

Long Walks to Freedom or Royal Roads to Servitude? How History Can Broaden Our Culture and Deepen Our Humanity

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Abstract—‘Freedom’ is one of the most used but least understood words in our modern moral and political vocabulary. In recent American political usage, traditionalist libertarians have co-opted the word to protect individual freedoms while protesting communal concerns with equality. This paper argues that we can recover a strong sense of authenticity, as found in Charles Taylor’s work, that empowers individual creativity without their being absorbed into narrowly construed consumer choice options or shallow individualism. Amartya Sen discerns a moral depth in the historical succession of thinkers from Adam Smith through the present that argues for social justice as completing a flourishing sense of freedom.

Index Terms—F. A. Hayek, Nelson Mandela, Amartya Sen, Adam Smith, Charles Taylor.

I. INTRODUCTION: INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM, DISSENT, SHARED HUMANITY

Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were chains on me... I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

[Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom][1]

At the very end of his inspiring book, Mandela wisely reminds us of the hard lessons he learned on his ‘long walk to freedom’. First, though we early discover a natural instinct for freedom, we also soon learn it is indivisible or reciprocal – chains on any are chains on all of us. Second, this drive for freedom, as we mature, becomes more impartial: we realize our individual hunger for freedom extends not only to our own people, but to all people, no matter their origins, color, gender, or creed. Nor is one’s freedom expansive if it comes at the price of taking away that of others, especially the marginalized. Only now are some Americans re-learning this in places like Ferguson, Orlando, Charleston, and Chicago. Third, even with the import of freedom as non-oppression, Mandela counsels us that this is merely the freedom to be free. We will not truly be free until we learn to live in ways that respect and enhance the freedom of others. Protests against injustices embody the freedom to dissent; we have yet to climb that final ascent, the one that promotes the liberation of others around the world, even our oppressors. Mandela became aware, as must we, that the oppressor must be

liberated every bit as much as the oppressed. Otherwise, we rob others, oppressors and oppressed, as well as ourselves, of our humanity. Dylan Roof has a longer path to tread towards real freedom than he imagines.

American freedom, Eric Foner reminisces, was born in revolution. Older traditions of freedom hence were re-molded in the American workshop of liberty. As a result, the American Revolution passed on to its future citizens an ‘enduring yet contradictory legacy’ – the new nation envisioned itself, and immigrant others escaped to America, as an ‘asylum for freedom in a world overrun by oppression’ [2]. Outsiders often see the asylum but overlook its oppressive ancestry. This origin also, rather sadly, explains much of the recent highly-polarized, especially venial character to our public discourse, political rhetoric, and glorification of violence. It is no surprise then that Americans still think of their own liberties as forms of resistance to tyranny, whether from fellow citizens, their own government, ‘foreign aggressors’, or lately, from immigrants. I say it is ‘no surprise’ given our national history; yet American education is largely forgetful of origins – we are immigrants from distant shores, and all benefit from longer cultural history lines than the American present. So, we might do better, by recalling Mandela’s reminder about how insularity oft results in parochialism, reinforcing hatred and prejudice, when one might focus on more communal freedom-enhancing activities as ways to reinforce our common humanity. Though American freedom was born in revolution against oppression, we need not repeat oppressive patterns by resorting to polarizing, paternalistic public discourse.

II. INDIVIDUALIST FREEDOM OR AUTHENTICITY?

Still, it is a mistake to dismiss as mere egoism or hedonism, as critics do, freedom as dissent, the cultural shift that the 1960s embraced. Rather, it was an individuating revolution, or an Age of Authenticity, as Charles Taylor regards it in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age* [3]. Many communitarian thinkers treat the 1960s protest era as a sign of cultural decline, whereby traditional ethical values of community service, self-discipline, and a sense of communal justice have been abandoned in the modern age [4]. Taylor’s insight is that in this age of ‘expressive individualism’, we often lose sight, as communitarian critics have done, of the search for authentic (self-determining, but responsible) ways of living and expression found in the modern age [5]. True, the pursuit of happiness has become more individualized; but no longer do such self-reflective individuals fear challenging corporate

Manuscript received March 24, 2017; revised May 12, 2017.

