



FREEDOM: A MULTI-MEANING WORD IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Ferdinand KPOHOUE
ferdinandkpo@yahoo.fr

Mathieu Dagbegnon HOUTOWADAN
houtowadanm@yahoo.fr

Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin

ABSTRACT

For many centuries, Blacks were maintained under the yoke of slavery. They made use of all struggling tools to achieve freedom. But surprisingly, Blacks and Whites understood freedom differently. In fact, freedom is a complex term to define in America. For White people freedom is the right of the individual to do what he wishes without fetters or impediments, as long as it is lawful under the state. This the type of freedom the American Founding Fathers long struggled to conquer from their British colonizers. Enslaved people and freed people view freedom differently. For them, freedom is rather collective. It is a participatory process that demands new ways of thinking and being. The objective of this paper is to investigate the different ways freedom is understood in America. Historicism and conflicts theories are helpful to decipher the ambiguity freedom suffers in America. In fact, while Black American freedom fighters conceive freedom as collective and immediate, slaveholders envision individual freedom. Freedom is so defined according to the interests of each group of people living in the same country under the same laws.

Key words: Freedom, slavery, whites, Blacks, individual, collective.

RESUME

Pendant de nombreux siècles, les Noirs ont été maintenus sous le joug de l'esclavage. Ils ont eu recours à tous les moyens de lutte pour obtenir la liberté. Mais chose surprenante, les Noirs et les Blancs avaient une conception différente de la liberté. En fait, la liberté est un terme complexe à définir en Amérique. Pour les Blancs, la liberté est le droit de l'individu de faire ce qu'il veut sans entraves ni obstacles, pour autant que cela soit légal pour par rapport aux lois de la république. C'est le type de liberté que les Pères fondateurs américains ont longtemps battu pour le conquérir auprès de leurs colonisateurs britanniques. Les personnes asservies et les personnes affranchies voient la liberté différemment. Pour eux, la liberté est plutôt collective. C'est un processus participatif qui exige de nouvelles façons de penser et d'être. L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier les différentes façons dont la liberté est comprise en Amérique. L'historicisme et les théories du conflit sont utiles pour déchiffrer l'ambiguïté dont souffre la liberté en Amérique. En effet, alors que les combattants noirs américains conçoivent la liberté comme collective et immédiate, les esclavagistes envisagent la liberté individuelle. La liberté est ainsi définie en fonction des intérêts de chaque groupe de personnes vivant dans un même pays sous les mêmes lois.

Mots clés : Liberté, esclavage, Blancs, Noirs, individuel, collectif.

INTRODUCTION

Through their fight against slavery and their determination to constitute themselves as a people, African Americans were able to extend the field of democracy to all Americans. That is, the concept of freedom had become essential to their struggles.

Even if the word freedom took on different meanings according to the period and the individuals, it however represents the leading thread of the African Americans' history. "Immediate freedom", was the appeal of the civil rights movements in the 1960s. Two phenomena threw light upon it: "The Freedom Walkers" and the legendary "Freedom Summer." The freedom walkers were those black and white young people who in 1961, went together on the same bus over the segregationist South. This shows that freedom is everyone's concern.

"The Freedom Summer " 1964 was a period when several hundreds of students from the North went to MISSISSIPPI to work with local black leaders and the militants of the students Nonviolent coordinating committee (SNCC). This is the proof that freedom cannot be easily gained. It should be through hard struggles and sacrifices

Martin Luther King Jr. also reminds us of "The Freedom Obsession" which appeared before the 1960s. The Black Americans' conception of freedom, based for centuries on African cultural heritage and experience of the new world was different from that of most white Americans.

The objective of this research paper is to explore the different meanings of freedom in America in order to highlight how interests and ambitions have taken the American citizens to redefine endlessly freedom throughout their history. Historicism and conflicts theories have been used to dig out the different meanings of freedom.

