

Rethinking Freedom: A Concept for Today

Daphne M. Rolle

"They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him." 2 Peter 2:19

The bicentenary celebration of the passing of the Abolition Bill by the British Parliament in 1807 has prompted much discussion on injustice, compensation, and freedom. In the early 19th Century the definition of freedom may have appeared to be quite straightforward when confronted with the enslavement of millions presenting itself as a moral stain on civilization. Two hundred years later, with the United Nations having formally declared all forms of slavery as unlawful and immoral, we may need to rethink the concept of freedom. Fundamental questions to be addressed are: 1) What does freedom mean in a world directed by the two opposing yet interdependent forces of entitlement and resistance? The entitlement which leads to unrestrained pursuits of economic gain is in opposition to and yet feeds the resistance to such pursuits; 2) What kinds of boundaries are necessary to define our free spaces? It is necessary to determine if it is individual freedom that is of primary importance or the establishment of national or regional boundaries.

It is the project of this paper to address the questions outlined above in an effort to articulate a concept of freedom that is appropriate for the present social context in which we live. It is likely that a goal-oriented concept of freedom, such as that driving much of the abolitionist literature as represented in the works of William Wilberforce, Robert Wedderburn, David Walker, and others is not sufficient for today's concerns. Drawing on the work of David Walker I will engage in an analysis of freedom which requires a consideration of other key concepts such as necessary boundaries, power and responsibility.

The notion of freedom as described by many abolitionists consisted of the obvious freedom from constraints, both physical and psychological, freedom of employment opportunity, freedom from insult upon human dignity, and educational freedom. It is not so unlike our ideas of freedom today. There was also present the belief that a full notion of freedom spoke to a political state. The idea that all humans are born free and have inalienable rights that are somewhat political in nature, i.e. ownership of assets, social justice, and authority or power in governance as is the case with democracy. These aspects were key in the shaping of the United States of America when independence from Britain was secured.

Both David Walker and Robert Wedderburn, early 19th Century black abolitionists, speak about the importance of and right to freedom of both mind and body, suggesting that such is the "natural state" of human beings, agreeing with the principles articulated in the nation's Constitution and Declaration of Independence. David Walker in particular was very much committed to the principles of democracy. It was the practice of democracy that caused him concern. The specific crime against morality of slavery is that the Negro was judged to be less than human. Walker called it the "insupportable insult" of American slavery. Because of the insult both Walker and Wedderburn repeatedly draw to their readers' attention the fact of the humanity of the Negro. "...have I not the feelings of human nature within my breast? Oppression I can bear with patience, for it hath always been my lot; but

when to this is added insult and reproach from the authors of miseries, I am forced to take up arms in my own defense."¹

In Walker's words, "...who can dispense with prejudice long enough to admit that we are men, notwithstanding our improminent noses and woolly heads, and believe that we feel for our fathers, mothers, wives and children, as well as the whites do for theirs."²

It should be noted that both of the staunch abolitionists mentioned above were in fact born free. They both, however, make repeated references to their shared experience with those held in bondage. The insult of being less than human applied to the race, not the physical condition of members of the race. Colored persons were "wretched beasts" as Walker puts it because of beliefs held about those of African descent, not because of their slave status. In response to this insult both Wedderburn and Walker were committed to a theological basis for freedom and the emancipation of slaves all over the world. Here I will turn to Walker's work for close examination.

Walker's project as defined by himself was to prompt inquiry and investigation into the wretchedness of colored persons, both free and enslaved, within the context of American democracy. He identifies slavery as the institutional source of the miseries. He holds responsible for slavery all, both black and white, who encourage, participate in, and allow for its continuance. Although slavery was actuated by the avarice of the white slave dealers offering us an early example of how market, profit and utility trump "the good"³, the colored persons must share responsibility for the perpetuation of slavery due to their compliance and unwillingness to participate in rebellion and insurrection. Walker was insistent that their humanity should provide them with the unquenchable desire for freedom, and that a longing for natural state of freedom should spur them to seek it at whatever cost. He held up as an example the successful slave rebellion in Haiti as the most natural response to slavery. Walker articulates, however, a more "enlightened" response, rebellion as a duty to God.

Some of the assumptions Walker bases his work on are: the Bible is historical fact, God is the Creator of all that is, God is not a god of distinction, God is perfectly just, and American slavery is evil. A key passage and fundamental argument of Walker's Appeal is found in the Preamble. The argument is: 1) If God allows slavery, is he a god of justice? 2) No, yet God is perfectly just. 3) Therefore, he will not allow slavery to continue. One can see the similarity of Walker's question to the age-old problem of evil. Unfortunately for Walker his restatement of the question does not make it any more straightforward or easily answered. It is on the basis of this argument, however, that Walker calls colored citizens of the world to arms. Wedderburn, in London, makes a similar insurrectionist appeal. Man must fight with God for the heavenly cause of freedom. In fact, what makes American slavery evil is that "enlightened Christians" reduced a race of people to wretchedness in direct contradiction to the principles they espoused. What makes a colored wretch evil is

¹ McCalman, Ian (ed.) *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, (1991), p. 45.

