The New York Times

You Can’t Put Frederick Douglass in Chains

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March 12, 2018

Over the past several weeks, a war of words over the ideological legacy of Frederick Douglass has erupted. This is nothing new. Like the founders and Abraham Lincoln, Douglass has long been at the center of an ideological tug of war; all want this iconic figure to be on their side in contemporary political debates.

But this war, which tends to flare up every Black History Month, seems to have gotten especially hot lately, thanks in part to the fact that 2018 is the bicentennial of Douglass’s birth. A great deal of this debate has been prompted by a new book by Timothy Sandefur of the Goldwater Institute, “Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man,” which was published by the libertarian Cato Institute. According to Sandefur, Douglass is best understood as a “classical liberal” or “libertarian” thinker who stood for “individualism, private property, free enterprise, and constitutionalism.”

In response to the Sandefur book, the Yale historian David Blight wrote an Op-Ed essay in The New York Times objecting to the Sandefur thesis. According to Blight, the “Douglass as libertarian” interpretation is woefully simplistic. Blight concedes that Douglass held many individualist views, but argues that the Sandefur interpretation fails to acknowledge the many ways in which he went beyond individualism.

So where does this leave us? What are we to make of this ideological divide over how best to understand Douglass’s legacy?

Sandefur himself provides us with a clue as to where we might find the answer. Among the central exhibits that Sandefur presents before the court of public opinion in his case to prove Douglass’s “libertarianism” is the claim that his devotion to private property was so strong that he “never joined in efforts by some leaders, including Charles Sumner, to confiscate plantation land and divide it among the former slaves.” What Sandefur does not point out — and it’s a crucial omission — is that Douglass actually came to believe that this view was mistaken.

This is no trifling instance of a historian’s quarrel. Indeed, it strikes at what I take to be the enduring questions at the core of the debates over Douglass’s ideological legacy: What did he mean by freedom and how did he believe freedom could be best secured?

On Aug. 1, 1880, Douglass delivered an Emancipation Day speech in Elmira, N.Y. Douglass, like many abolitionists, had long observed Emancipation Day to commemorate the end of

slavery in the British West Indies. As the 62-year-old Douglass rose to speak on that day, though, he was thinking about a history less distant. More specifically, he concerned himself with the question of what the Reconstruction era had to teach us about the meaning of freedom.

Reconstruction failed, Douglass explained, because the Republic "gave freedmen the machinery of liberty, but denied them the steam to put it in motion." The Republic, he said, "called them citizens" but left them "subjects," and it "called them free and almost left them slaves."

Douglass's claim here is beyond contention: Although emancipation from slavery was an important step toward liberation, it did not complete the journey. Members of the emancipated class were no longer slaves, but they were not quite free either.

The reasons Douglass offered in support of this conclusion reveal that unlike most libertarian thinkers, he did not accept the idea that human beings are free insofar as they are able to act without unjust interference of others. This is what philosophers like to call "freedom as noninterference," and it is at the foundation of most libertarian theories of justice. While Douglass certainly believed that it was important to protect individuals from unjust interference, he did not believe this was sufficient to make human beings free.

In the context of the post-Civil War United States, Douglass explained, negative liberty was not enough because of the significant differences in power between former slaves and their former masters. The "old master class" had not lost "the power of life and death" over the human beings it used to claim as property, he said, because it "retained the power to starve them to death." "You shall serve me," the former master was still able to say to the former slave, "or starve." This was slavery by another name.

It should be clear by now that the alternative theory of liberty defended by Douglass, which philosophers often call "freedom as non-domination," poses serious problems for those wishing to defend the idea that he was a libertarian. What makes libertarians uncomfortable about "freedom as non-domination" is that it opens the door to the idea that the state may have an important role to play in counteracting the power of economic elites, who left unchecked might use their power to dominate others.

But let's step down out of the clouds of theory to see the practical implications of Douglass's view. Recall that in his libertarian reading, Sandefur argues that Douglass "never joined in efforts by some leaders, including Charles Sumner, to confiscate plantation land and divide it among the former slaves." Douglass "was too well versed in the history and theory of freedom," Sandefur explains, "not to know that destabilizing property rights in such a way would in the long run harm the freedmen more."

Sandefur is right that in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Douglass did not join with Sumner and the other Radical Republicans in their call for confiscation and redistribution. Perhaps Sandefur is also right that Douglass's "theory of freedom" led him to reject this path in those years. What Sandefur does not tell us, though, is that Douglass changed his mind.

In the 1880 Emancipation Day speech, Douglass said the threat to liberty presented by economic inequality was "seen and felt by Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, and leading stalwart

Republicans, and had their counsels prevailed, the terrible evils from which we now suffer would have been averted." It is hard to imagine Douglass stating this more clearly. By 1880, he was looking back and saying, they were right, I was wrong. His "theory of freedom" had evolved.

It is worth noting that Douglass himself considered his 1880 Emancipation Day speech to be among his most important. We know this because when it came time to choose two speeches to include as appendices for his 1881 autobiography, "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass," he chose it and his famous "Freedmen's Memorial Speech" about Abraham Lincoln. This speech mattered a lot to Douglass and it ought to matter to those of us who want to tell the truth about his legacy.

Since I started working on Douglass more than a decade ago, I have more or less occupied a middle ground in the debates over his ideological legacy. Whenever I see an interpretation that attempts to fit his ideas neatly into an ideological box, I am suspicious. Douglass was a deep and complex thinker and he was willing to adapt his principles to new facts. He was indeed committed to many ideas we now call "libertarian," but he also held many views that we now call "progressive" or even "radical." He was, in sum, a statesman, not an ideologue.

As we attempt to make sense of how Douglass's ideas — and those of other prominent historical figures — might apply to our own political lives, we ought to do so with humility and care. This requires that we recognize that we cannot know how time would have altered their views and it imposes on us the obligation to resist the temptation to read them selectively to serve our own agendas. Douglass can indeed speak to us across the expanse of time, but we ought to be willing to hear all that he has to say.