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loyalties or feel compelled always to ‘play for the team’, with no questions asked. We have become too morally informed to let go improprieties, biases, and injustices.

Nonetheless, Taylor surmises, though our age of authenticity pushes us to recognize self-expression as a momentous peak on the path towards a true community of equals, it loses some of its force when individuating concerns get immersed in a ‘higher selfishness’ that simply reduces individuality to ‘choice’. Choice gets presented, especially in the omnipresent world of marketing and advertising, as invoking a grand array, in fact, an infinite display, of options, all of which are pleasures one would be foolish or self-disabling not to pursue. Just consider the MasterCard campaign: we are to pursue a ‘life without limits’. So, now we detect an argument for this higher selfishness: choice is a good thing; so the more choice, the better chances for our attaining individual happiness. Any limits imposed on individual choice are arbitrary restrictions on our sacred freedoms. Free individuals should be suspicious of all authorities, since no one has a right to tell others what to think, ways to behave, or how to live. Hence there is no real responsibility for personal mistakes, bureaucratic miscalculations, or corporate sins, since individuals and institutions are merely created by the social contexts in which they arose [6]. By this logic, is it any surprise that Dylann Roof acted against those African-Americans in South Carolina whom he regarded as oppressors, or that he has as much support as he does by other disgruntled reactionaries in the ‘land of the free and home of the brave’?

From this argument, it seems easy to conclude that individual freedom becomes nothing but rage against more recent arrivals, or freedom is captured by unrestricted consumer choice; but these features move us toward perpetuating a culture of narcissism [7]. But, this is a reductionist conclusion, and it fails to capture the profounder sense of authenticity, underlying choice, that Taylor has captured in much of his work. Yet further, it fails to appreciate the deeper sense of freedom and responsibility that Mandela articulated. The long walk to freedom, with its rises and falls, cannot be completed by a shortcut through consumer choice, especially by sidestepping real-life consequences. Real freedom requires recognition of self-imposed limits, warranted authority, and inter-personal responsibility. So how did we arrive at this obsession with individual choice that overlooks or neglects the needs of others, especially those from diverse backgrounds and multicultural roots? How can we attain authenticity without devolving into individualism and narcissism? Can we value personal choice as an outcome of authenticity, but also honor self-discipline, public service, and social justice & equality? If so, can we recognize a path for restoring humane modes of considering & treating each other?

III. DOES LIBERTARIANISM OFFER FREEDOM OF CHOICE, OR RESTRICTIVE CHOICES?

In recent American political thought and life, libertarianism has exerted a strong hold on the American mind because it stresses four features: radical individual freedom, almost

anarchy – ‘no limits’ MasterCard proclaims; strong defense of human rights, especially the freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights; requires only rational self-interest in making decisions; and espouses a gospel of anti-federalism, a minimal ‘night watchman’ view of state goods and services. These four aspects appeal to many Americans, since they require no elitist education to understand – hence, it is no surprise that the novels of Ayn Rand retain popularity among the young. However, following Taylor’s earlier points about the Age of Authenticity, though such a political philosophy fits certain predispositions of the public, we should remain wary of its appeal, since the search for authenticity can, in a dumbed-down apathetic political culture, get reduced to that ‘higher selfishness’ promoted by leaders in the American marketplace, such as Donald Trump, who like to espouse a nostalgic ‘return to American greatness’. This approach reduces the whole Bill of Rights to merely one, that of property; but then, those with the most property jostle for and retain the most power; and the rest of us, the majority, find ourselves governed by plutocrats, not democrats.