As a matter of fact, freedom means very different things to different Americans in different times as Eric Foner mentions in *The Story of American Freedom*. When the revolutionary war broke out in April 1775, freedom was the determination to decide over the fate of American people without the British authorities; the Declaration of Independence that highlights 'Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness' and cracks up individualism and private property, but maintained slavery defined freedom its way. Shays's Rebellion, (August 1786-February 1787) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1791-1794) were typically economic because they were against taxes. The American Civil War (1861-1865) extended the limits of freedom to include the abolition of slavery to free Blacks. Male universal suffrage and women suffrage, right to vote, civil rights, etc. gave new meanings to freedom. Freedom bears different connotations to whites, it means different thing to Blacks. Freedom is finally like an octopus in terms of definition in America, it has become the barometer of the whole American history to determine how the word has undergone modifications all along its history.

1. Freedom according to slaveholders

The American conception of freedom took form during the revolution period and was related to the issues of individual freedom. Saul, in his book entitled *Jefferson* has revealed:

In a slave economy, the planter had little choice but to continue using slave labor or to bankrupt himself by liberating his Negroes. Freeing the slaves, however, was no solution either, for such freedom, unable to find free work in a slave world, would be certain to be exposed to beggary or starvation. Moreover, the slaves were neither morally nor technically prepared to make an independent living in a competitive world", Jefferson to Dr. Edward Bancroft in 1789. (Saul, 1942, p.232)

He continued:

to give liberty to, or rather, to abandon persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children. Many Quakers in Virginia seated their slaves on their lands as tenants ... but ... the landlord was obliged to plan their crops for them, to direct all their operations during every season and according to the weather. But what is more afflicting, he was obliged to watch them daily and almost constantly to make them work, and even to whip them. A man's moral sense must be unusually strong, if slavery does not make him a thief. He who is permitted by law to have no property of his own, can with difficulty conceive that property is founded in anything but force. Dominant opinion had it that the Negroes were incapable of independence and unable to take care of themselves. Many possibly most, white people insisted that Negroes were inferior beings in every way, and hence it was "natural" that they be enslaved. (Idem)

That American conception of freedom is in contradiction with the Declaration of Independence which maintains that 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

According to the founding fathers of America, when they refer to the phrase "that land of opportunity" (Sidney, 1974, p.133) their idea of freedom was inseparable from the process of living itself. They all recognized like the French philosopher of the enlightenment century that freedom was coexistent with the quality of being human. They all agreed that nobody has a right to claim absolute control over other beings by controlling the things they depend on, but that all of us should be free to grow to the full reach of our compatible and non-exploitative powers.

But how can one imagine that when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence emphasizing the sacredness of freedom and equality of all men, he was personally depriving nearly 200 men, women and children of their liberty? When he died on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence on 4 July, 1826, he still owned more than two hundred slaves. Before him, George Washington was owner of 277 slaves when he died in 1799. (Dumas, 1984, p.391)

The slaveholders' hypocritical pretense to devote themselves to freedom was not peculiar to Davies or Jefferson or Washington. It was not peculiar to Virginia either.

The men who went together to found the independent United States and dedicated themselves to freedom and equality either held slaves or were willing to join hands with those who were in favor. Neither of the two categories felt entirely comfortable about the fact, but they did not feel responsible for it either. Most of them had inherited both their slaves and their attachment to freedom from an earlier generation, and they knew that the two were not connected. The use of liberty and equality in America had been accompanied by the presence and exploitation of slaves owned by free people. These two seeming contradictory developments which took place simultaneously over a long period, from the 17th to the 18th centuries, is the central paradox of American history. For a modern intellectual, it poses a challenge to explain how a people could have developed the dedication to human liberty and dignity such as exhibited by the leaders of the American Revolution and have at the same time developed and maintained a system of labor that denied human liberty and dignity every hour of the day.