² Walker, David *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, New York: Hill and Wang, (1965), p. 4.

³ This may be the basis upon which Walker identifies whites as the "natural enemy" of the Negro.

that he/she refuses, for whatever reason, to fight for the right to call no one but Jesus Christ master.

Walker is sure of his theology and attributes slavery's continuance primarily to a lack of unity among colored persons, their ignorance, the false preachers of the gospel of Christ, and the hypocritical commitment to the principles of democracy of American statesmen. For Walker, true freedom could only be experienced when both physical and mental restraints were removed and colored citizens could participate in the religious, political and economic activities freely experienced by others recognized as citizens of the U.S. This is, he believed, what God intended for man.

What is missing from Walker's theology, however, is that he fails to leave room for the enslaved (in physical bondage) person who does in fact experience true freedom. Walker's concept of freedom identifies freedom from physical constraints as a necessary condition for freedom, and makes physical bondage a necessary condition for slavery. Similarly he fails to recognize the similarity to the slave of the physically free yet impoverished white man who is in many respects also a slave, and therefore also wretched. Freedom as understood in the Biblical context is considered in a much broader context. God allowed for numerous instances of slavery, oftentimes requiring the enslavement of his chosen people. If Walker would agree that God's nature and character are fixed, then God was a God of justice when the Hebrew people experienced 400 years of Egyptian slavery. Moreover, God's justice cannot be called into question centuries later because he allowed the American institution of slavery to last almost 100 years. It also bears noting that the Bible shows God not only allowed but also endorsed numerous wars, none of the stories describing the emancipation of the Hebrew peoples were stories of insurrection. In fact, time and again the New Testament advises slaves to be obedient to their masters.⁴ Furthermore it suggests that such obedience will allow for the experience of true freedom even when one is held in physical bondage.

Far from such an interpretation, Walker seems to suggest that such teaching represents the malicious misguidance of those who are pretenders to Christianity. I would argue, however, that the direction for slaves to obey their masters is consistent with the spirit of Christ's teachings and is indeed compatible with the experience of true freedom. Walker himself points to the example of Joseph who started off in Egypt as a slave but ended up being second only to Pharaoh. If we follow this example we see that Joseph was always "free" because he always acknowledged God as the ultimate authority. His destiny was determined by his obedience to God. The psalmist phrased it in this way, "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts."⁵

Paul, the great apostle and author of most of the New Testament tells us that freedom is essentially to be free in Christ. This is to say that freedom is tied to an understanding of and belief in one's identity in Christ. Freedom begins with an internal understanding and does not require a particular physical condition. To place the emphasis of freedom on physical conditions and call for the enslaved to take up arms in the name of justice is in the context of the Bible in opposition to living by the Spirit, hence it is rebellion against God.⁶ As suggested by the psalmist freedom is

⁴ See Walker (p. 39), 1 Timothy 5 and Titus 3.

⁵ Psalm 119:45

⁶ See Isaiah 59:12-13

experienced because one understands the principles of God. As such the only power required for freedom is the power to live in obedience to God.

The notion that freedom requires conformity to certain principles is not only to be found in the Biblical context. Plato also suggests that such is the case in his discussion of the just soul, Confucius does so when describing the gentleman, as do many others. That freedom requires necessary boundaries in the form of principles or precepts is not novel. What sparks discussion and controversy are the particular precepts put forward.

Our current debates regarding freedom and how it should be defined often touch upon the sore point of proper precepts. One question is does freedom require a specific political context? Another is does freedom require a free market society? Such notions of freedom seem to suggest that freedom at its essence is experienced most fully at the level of the individual. Oppression of any form is problematic because it restricts the fundamental freedom to make what we will of ourselves. We see the same commitment to determining our own fate and our right to economic independence as was present in the 18th and 19th centuries. We seem to be wholly committed to a faith in our own individual free will. As is evidenced by the situation in Iraq, we do not really question so much this principle of freedom of the will to determine our own fate. We tend to focus more on the consequences of imagined possibilities rather than on the actual principles driving them. Subsequently, we will argue about are the consequences of the actions of our free will, i.e. how much money we are spending in Iraq and how many U.S. soldiers have died.

Another example can be seen in the debates regarding U.S. immigration policy. The dominant spirit of the debate has little to nothing to do with the sentiment expressed in Lazarus' sonnet "The New Colossus" found on the Statue of Liberty which speaks of a responsibility we accept to care for those who are tired, poor, and longing to breath free. It is instead focused on the negative consequences of a commitment to this principle of responsibility, i.e. the negative economic impact on Americans and issues of safety.

Other aspects of current notions of freedom that reinforce the emphasis on the individual's free will include freedom as ownership of assets that are inheritable. This in essence says that we have a right to a future legacy. Another is our belief that we have a right to a career, not just a job. Our career is part of what goes into forming our particular identities which is something else we have a right to determine through free will. Such ideas of freedom, because of their emphasis on the individual, are too narrow to be of much use in today's context. They tend to lead us to pursuing narrowly conceived methods for securing freedom. The method tends to be goal-oriented (tangible goals) in nature. For the abolitionist the goal was emancipation, which did not bring about the desired freedom. For small colonies it was national independence, and for current defenders of freedom it was at first the removal of Saddam, then it was Iraqi elections, and so on. Also problematic is that the attainment of the goals that are set is said to require political savvy. Those without the forces of money and influence must today be skilled politicians, because problems are viewed in essence as political in nature. The problem with this is that history shows us politics tends to obscure truth and justice, not ensure them.