Curiously, the American Founders disagreed with this libertarian program. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, amongst others, though themselves from privileged backgrounds, argued vociferously against such domineering by the wealth and power elites. Self-interest alone, they recognized, is too fiery and fragile a foundation for explaining complex human behaviors, and it will destroy a democratic republic’s respect and responsibility for a shared common good. They agreed that there is a natural aristocracy – a rule of the best, the **aristoi** – that emerges in a republic, but disagreed over how hopeful one might be about such prospects. Adams argued the political realist view, that noble birth and wealth together always prevail over virtue and talent in all ages; and hence he concluded that the people will acknowledge no other **aristoi** except the wealthy and well-born to rule them [8]. Jefferson, ever the ‘grieving optimist’, replied that reliance on noble birth, wealth, and beauty are signs of an artificial aristocracy, and that the best remedy for such corruptions is a democratic constitution, guaranteeing regular free elections, laws against privilege, and bills for diffusion of learning, so as to separate out the true **aristoi** from the artificial best and the brightest [9]. Perhaps only time will tell if Jefferson’s or Adams’s view will prevail in the current endeavors to domineer the political vision and higher education of America, since both are being disrupted and deformed by the wealth and power elites. Despite however the libertarian rhetoric, it has become clear that privatization alone will not solve modern bureaucratic complexities.

Of course, what is missing from this political view is a sense of historical context, a holistic reading of pivotal texts, and a heightened moral awareness, one that goes beyond unfettered self-interest. Libertarians claim Adam Smith as their founder, the procreator of rational self-interest as the primary motivator for human action. They never tire of citing his famed passage in *Wealth of Nations* about the butcher, brewer and baker needing no benevolence, but only their self-interest to provide us with what we need for our dinner [10].

IV. IS ADAM SMITH THE GURU OF PROFITS, OR A PROPHET OF SOCIAL JUSTICE?

However, as Amartya Sen notes, this libertarian tradition of interpreting Smith as the ‘guru of selfishness’, founders in their not reading much else in Smith’s book. It is true that Smith is addressing the interactions underlying exchanges, but by focusing only on that, we overlook other aspects of market relations – production and distribution – and the very motivations underlying exchange, all of which require *trust* and confidence between parties if there is to be any interaction at all [11].

When we probe a bit deeper into *Wealth of Nations*, we notice how shallow is this reading of Smith as guru of self-interest. At the very start, though he recognizes how in our exchanges with others, we often resort to self-love to interest them in our goods or services, that is not the most basic characteristic of human nature. He notes that the division of labor is not the outcome of human wisdom foreseeing all details of exchanges. Rather, there is a certain propensity in human nature to ‘truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another’ [12]. And without that propensity, each of us would have to procure all the necessities of life on our own. So it is this disposition which enables a diversity of human talents to be developed, and then the varied ‘dissimilar geniuses’, as well as the diverse products of their respectively developed talents are brought into a ‘common stock’, wherein each may obtain that of which one has need [13]. What all this shows is that it is self-interest that drives human exchanges. However, at the very end of Book I, Smith cautions about the excessive self-interest of some, whose interest is not the same as that of the public -- the employers and master manufacturers generally have ‘an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public’ [14]. Out of concern for this very likely event, Smith advocated abolition of positions of monopoly and privilege and passing statutes to regulate apprenticeships. So in his view, the state has a responsibility for social and institutional reform, not simply for maintaining any status quo that protects corporate and other landlords [15]. Somehow, libertarians never got that far in Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*.

In fact, when we recall that Smith was a moral philosopher, as was clear in his earlier book, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, we notice his grand concern for sketching out a theory of justice, one that sought to remove identifiable injustices in the world. In that work, Smith criticizes the ancient Greek hedonist Epicurus for reducing the virtues merely to one, that of prudence. Yet another irony is how modern economists and libertarians assume that Smith’s own stress is only on prudence, when he champions the social virtues of sympathy, generosity, and public service [16]. But that would require their reading Smith’s other main work, which he continued to update for its 6th edition in 1790, the year of his death [17]. What this showed is that Smith never abandoned advocacy of these social virtues. However, even in *Wealth of Nations*, Sen notes, we find present two distinct aims for political economy – one is the usual goal of providing ‘plentiful revenue’ for the people, but the ignored second task was supplying the commonwealth also with a revenue ‘sufficient for the public

services’ [18]. For the latter, Smith defends public services such as free education, poverty relief, and regulations on behalf of working people so that they are not unjustly manipulated by their masters, and argued for more freedom for the indigents than the Poor Laws permitted [19]. Accordingly, Smith argues for social justice values that go far beyond any profit motive, since he recognized that a profit-based market economy alone would not guarantee a flourishing life for all in a well-ordered society.