Jefferson, who owned hundreds of slaves and even defended that they were inferior race, comes to be the prominent defender of freedom. He relates:

Comparing them (slaves) by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites: in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid ; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous I advance it, therefore, as a suspicious only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. (Jefferson, 1904-1905, pp.382-386)

This inconsistent and hypocritical attitude towards freedom is different from the conception Blacks have about freedom both in America and in Africa.

2. Freedom according to Freedom Fighters

As the constitution has declared them free, the African Americans' perception of freedom makes them claim for a collective justice in terms of freedom, for instance, to work and benefit from the fruits of their work as individuals, to have a family, to establish institutions and to conjure up visions of their own destiny.

The black people's conception of freedom is revealed by Benjamin Banneker, a black mathematician and astronomer, who upbraided Jefferson for keeping slave against the principles in the declaration of Independence:

we are a race of beings who have long laboured under the abuse and censure of the world ... we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and scarcely capable of mental endowment.
Sir, I hope ... that you are a man far less inflexible in sentiments of this nature than many others, that you are measurably friendly and well disposed toward us. ... Now, sir, if this is founded in truth, I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions which so generally prevails with respect

to us, and that your sentiments are concerned with mine, which are that our universal father hath given being to us all ... [here Banneker quoted the Declaration of Independence that 'all men are created equal', and so on.]. ... but, sir, how pitiable it is to reflect that, although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of mankind ... that you should at the same time counteract his mercies in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression. (Saul, 1942, p. 234)

At the end of the American civil war, in 1865, the General of the union, William Tecumsh Sherman, and the State Secretary of the war, Edwin Stanton, met a group of black pastors to discuss the meaning to give to the word "freedom". A pastor remarked: "Freedom as I conceive it [...], it is to escape the carcan of slavery and find ourselves where we can gather the fruit of our work, take care of ourselves and help the government to preserve our freedom". (Marable and Spencer, 2003, p.7)

To carry that Collective freedom concept into effect, black Americans settled down two immense piece-works at the same time. The first consisted in creating a space from where to challenge the system maintaining them in slavery. It was then necessary to think out a community, and build it.

Then, on this basis, there remained to elaborate strategies to face oppression structures.

Blacks got united as a group despite the context of crushing brutality, inequality and violence they were subjected to. After being drawn from societies often very different, Africans were submitted to slavery in America. Even if some kinds of slavery existed in Africa before, that kind of slavery consisting in depriving individuals from all their rights, leaving them to the power of their only owners, exists but in America. In the United States, slavery changes not only human beings into goods, but the colour of their skin became the foundation of their reduction to slaves. Even if, for the Americans as whole, race and slavery seem inexorably linked, the reduction to slavery on the basis of racial identity was accidental. Line of action from the most contested, slavery founded on race, was imposed only in precise places and periods. It was necessary to find strong justifications for, once in place, the hereditary reduction to slavery with racial sway would seem rational. The reasons set forth to justify slavery as an institution swayed between religious explanations and pseudo-scientific arguments. Religious doctrines either made African peoples the Scions of cham, the disowned son of Noah, or suggested that the salvation of African pagans depended on slavery. The pseudo-scientific arguments were perhaps the most dangerous. And even if polygenism is everywhere disparaged today, the influence of that theory finding in Africans and Europeans species not only different, but also unequal is still perceptible in some skillful speeches on races and racial differences.

It is in the lap of this inhuman slavery system from which theories on Black's inferiority had been taken up again by almost all the institutions that African Americans take as a duty to build a community. They had been taken away by

force from different societies, from village communities to very ancient states. Their language and their religious practices were different; but, almost all of them had thorough commands of agriculture, most of them came from organized societies according to the relationship principle, everyone belonging at birth to the same parents' long line of descendants which situated each individual in a global interrelationship. And, for many of them, the rite related to birth and death were the same.

