

Freedom



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EVOLUTION OF THE IDEA OF FREEDOM IN THE UNITED STATES  
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THE UNITED STATES Eric Foner, a renowned historian and Pulitzer winning  
author of "The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery,"  
promulgates the idea that freedom is the most fundamental idea to  
American sense of themselves both as individuals and as a nation. Thus,  
Americans see freedom as the most essential ingredient in human life, both  
socially and politically. Tracing the American history of freedom, it can be  
seen that while the white Americans have faced problems in America under  
British colonization, Black Americans remained imprisoned in the name of  
slavery, denied of all rights. In his work, "The Story of American Freedom,"  
Foner traces the idea of freedom in the United States from the past to the  
present and illustrates the different meanings that it has taken in its  
transformation to the present day concept. The concept of freedom has  
evolved during the 18th and 19th centuries, and in the modern context,  
freedom can be perceived as the universal right of equality to all human  
beings, irrespective of their race, color, gender or sexual orientation.  
Freedom is the birth right, but to the Americans it was bought about by the  
Civil War. Foner says that other people also value freedom, but the idea is  
having more prominence in the public and private discourse in the United  
States than any other country. In the past, the idea of liberty was something  
between the natural liberty and the moral liberty. People considered liberty  
as the freedom to do only what is good. By the eighteenth century this  
concept was changed in the Atlantic world. Thus, the idea of freedom  
evolved to the concept that if religious liberty means obedience to God, civil  
liberty meant the obedience to law. The Britons who were the colonizers  
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themselves were universally free and they found no contradiction in proclaiming themselves as the citizens of the land of freedom, while bonding millions of Africans to slavery. Till the eighteenth century no one considered the Africans who were under the rights of the Englishmen. But later the definition of freedom got its new expression. Freedom or true Liberty means a right to do every thing that we please. During the eighteenth century it was believed that “ virtue” was a moral as well as personal quality by which a person subordinates his private passions and desires to the public good. Hence, Foner supports the opinion of Benjamin Franklin that “ only virtuous people are capable of freedom” (Foner 1999, 8). It has been argued that freedom that was celebrated in the eighteenth century essentially individual and private as republican liberty was enjoyed only by the citizens of a free state. When it came to the nineteenth century, the Americans strived not only for a well conceived definition of freedom but also to preserve it. By this time servitude had disappeared and the meaning of the words master and slave was also transformed. Masters came to be called boss and the servants became helpers. Hence, by this time freedom came to be defined as equally free and independent. But people also believed that to lack economic resources is to lack freedom. Hence, the government proposed to award fifty acres of land to those who did not possess it in America. By this time, it came to be accepted that liberty would rely on the machinery of government and not on the character of the people whether they are virtuous or not. Subsequently, freedom happens to be perceived in the context of gender as well as sexual orientation. In the modern world, freedom has evolved to have many connotations. But it can be clearly discerned as one’s right for exercising one’s free will, but within the confines of law that governs life in a

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society. Foner describes the ideological conflicts that have been subjects in the American Revolution and the Civil war. These have transformed the thought of what freedom is and who should enjoy it. By the twentieth century, Americans considered freedom as a call to arms in both world wars. At this juncture, when humans have become a highly sophisticated social being the concept of freedom has expanded to encompass different dimensions. Thus, finally it has evolved to include in its gamut the concept of equality and liberty irrespective of race, color, religion, gender and sexual orientation. Bibliography Foner, Eric. 1999. The story of American Freedom. W. W. Norton.