V. FERGUSON OR HAYEK: ARE WE ON THE ROAD TO SERFDOM?

Well, if Smith had a lively sense of social justice, how then did American culture arrive at this narrow conception of the good life espoused by free-market fundamentalists? F. A. Hayek wrote *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944, wherein he aimed to overturn a free-market apathy generated in light of the bad experiences of World War II. Hayek argued that it was the abandonment of a dynamic free-enterprise capitalism that led to the current political chaos of global totalitarianisms, and that the remedy was to return to the ‘abandoned road’ of individualized freedom of entrepreneurs, and a minimal central state that allowed a complex social order to arise naturally from spontaneous, unguided activities. During the war, both England and America had embraced erroneously government planning and regulated markets, thereby detouring from the path of individualist freedom earlier blazed by Milton, Locke, and Adam Smith. Hayek feared European liberals’ attraction toward socialism -- whereby disparities in talents would be leveled, class structures would disappear, and wealth would be re-distributed equally -- would destroy itself. What was promised as the Road to Freedom, under socialism, Hayek forewarned, actually was the High Road to Servitude [20].

In his later work (1960), *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek stressed the pivotal role that unavoidable human ignorance plays in our progress. The individual, in pursuit of his/her own ends, must utilize more knowledge than acquired individually, and thereby profits from that knowledge-base. Rather than claim perfect knowledge, we should recognize our unavoidable ignorance, and how it contributes to our overall progress. We should follow the lead of that second Adam, surnamed Ferguson, who proposed a ‘spontaneous order’ thesis: human institutions emerge quite naturally; just like the artifices of other social animals (beaver, ant, bee), our institutions and inventions are products of our natural instincts, but they are the unplanned, unforeseen consequences of human actions. ‘Every step and movement of the multitude, even in the most enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and hence nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.’ [21] It takes no great stretch of our imaginations to see how Hayek could use the spontaneous order thesis both to argue against state regulations of a free market, and to praise the emergence of the inventor or entrepreneur as the modern symbol of human ingenuity [22].

Ironically enough for both Hayek and his followers, his

own advocacy of Ferguson's spontaneous order thesis 'stumbles on' the notion of absolutely unregulated free markets. Hayek insists that one must make the best use of the competitive forces as a way to coordinate human efforts. What this meant was that Hayek's libertarianism, despite his animosity against a centralized state, had more than a minimal state – he supported a minimum standard of living for the poor, environmental as well as workplace safety regulations, and price controls to prevent monopolies from amassing unjust profits. His libertarianism, it seems, despite its promise of individualist freedom for postwar Americans, still held onto much old European liberalism. But curiously, when Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* first appeared in the American popular press, it was in a condensed version in *Reader's Digest*, and it omitted all the social justice addenda; so it fit the agenda of some reactionary Americans, who were dismayed by President Roosevelt's New Deal programs [23].

What else is missing here in the libertarian programme? They lack awareness of the breadths and depths of history, and how a variety of political positions empower citizens of a democracy to flourish in more progressive ways. Flourishing, we should recall, is not easily measured by economic considerations alone. Just consider the Great Depression, and how FDR's New Deal policies jumpstarted the stalled economy through programs like the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps. I happen to live in the beautiful southern Appalachian Mountains, a traditionally impoverished section of America. But during the Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps surveyed and built the Blue Ridge Parkway, an amazing corridor that was designed with structures simple and harmonious with the natural environment, so that visitors could enjoy a mix of 'mountain vistas, rolling hillsides, and dense woodlands', thus revealing the aesthetic charms of rural Americana from scenic overlooks while permitting hikes and recreation amongst its hills, waterfalls, and meadows [24]. It is true that the National Park Service profits from sales at its various shops, but primarily each fall, the Parkway is crowded with citizens enjoying the beauties of the Smoky Mountain vistas, just as trees freely exchange their summer green for brilliant hues of reds, oranges, and purples; all the while, one can hike or gaze through the vibrant color schemes and rigorous terrain, and perhaps recover a bit of American history, nature and culture. So here, individual freedom marries the greater social good, and benefits from a more-than-minimal state putting impoverished Americans back to work during the Depression.