Thanks to those common cultural traditions, black Americans made up a community, an identity, a voice, in the New World. The lot cast upon families was one of the most grievous aspects of slavery. The family had been one of the patent concerns of black Americans' freedom. During slavery, families were able, to some extent, to constitute for themselves a distinct space. Nevertheless, the family was at the same time a force and a cause of vulnerability, a reason to resist and an obstacle to the resistance, many hesitating to put in danger the human beings who were dear to them. The stability of slaves' families varied across periods, regions, coppices of plantations and behaviors of slave owners. However, nowhere in the United States could slaves' family form a legal entity. Between 1790 and 1860, a million of slaves were moved very far to the South and West, towards the states which produced cotton. A great number of families were separated and torn apart. In the upper part of the South, one marriage out of three was broken by a sale and at least half of children were separated from one of their parents, a proof that the image of the benevolent master was truly a myth. When a family is divided because of a death or a sale, non-consanguineous relationships were established, creating extended families. Slaves separated from other members of their family worked to maintain links with them. Those who were just emancipated were looking desperately for kith and kin who fled or who were sold. Despite all the experiences related to segregation, migrations and frequent separation and abuses, Blacks created again family cells to put together their resources and guarantee their survival. Lack of jobs, more and more women bring up their children without financial support from a man. The struggle to maintain black families' integrity has never stopped.

Black church kept an important role in the constitution of the black community. Religion takes a crucial importance at the same time as system of belief and social institution.

Africans adopted Christianity to express their faith, but it is not the Christianity of their masters. If they abundantly take their inspiration from Christian beliefs and symbols, they deliberately change them to make a black American religion adapted to their projects. Like the sojourn of the Hebrew in Egypt and their freedom, familiar histories of the Old Testament became the main topic of Negro spirituals and other rituals. In this form of Christianity, it was question of realities of the contemporary life, but also of transcendent vision and faith in the future. Religion

offered means to get into working order and the church was one of the rare institutions constantly authorized by white people during slavery. The establishment of black American churches, such as African Episcopal Methodist church, was a consequence of the racial segregation. Churches constituted the center of the blacks' social life, places where they could meet, exercise responsibilities and support one another mutually in the face of segregation and discrimination. Here and there, Blacks' churches hosted the first schools and fed the starving. They were the cradle of civil rights movement. The presidential campaign of 1984 and 1988 of reverend Jesse Jackson testify to this. Religion played an important role in the mode of organization of African Americans.

The associations of the church members soon constituted the infrastructure of the black civil society. Benevolent, funeral, saving and loan societies, circles of men and women were created to help the sick, the old people and the disabled and gather the resources of the community while giving to leaders the opportunity to reveal themselves. Among those organizations black women clubs were of a great importance. Towards the end of the 19th century, black women founded in all America thousands of organizations which were the only to offer social services to the Black community facing segregation. In those clubs, thousands of women created schools, helped the poor, the sick and the old people. They took care of children and built centers for home employees very often exploited sexually by their employers. Organized in national association, they struggled at the same time against the lynching and for the obtainment of civil rights. It is in the name of that tradition that the Black feminists stand against all sexist and racial discrimination inside or outside the Black community today.

In establishing communities able to influence their destiny, Black Americans improve their idea of freedom. To them, this meant firstly, to earn one's bread, to work and be paid for the work done. In 1865, Frederick Douglass answered those who were asking him questions about what the desire of recently emancipated people was. He replied in the following words:

What is freedom? It is the right to choose one's own job. That is its meaning, to suppose this is one, and when an individual or a group of individuals choose the responsibility on themselves to decide when a man should work, where he should work, what would be his work and what he would get from his work, see that man practically reduced in slavery. It is a slave. (Marable, 2003, p.8)

Frederick Douglass through those lines raises the question of the kind of freedom necessary for Blacks in America. Following his view black Africans have to decide on their own destiny. To achieve this, it is necessary for them to work for their own. Even when, by 1900, emancipated Blacks were fighting to join the new-born working class, where they continued to be exploited in their work, some of them asked themselves what freedom to only gain one's bread really meant. This is Hubert

Harrison, a militant worker's question in 1912:

