

African American Agency Responses to the Contradiction of Liberalism in Early America

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Abstract

Lisa Moynihan explores the juxtaposition of American liberty and freedom put forward by the *Declaration of Independence* and the Constitution of the United States with the treatment of African Americans during the first century of the United States of America.

Flight, independent economic success, rebellion and influential leaders all served to demonstrate African Americans' agency as a people and consequently their right to freedom. All of these actions were in direct response to contradictions that existed in a young nation that boasted its liberty and protection of rights. By their actions, African Americans proved that exclusion from freedom based on the ideas of classical and Lockean liberalism was unfounded. The cross-fertilization of the two ideologies championed the ability to acquire and establish property, individual agency, a resistance to oppression and an iron will to gain freedom.



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African American Agency

For the land of the free and the home of the brave, the United States has had difficult historical contradictions to explain. Perhaps the most blatant of these contradictions lies in the institution of slavery. Slavery is an institution that effectively dehumanizes those in bondage and reduces individuals' existences to mere matters of economic gain. It is an institution that prohibits individuals from reaping the benefits of their labors, and an institution that caused unjust physical and psychological harm to hundreds of thousands of people. Slaves have been present in societal structures as far back as any records exist. However, there have only been five genuine slave societies in history and the United States housed one of them.¹ It does not seem possible that such an institution could have survived for nearly a century in a country whose Declaration states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal". So how did the institution of slavery exist and thrive for an extended period of time in such a political environment? And how was the movement towards abolishing it achieved?

The answer lies in the elasticity of ideologies present in the social atmosphere of the young nation and in the continued and strong response of the African American community. Key in the political discourse of early American documents and society were the ideologies of classical and Lockean liberalism, two schools of thought that directly contradicted the continued presence of slavery during the period from 1787 to 1861. The contradiction, however, inspired a response from the African American population, both slave and free, that manifested itself in many ways, but served the same purpose of demonstrating that African Americans too had the capacity to exercise individual agency and the right to the opportunity of freedom. Their success is marked by the outbreak of the Civil War and the subsequent emancipation from slavery.

Following the unlikely victory of the American Revolution, members of the new nation were faced with the challenge of creating a new political system; a political system that held limited powers but was still effective in administering to the needs of the new nation. Framers of the Constitution drew from their experiences as colonists and from classical and modern schools of thought to aid their revolutionary system of government. One of the most influential intellectual traditions used was that of liberalism. François Furstenberg gives a comprehensive

¹ Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1998), 77.

description of liberalism in his article, *Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse*. He states that liberalism was born in ancient Greek and Roman society and continued to evolve, develop and influence societies and cultures throughout history and into modern times. Although liberalism has come to encompass many different ideas and subtleties, all forms align themselves with the idea of “unimpeded motion, or the ability to act within an autonomous sphere”. Autonomy in early American society denoted the “belief that humans are endowed with the capacity for will or agency and the consequent belief that worldly events are produced by human action, rather than providential guidance, chance, or fortune”.²

Autonomy, or human agency, was exemplified in many aspects of the early American period, consequently legitimizing its importance as a founding principle of liberalism. Perhaps the most important manifestation of agency in the early American period was the Revolution itself. Rather than subordinate to what they viewed as an abusive and exploitive power, the American people took it upon themselves to leave the relationship. In taking the initiative to improve the quality of their own lives, in the way they saw most suitable, the American colonists clearly demonstrated that they were not “slaves of fate”, so to speak. They chose to act and effectively changed worldly events of their own accord, rather than conversely staying in the unsatisfactory state and blaming abstract forces. Furstenberg argues that the Revolution combined with nationalist ideologies created a definition of American freedom that was steeped in the idea of human agency; including the ability to alter circumstances, to change the environment, to reform government and above all to resist oppression.³

“Give me liberty, or give me death,” the immortal words of patriot Patrick Henry, have stirred nationalist sentiments in the American public from the day they were spoken. However, the depth of their influence and meaning is often not fully understood. While they did, and continue to, inspire many people to fight bravely for the United States of America, militarily, politically and socially, the words also subtly reflect the early Americans’ feelings towards the condition of African American slaves. Namely, if the African Americans were in bondage it was because

² François Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virture and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 89 No. 4 (2003): 1297-1298.

³ Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery,” 1300.

African American Agency

they were allowing themselves to be kept there. White Americans had emancipated themselves from political slavery; therefore, African Americans should be able to emancipate themselves from chattel slavery. Disregarding the immense differences between the two situations, freedom was made a choice. Those who chose to act against slavery earned freedom. Those who did not choose to act, and consequently remained held in bondage, deserved to be slaves.⁴ Human agency as a means to resist oppression was a real and major aspect of liberalism. It not only held ideological clout, but also was legitimized by concrete political and social examples, which made liberalism extremely influential in the early American society.

