

Conservative individualism is not an atomistic philosophy. Professor Blight ends with a sniff about Republicans boasting about Douglass's membership in their party during an event honoring him. "Douglass's descendants who were there, as well as scholars like me with, shall we say, different training, smiled and endured." Professor Blight's training seems to me incomplete. He has only demonstrated that Frederick Douglass's ideas are a world away from those of a strange little cartoon that has very little to do with American conservatism.