Also, has not the libertarian overstated something in the basic bottom line? The real goal of business is not maximizing of profits; these are merely a side effect. The true purpose is to deliver goods and services to customers. Businesses and institutions often fail when they lose sight of their original mission, and seek nothing but profit maximization. Consider the Great Crash of 2008. Diane Coyle notes how the three elements of a classic Greek tragedy were re-enacted during the financial market crisis – **hubris** (arrogance), **atê** (reckless impulse), and **nemesis** (just resentment). The arrogance emerged from a market triumphalism about the dominant model of unregulated economic growth; reckless impulses were seen in

manipulation of markets to feed the greed of elitist remuneration; and tragic downfall occurred in that prior American dominance of global markets now is challenged by China's economic success. As Coyle reminds us, the financial markets of the Great Crash were dominated by 'irrational exuberance, widespread fraud, and market manipulation' [25].

Consider again Hayek's reliance upon the second Adam. As it turns out, Hayek only presents one side of Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, those more optimistic aspects of human nature, Adam before the Fall, we might say. In this aspect, he was in step with his colleagues, David Hume and Adam Smith (as conventionally understood), who stressed humans as primarily concerned with others in terms of profit or loss, or how useful or detrimental others might be to one's own self-interest. However, Adam after the Fall worries in the latter part of his essay about the decline, no longer praising the rise of, nations. In this emphasis, he departed from his fellow Scotsmen. When we attend to the whole book, and especially the last two parts of his essay, we recognize that postlapsarian Adam is worried about the decline of nations, and how luxury tends to corrupt us and lead us into political slavery. About this more complete second Adam, we learn nothing from American libertarians or Donald Trump. Perhaps those oppressors need only look to Adam before the Fall to continue rationalizing how they hold the rest of us in economic and political slavery.

Ferguson's essay actually is an apology for engaged citizenry, and later in it he bemoans the negative outcomes of unintended consequences. Earlier, he celebrated the positive results of unplanned order for individuals. Now, he frets about the losses to the social order. First, in a society devoted single-mindedly to the commercial arts, they gain ascendancy at the expense of other pursuits. 'The desire of profit stifles the love of perfection. Interest cools the imagination, and hardens the heart.' This means that ingenuity has been driven only to the Market and workshop. Second, members of society are now segregated into specialist expertise areas, of which all others are ignorant. Ferguson quotes Pericles of ancient Athens who observed that we cease to be citizens, or even good poets and orators to the degree we become distinguished in these separate professions. Distinction is good, but not when it forces us to forget our shared duties as citizens for a common good. Finally, one severe unforeseen result of the love of profit, for libertarians an ironic tragedy, is a loss of freedom. The individual passions for wealth and power seem to engender a love of domination, and this leads to scenes of oppression and servility in human families and social history that we ought to resist. If, after all, humans are property, or mere things, with no dignity or inherent worth as persons, then there are steep prices to pay. 'The parent supplies the market for slaves by the sale of his own children; the cottage ceases to be a sanctuary for the weak and defenseless stranger; and rites of hospitality come to be violated, like every other tie of humanity, without fear or remorse.' [26] Accordingly, Ferguson was one of the first authors to 'recognize the benefits and *dangers* of the division of labor', as no less astute a social critic than Karl Marx later observed [27].

