



## Frederick Douglass Was His Own Man

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Whom does Frederick Douglass belong to? The question suggests its own answer: Douglass belonged to himself, having escaped from slavery at the age of 20 and vindicating his right to freedom for the remainder of his long life. He was not someone else's man, but his own: he was a free individual.

In today's culture wars, unfortunately, that's not quite enough. Pervasive identity politics and fashionable "social justice" concepts, including the insidious notion of "appropriation," have transformed American history and culture into a battle zone defined by political lines. And even worse, those lines are drawn in the most naïve and simplistic manner — in terms of partisanship where nobody but Republicans and Democrats are even acknowledged to exist.

A good example of this cartoonish partisanship appeared in the New York Times recently, when Yale professor David Blight condemned my new biography of Frederick Douglass for seeking to "co-opt" Douglass and for "cherry-pick[ing] his words to advance [my] narrow vision of libertarianism." This is wrong, Blight insists, because Douglass was not really the individualist that he himself claimed to be. "Without many people," writes Blight, "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."

That's certainly true, and Douglass often said so. In his famous celebration of "Self-Made Men" — his most popular lecture, and one he delivered scores of times in the last half of his life — Douglass began by noting that "Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men.... It must in truth be said, though it may not accord well with self-conscious individuality and self-conceit, that no possible native force of character, and no depth of wealth and originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellowmen."

Yet Douglass also saw that this did not vitiate the honor of those distinctive individuals who overcome obstacles and make something special of themselves without having the advantages of birth and wealth. These were the “self-made men” that Douglass defined as people “who are not brought up but who are obliged to come up...[who] are in a peculiar sense, indebted to themselves for themselves.... If they have ascended high, they have built their own ladder.”

A fierce individualist, Douglass emphasized that nothing could give people freedom—they had to claim it for themselves, and they had to do it through “WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!! Not transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work into which the whole heart is put.” Aid societies, charities, benevolent associations, all were critically important, of course — but in the end, it was the individual person himself (or herself; Douglass was a lifelong feminist) who made, demanded, and created his own freedom. As for government, it existed to defend individual rights — to protect people against crime and oppression. But it did not exist, as Blight would have it, “to free people” through some sort of permanent welfare state apparatus. To make any group of Americans into recipients of government largesse—let alone to make them wards of the state—was a recipe for disaster in Douglass’s mind, because what can be given can be just as easily taken away.

That’s why, when Douglass worked to recruit freedmen and black northerners into the Union Army during the Civil War, he virtually never argued that they were obliged to serve the state, or that they owed it as a sacrifice to the government. On the contrary, he emphasized time and again that black Americans should enlist for their own sake: “Decried and derided as you have been and still are,” he told them, “you need an act of this kind by which to recover your own self-respect.” To be a free person required self-reliance and pride, and that meant the very opposite of the government “freeing people.” It meant people freeing themselves.

“In regard to the colored people, there is always more that is benevolent, I perceive, than just, manifested towards us,” Douglass told an audience shortly before the war’s end:

What I ask for the negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice. The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us.... I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm-eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature’s plan, and if they will not stay there, let them fall. And if the negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs...! If the negro cannot live by the line of eternal justice ... the fault will not be yours, it will be his who made the negro.... Let him live or die by that. If you will only untie his hands, and give him a chance, I think he will live.

Of course, Douglass was not so foolish to think that simply unlocking the slaves’ chains would be enough. “It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing,” he said. Even if the American people were to “put a schoolhouse in every valley in the south and a church on every hillside,” they “would not have given fair play.” Douglass, therefore, supported

the work of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Freedmen's Bank (of which he briefly served as President) in efforts to help former slaves get a start in life.

But reparations for the slaves themselves and federal efforts to remedy the injustices that had been imposed by southern state governments in the ages before Emancipation hardly translates into a belief in long-term government "help" or the modern regulatory welfare state. Fundamentally an individualist, Douglass's most persistent message that each person must assert, earn, and claim his or her position in life. "There can be no independence without a large share of self-dependence, and this virtue cannot be bestowed," he declared. "It must be developed from within."

This was also why Douglass rejected socialism — then a fashionable new idea circulating in Europe and America. Douglass's first biographer, Frederic May Holland, explained in the 1890s that socialism was doomed because there were only two reasons people would ever work—to earn more, or to escape punishment—and because socialism eliminated the first possibility, the only consequence one could expect from socialism on a national scale would be a system of punishment that "would necessarily resemble slavery, in all its cruelties as well as its privations." (Douglass applauded Holland's biography, saying it did him "scrupulous justice.")

In summarizing these ideas, I wrote in my book that Douglass "was not likely to be attracted to any doctrine that subordinated individual rights — whether free speech or property rights — to the interests of the collective." Blight misrepresented these words in his article, accusing me of saying that Douglass was "never concerned with 'the interests of the collective.'" But as Douglass's life vividly demonstrates, one can certainly be concerned with the interests of one's fellow citizens without believing it proper to sacrifice one's rights to their needs or desires. As Ari Armstrong writes, the fact that "individuals can have interests in common" does not mean, as Blight implies, that "'collective' interests ... somehow transcend the interests of individuals." Douglass spent more than 50 years writing, speaking, and agitating for the rights of all Americans, of all races and sexes—including the right to vote, to own property, to publish their opinions, to own firearms for self-defense, and to earn a living free from government restrictions. Yet the notion that the individual's life should be *subordinated* to the needs, wishes, or commands of others, was anathema to him.

Douglass, therefore, does not fit within today's blinkered two-party worldview. He stood on a level of principle that is far removed from either major party today—both of which support massive government programs to "help" some people with money taken from others, to seize the belongings of some groups to give to different groups, to restrict one form of speech or another, and to regulate and restrict personal and economic freedom far beyond what was imaginable in Douglass's own lifetime. Douglass was a classical liberal — today called a libertarian — who believed that government's proper role was to free people to pursue happiness on their own terms. The fact that these principles are incomprehensible to Yale professors today says more about us than about them.

A bold defender of personal independence, Frederick Douglass doesn't "belong" to any party or either side of today's tedious clashes of identity politics. He was his own man. And the lesson he teaches is that the same is also true of each of us.

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