Victory over England in the Revolution was arguably the most important demonstration of liberalism because it resulted in freedom by means of pure human agency. However, equally as strong in influence during the period was the ideology of Lockean liberalism. John Locke's philosophical work was extensive and diverse in subject matter. His political theory deeply influenced the American Revolution and subsequent development of the United States system of government, enshrined in the Constitution of 1787. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, published just after the Glorious Revolution in England (although most likely penned prior to the event), Locke explains his revolutionary ideas of the social contract and natural rights to be protected by the government. He argues man "is willing to join in society with others...to unite for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property."⁵ The United States government was fashioned on the belief that a social contract existed between the people and the government. The social contract gave the people the right, and duty, to overturn a government that became tyrannical. The root of that right stems from the idea that government exists solely for the people; to protect their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Without closer examination, or if taken out of context, Lockean liberalism looks like the ultimate contradiction to slavery. It is fundamentally for the natural rights of people and slavery is fundamentally against those rights.

Locke and many other Enlightenment thinkers, however, did not condemn slavery. In fact, many of their arguments and ideas could be turned against arguments for the abolition of slavery when it came. For

⁴ Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery," 1307.

⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London, printed for Awnsham Churchill, 1690), 160.

example, Voltaire stated that, 'if human bondage was as ancient as war, and war as human nature,' then the institution might be justified by the doctrine of sufficient reason. One of the major themes of the eighteenth century intellectual movement was Rationalism, or the ability of humans to reason and the superiority of that reason to other means of knowledge and understanding. Therefore, if slavery was a rational institution, it was neither necessary nor proper to abolish it in societies where it existed. To be sure, as Davis points out, the Enlightenment was at its height during the "golden years of the African slave trade".⁶

Arguably one of the most controversial Enlightenment topics in the early American period was the manifestation and protection of the Lockean idea of the "pursuit of happiness", or property. In an agricultural society, which existed in the early American society, property was crucial to economic success. Industrialization would come, but until it did, land and the fruits of a man's labor on that land were of utmost importance. Protecting property then was to be a main duty of the government and also the most effective form of justice in the new political system.⁷ As slaves were viewed first and foremost as property, as commodities in the proto-free market economy, many people expected the protection of the government to extend over their human property. Evidence of this sentiment is extensive, but perhaps the most well-known example is the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law. The law, while passed late in the life of slavery in the United States, demonstrated the function of the Lockean social contract in practice. Slave owners put pressure on the government to protect their property and their will was heard. Protection of property was, and remains, one of the most valued rights of the governed in the United States.

Protection of property was a natural right; however, property itself was not. Property was something to be earned. Much like the idea that freedom was something to be earned, and only those who achieved it were deserving of it, so too were property and economic prosperity. Again human agency was to be used to improve an individual's situation. If successful, property would be amassed in larger and more lucrative quantities, if unsuccessful; an individual's misfortune was a reflection of an inadequate agency. Therefore, unequal distribution of property was

⁶ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 391-392.

⁷ Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series Vol. 45 No. 1 (1998): 6.

African American Agency

inevitable. In the Federalist Papers No. 10, John Madison demonstrates this sentiment by attributing the unequal distribution of property to, “the diversities in the faculties of man,” and to their, “different and unequal faculties of acquiring property”.⁸ Slavery as an institution made economic mobility difficult. Free labor, regardless of ethical quality, is hard to compete against as a small or subsistence farmer. The elite planter class held the economic and political monopoly and the population minority; however, rather than deterring people from the institution, owning slaves became an economic aspiration of many yeomen. They viewed the opportunity to own slaves as a natural right. Whether or not that opportunity came to fruition was irrelevant in their eyes. This aspiration engendered a deep hate and racist attitude toward African American slaves. Harriet Jacobs writes in her narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, on the searches carried out in the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion. While organized by the wealthy, and frankly scared, plantation owners, the searches were executed by Southern yeomen. “It was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance and moral degradation.”⁹ While a cornerstone of liberty and freedom, the idea of property also worked against the African Americans held in bondage by legitimizing their status as a commodity and serving as an aspiration to which poor white men could work.

The contradictions that seemed to exist with the existence of slavery did not seem so radical when carefully examined and placed within the contexts of social, political and economic trends of the day. Liberalism seemed to denote liberty for all men. The unspoken second half of the definition was, “liberty for all men... who deserve it, by earning it through their own agency.” The American Revolution and consequent liberation from the political slavery of England solidified the idea that freedom was something to be earned rather than a right. The Enlightenment ideology of Lockean liberalism also seemed to imply natural rights for all, especially those of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Again, though, the ideology that seems to be anti-slavery is spun to be pro-slavery in the economic and social atmosphere of the young country.

⁸ Kramnick, “The ‘Great National Discussion,’” 6.

⁹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2000), 69.