VI. CONCLUSION: ROAD TO SERFDOM, ROYAL ROAD TO SERVITUDE, OR LONG WALK TO FREEDOM?

If conservative libertarians have misrepresented the purpose of business and economics, what other options do we have that both respect human freedom, but also generate trust in persons and institutions? Amartya Sen reminds us that the story of economics is a tale of two origins [28]. Originally, economics was classified by Aristotle as a subdivision of the practical sciences, and it, along with ethics, helped humans in their quest to live the good life in the **polis**, the community. Accordingly, economics was a central study for human flourishing but it was subsidiary to issues of ultimate ends as considered by **politikê** statecraft. This origin requires economics to look beyond mere rational efficiency to answer the questions ‘How should one live?’ and ‘What sorts of lives might we lead that empower our community to flourish?’. According to this tradition, economics has an **âthos**-orientation, and takes a more comprehensive view of ‘the good’ than individuals can foresee. The other origin of economics is much more recent, and is concerned primarily with an ‘engineering’ approach, one that assumes human ends are settled, and that we need only consider appropriate means for attaining those ends. This latter view sees economics as resolving primarily logistic or technical problems, and assumes a simple motivation of self-interest for human behavior. While both approaches are needed to give a comprehensive understanding of our political economy, the engineering approach has dominated modern views of economics, especially in American circles.

Sen presents an argument in *The Idea of Justice* that follows up on Adam Smith’s insights that remind us of the **âthos** origin of economics. Sen notes that he is not interested in presenting an ideal theory of perfectly just institutions, as one finds in John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* [29], since it is notoriously hard to achieve consensus of what counts as a truly just social order. Instead, his argument takes the following form:

- 1) Focusing on the removal of manifest injustices in the actual world (slavery, poverty, exploitation of labor, inhuman penal codes, subjugating women), we can compare actual institutions that already exist, and decide how well they socially realize goals of removing injustices.
- 2) Sen places his *Idea of Justice* in the moral tradition of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Mary Wollstonecraft, and John Stuart Mill. This tradition looks at actual choices made among feasible alternatives; one can establish reasoned agreement on how injustices can be reduced, even when we disagree on theories of perfect justice and ideal regimes.
- 3) This argument for an accomplishment-based understanding of justice realizes that we cannot be indifferent to the lives that people actually can live. Naturally, institutions and laws are important in influencing outcomes, but human beings are centrally interested in the freedoms that they have in choosing how their lives turn out. All of us seek our authenticity in the free choices we make that contribute to our own sense of a flourishing life and good society.

- 4) Thus, freedoms and capabilities that we can enjoy are ultimately valuable to us; only we can decide how to use the freedoms we have in constructing authentic lives.
- 5) If we assess social realizations in terms of capabilities that we actually have, instead of their utilities, desires, or preferences that rational observers usually have, then human lives are seen more inclusively; and from human capability to choose follows a responsibility for our chosen actions.
- 6) Accordingly, the demands of actual justice call on us to prioritize the removal of manifest injustices, rather than concentrate on long-term searches for the perfectly just society. So, a truly global development ethic requires that we secure an adequate level of moral agency and morally basic capabilities for all, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, or sexual preference [30].

Sen in his idea of justice, then, has combined consciousness of injustices, present in our freedom to dissent, with making us aware how we might remove them by restoring human capabilities to all. In this way, he has shown us how to climb that final ascent that Mandela envisioned, whereby we restore oppressed and oppressors with our humanity. Even if Hayek was right to worry about pure socialisms becoming High Roads to Serfdom, should we not also fret about the path of a higher selfishness? Any society that guarantees only the freedom of the wealthy and powerful to domineer over others has lost sight of its humane purposes. Americans wait anxiously to see if Donald Trump can rise above his ambition and wealth to respond to calls for social justice and equity. And Dylann Roof displays the end result of hatred, alienation, hostility, and prejudice aimed at those he regarded as unequal to him. However, as Mandela taught us, it truly is a long walk to freedom; and as he would remind us, we have already trod this other path, the Low Road to Slavery. All of us will be free when we quit shackling others to our own chains. Is it not high time that we release the oppressors as well as the oppressed from their chains?

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