Today, my companions, you who are suffering with me, we claim we are free. But, are we? A second of thinking is sufficient to note that it is not the case. We only replace a form of slavery against another one. Before, slaves were considered as livestock, hereafter it is slavery by the salary. Now slavery by salary is from the same nature as slavery at an owner. The difference is only the form. It is the force that obliged a slave to work for his master. In the case of a slave who earns salary, it is the hunger. It is the master who seized the production of his slave. It is the employer who steals from a slave who earns salary the fruit of his work. (Marable, 2003, p.8)

Hubert Harrison shows that the real freedom dreamed by African Americans is the condition of a person who depends on himself. According to him getting job and earning one's own salary is the only key to real freedom. Militant Black workers of the 1930's provided the civil rights movements of the 1960's with their financial basis and foundation. Today, with the disappearance of millions of jobs generated by industry, plenty of people are in a precarious economic situation, they risk long term unemployment.

Freedom to learn constituted a thumping state in the edification of the black community, and having fought to quality instruction has been like the right to vote, an essential claim of the movement for freedom throughout history. About it, W.E.B. Dubois stated:

Fast sumptuous ideals - Physical freedom political power, education of spirits, apprenticeship of manual work - started asserting themselves and finished growing blurred, to such a pass that even more recently the education idea has hereafter something difficult to understand and doubtful. Are they all false, those ideals? That is not the case, but taken separately, each ideal had something very simple and at the same time unfinished. To be true, all the ideals should be melted and joined to only to make one. Learning at school that is what we than ever need: Favour the rightness of hands, the rapidity of eye and ear, but mostly secure in all then dimensions, gifted as vast as possible culture of spirits and pure hearts. (Marable, 2003, p.8)

The struggle for freedom to learn and to know started during slavery. Fully aware of the power of knowledge, almost all Enslaved-holding States forbad slaves to learn to read and write. They punished slaves in case of infringement and their teachers are severely penalized. Despite those restriction, some receive an instruction thanks to schools and alphabetization and teaching programs set up by religion groups or by churches. The emancipation aroused such a desire to learn so that it was difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy it. A freed office, federal agency created in 1865 to help emancipated slaves, was at the origin of the creation of many schools. Free Blacks and Whites from the North settle in the South to establish temporary schools teaching children in the morning and parents in the evening. During the reconstruction period, the need for education was so strong that Blacks used their new right of vote to establish to the South the first education systems publically financed. It is from that period that were created the first Black institutions like Howard University, Fisk University, Atlanta University and Hampton Institute. But

to the 1880's and 1890's the attainments of the reconstruction were suppressed.

Despite their limited means, those schools favored the acquisition of knowledge and professional skills, and the life of millions of Blacks was improved. Thanks to them, Black middle class and many Black political organizations were developed. Coming from civil rights movements, Black student movement gave a broader meaning to freedom to learn, which was no longer limited to the only issue of access to school rooms to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the universities in the North where White people were in majority. Black student movements raised the problems of content and required that the life of color people and their experiences, in particular those of women, workers, and groups of subordinates be reflected in the programs that was a way to challenge the definition of the traditional knowledge:

Freedom to which we so long aspired to we still aspire it, freedom of life and our members, freedom to work and think, freedom to love and to have one's own desires. Work, culture, freedom, we need all that not separately but together, not successively but at the same time, in growth and mutual help and all of us having this more extended ideal in heart than what the people has in front of his eyes, the ideal of human brotherhood reached thanks to the unifying ideal of the race. (Marable, 2003, p. 8)

One of the important themes of freedom movement was imagination freedom. That precious freedom to think a people and a future, but also to create music, dance, works of art, folklore, poetry and humor while pushing back the limit of human body, deeply influenced western and world culture. In the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois recalls how complex the concept of "freedom" is.

It is by creating a community that Blacks possess the stakes thanks to which ordinary women and men could fondle freedom dreams. Families, churches, schools, self-willed association but also artistic, poetic and sport activities, where so many places and fields where the struggle for freedom took root were embodied. Coming from their communities, they knew how to conciliate their freedom exactingness with strategies destined to bring it into play and choose the moment to act depending on precise goals.