To begin to shape a concept of freedom and proper method for its attainment will perhaps require us to think about the types of bondage we currently experience. Some forms of bondage are poverty, racism, unemployment, drug abuse, and

obesity with its accompanying health problems to name a few. Many of them are constraints, both self-imposed and imposed by others, due to excessive liberty. They are problems of values not politics. It was the European avarice and exercise of excessive pursuit of financial gain that birthed and perpetuated chattel slavery. It is the excessive indulgence of drinking alcohol that leads to alcoholism. To be free from bondage that is a consequence of excessive indulgence/liberty, we ought perhaps to think about establishing some necessary boundaries. The role of such boundaries is to define our power or use of power and to impose upon us responsibilities in an effort to minimize our excesses. Especially in today's context it is important to think of freedom as requiring all three – boundaries, power and responsibility.

I now turn to the address of those two fundamental questions identified at the beginning of this paper. The first question asks what freedom means in a world directed by the two opposing yet interdependent forces of entitlement and resistance, or globalization and particularism? These forces are both driven by excess.

The force of globalization expresses the belief in the justice of a free market society and the right to promote and sell as much of almost anything we can, i.e. liquor stores on every other corner in the inner cities, Wal-Mart in China, and larger businesses in economically depressed areas who put smaller local businesses out of business. This force driven by individualism and a sense of entitlement provokes a negative response from those adversely affected. This response represents the opposing force of particularism. It is expressed in resistance movements, be they cultural, political, religious, or otherwise. What it seeks is freedom from the influence of globalization and freedom to define or maintain a particular identity. It is at first glance primarily concerned with the corporate welfare of specific communities emphasizing the distinctiveness of culture, nation state or religious belief system. A closer look shows it to be more often than not forced conformity to a very rigid identity.

Tension and conflict between the two forces fosters a sense on both sides of a right to freedom from constraints – the zealous particularists demand freedom from everything save their narrow ideology, and the globalizers demand freedom from everything except those restraints (usually placed on others) that protect their individual interests. None call for absolute freedom, the idea that everything is permissible, but both call for something very close to it hence formulating opposing conceptions of freedom for themselves that ultimately translate into existential bondage for the people affected by them. There is absent from both the notion of universal freedom.

This absence is what leads me to the second question. Whose freedom are we really seeking? Is freedom to remain a concept concerned first and foremost with the individual (however narrowly or broadly we define individual), or is it possible to conceive of freedom in such a way that seeks universal freedom? The answer to this question will determine what kind of boundaries it will be necessary to establish. If individual freedom is the focus, our efforts need to be put into articulating theories of individual responsibility so that we place limits on the exercise of our freedom in an effort to minimize the conflict and strife we see currently. If, however, the primary concern is one of establishing boundaries that will identify independent nation states or regions, then our efforts must be put into articulating public policy that will enhance the freedom of the nation-state which will in turn protect its individuals.

We must decide what we want our global world to look like. Will we follow the American example of individualism where we only concert our efforts in the cases of personal interest, i.e. white women suffragists who did not advocate insistently for the abolition of slavery and the supporters of the emancipation of slaves but not for their social and civil equality? Do we want to explore more inclusive concepts of regional or national freedom as perhaps is seen in the establishment of the European Union or CARICOM? Or are we willing to formulate a concept of collective freedom at the level of humanity? Although Walker's theology was off at times, he was on the right track. What he was seeking to articulate was the basis for a universal concept of freedom and that is what we should be seeking as well.

In order to do this we must return to a discussion of power, responsibility and necessary boundaries. If we will be generous enough to begin to shape a notion of universal freedom then we must first commit ourselves to a belief in our power with respect to its attainment. We must first believe that we can secure universal freedom. It cannot be viewed as a utopian dream that is dismissed out-of-hand due to a lack of practicality. The pursuit of universal freedom will require a further commitment on our part to do away with our individualism and begin to see ourselves as inseparably connected to the much larger body of humanity. We must do away with the notion of "the other". Only then will we be willing to take on the responsibility, prompted by genuine concern, of acting consistently on behalf of others as well as our own well-being. We must get to the point where we find it impossible to be satisfied with our own lives if our neighbors face unacceptable conditions. Once we have accepted the responsibility of caring for others we then will need to establish necessary boundaries, which function as the principles of self-discipline that will guide our actions. With the establishment of such boundaries we acknowledge that there must be limits on what we have a right to freely choose, thereby avoiding dangerous excesses.

I appeal to those engaged in putting forward concepts of freedom to help restore a belief in the possibility of universal freedom. There is power available to us that we fail to have faith in. We need not be mastered by our selfish desires and lack of self-discipline. Let us rekindle the generosity of spirit we see glimpses of from our past.