In the quest of freedom, Black Americans did not always all agree on the choice of the moment, the strategy and the tactics. At precise historical stages, some believe that racial assimilation is possible inside the existing social order, others advised to create separate institutions, others wanted to change the socio-economic foundation of the society. But, in this diversity so fruitful, all Blacks' voices made hear the same call of freedom: freedom to live and justice. Freedom was never conceded from above. It is obtained at the end of struggles. "Freedom" was never "free". It has had its victories and its disappointments, but who can doubt that, by proving the limits of democracy, the struggle of Blacks deeply changes the meaning of the word freedom for all the Americans? During a debate about students' sit-ins, the militant of civil rights movement, Fannie Lou Hamer stated: "[...] the feeling of students to have a

predestined appointment with freedom was not limited to a campaign for their own freedom or even for the freedom of Blacks in the South. People frequently said that the movement took into account moral implications of the racial discrimination for the "whole world" and for the human race." (Marable, 2003, p.9) By succeeding in its campaign of desegregation, the movement for the freedom of Blacks led in 1865 to freedom, of immigration laws based on racial prejudices. And by offering a model and a method, it contributed to extending the rights of old people, women, renters, disable, Latino-Americans, Indians, Asiatic origin Americans' etc. As far as Black Americans thanks to their long standing opposition to restrictions imposed to women, the latter have taken by word and action, the lead of the struggle against the subordination of all the women.

Black Americans very soon linked their struggles to others in the whole world, and their methods as symbols inspired freedom movements, anticolonialist movements and movements against all discriminations - as in India, where the untouchable, the Dalit, took the symbol of Black Panthers. South Africa gave up to the apartheid, where freedom movement intoned "we shall overcome." MartinLuther King wrote in 1957: "Black Americans' determination to be free from all forms of oppression came from the same deep desire of freedom which motivated all the oppressed people of the world. The pulsation which puts rhythm into the deep dissatisfaction of the peoples of Asia and Africa is at the beginning a quest for freedom and human dignity at peoples who have long been victims of colonialism. The struggle for freedom of the oppressed in general and of Black Americans in particular grew slowly and would not stop suddenly. Privileged rarely abandon their privileges without opposing a strong resistance. But when the oppressed people stand against oppression, there is no possible way before they reached freedom.

CONCLUSION

In short, truly speaking, the question raised here is not the one of meaning only. It has to do with the spirit, the context, and what any person faced with the issue of freedom considers the latter to be. In the American context, freedom according to slaveholders concerns only some aspects of freedom which have to do with individuals whereas freedom fighters consider it collectively. But it is important to retain that freedom after all has to do with the way the individual tries to conquer it. As Pulitzer Prize Winning Author Alice Walker states, "in the end, freedom is a personal and lonely battle and one faces down fears of today so that those of tomorrow might be engaged." (Painter, 2007, pp.70-71)

It is this deep belief that sharpened freedom fighters' conception of freedom, so they engaged in many struggles to conquer it.

Even the most famous and emblematic of all American founding symbols, the

Declaration of Independence, which is a manifesto revered as a statement of the right of revolution, a manifesto that awakes a mighty spirit “that walks abroad upon the earth and that shall in its onward march overturn principalities and powers, and tramp thrones and scepters in the dust” (John, 1997, pp.19-20) is not exempt from contradictions and incoherencies. By including human equality among the “great principles” stated by the Declaration of Independence, which is often described as “the foundation of all political, of all human institutions”, Jeffersonian republicans in the 1790s had already started a modern reading of the document, which was to develop after the 1820s to increasingly eclipse the document’s assertion of the right of revolution. Freedom is still ambiguous because its meaning is still varying according to the interests of the people in a position to define it. Freedom in the American context is a permanent challenge for all generations. It will be defined again and again according to conditions, time and challenges.

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