Slavery, though, does not exist in American society today. The ideas of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are still relevant and, although not quite as crucial as in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Lockean liberalism still influences American politics and economics. But slavery is no more. The reason for the abolition of slavery could be attributed to a great number of events; and truly was caused by a combination of many different forces present in American society during the early to middle nineteenth century. However, it was the initial and continued African American response to slavery that directly challenged the social views and stereotypes of slavery and ultimately led to the abolition of slavery. The responses were varied, and manifested themselves in many different ways through many different individuals and groups of people, but all served the same purpose as proving the fact that African Americans had the right to liberty.

African American slaves, though subject to unspeakable cruelties both physically and psychologically, found ways to challenge the ideological obstacle that faced them. As stated previously, liberty and freedom resulted from human agency, or a resistance to oppression, a willingness to sacrifice life for liberty, and a refusal to live in bondage.¹⁰ Although this was not achieved as a whole, like America achieving freedom from England in a single Revolution (disregarding the blatant differences between political oppression and chattel slavery), the individual acts of human agency to achieve freedom by African American slaves could, and have, filled books. To narrow the spectrum, individual flight, work to achieving economic independence, rebellions and African American leaders will be analyzed as forces that worked directly against the ideological machine that perpetuated the existence of slavery.

Flight from bondage was one of the most dangerous acts of agency that a slave could attempt. Traveling was dangerous, and if a fugitive slave was caught, his or her punishment was often terrible. In Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Jacobs describes some of the punishments she witnessed, “They [bloodhounds] were let loose on a runaway, and, if they tracked him, they literally tore the flesh from his bones,” and, “he was captured, tied and carried back to jail... considered punishment in jail on bread and water after receiving hundreds of lashes too mild... overseer whipped him to satisfaction and placed him between the screws of the cotton gin...”¹¹ Despite the obvious physical and

¹⁰ Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery,” 1312.

¹¹ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 49-51.

African American Agency

psychological risk that flight presented, countless men, women and children decided that the chance of freedom was greater. The idea expressed in Patrick Henry's words was taken to heart by all of the individuals in bondage that attempted flight. Some achieved freedom through flight by means of their individual agency, but many others paid the ultimate price for their risk. However, even in the face of death, those individuals knew that they were fighting for something greater than even life, their freedom. Indeed, Frederick Douglass on the eve of his own first flight attempt (that was foiled before it began) is on record as having said that if he and his companions were to "falter and abandon the plan of escape would be to acknowledge that they were only 'fit to be slaves'."¹²

The liberal clout of flight did not go unnoticed or unappreciated. Although slaveholders inevitably felt indignant at the flight of one of their slaves, they more often than not attributed the cause of the event to a source other than that of the fugitive slave. Kidnapped, lured away under false pretenses or otherwise manipulated by an outside force; all were used as potential causes of flight. Anything to deny that slaves were their own agents of resistance.¹³ This shows that slaveholders recognized that slaves did have the capacity for agency. They were scared and reluctant to admit that agency; for it may have earned African Americans the opportunity of freedom.

Contemporaneous to slave flights were the efforts of slaves to become economically independent as a means to earn their freedom. Jacobs references her grandmother as a loyal and indispensable slave to her master and mistress. In as much, her grandmother asked and was granted permission to bake crackers at night after all the housework was done to sell for her own profit, granted that she clothe herself and her children from the profits.¹⁴ In doing so, this woman was able to provide for herself and her family for years and she was even able to purchase the freedom of some family members. Even without the Lockean liberal protection of rights, this woman was able to fend for herself economically. This clearly demonstrated that African Americans not only possessed individual agency, but also that they were economically competent; two major requirements of freedom in early American society. And this was just one case. In all regions of the United States individual

¹² William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1991), 53.

¹³ Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery," 1317.

¹⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 2.

slaves were selectively allowed to make small economic profits from their labor. Many worked hard for years and then purchased their own freedom. Once this was achieved they would continue to work to free family members. African Americans who achieved economic freedom were champions in the fight against ideological challenges.

The most radical and violent resistance efforts and displays of individual agency were the well-documented slave rebellions. Fashioning themselves in the likeness of the American Revolution, rebellions were the greatest fear of white slaveholders. In 1800 Gabriel Prosser of Henrico County, Virginia, made an attempt at a rebellion that was thwarted by a tattletale, similar to Frederick Douglass' first plotted flight. Had the rebellion succeeded, it would have been one of the largest in American history with almost one thousand slaves involved.¹⁵ Although Gabriel's rebellion did not come to fruition, it effectively showed the discontent of slaves and their strong will to change their situation. More disconcerting to slaveholders than Gabriel's Conspiracy was the slave uprising in San Dominique in 1791. This insurrection was as successful as the American Revolution, effectively ending French rule and establishing Haiti. It was a sobering example of what was possible in the slave society of the United States. Another successful attempt at insurrection was Nat Turner's Rebellion, one of the most successful slave rebellions in American history. In 1831, Turner organized and successfully began a rebellion of hundreds of slaves. Although brutally suppressed, his legacy lived on and sent repercussions through the United States, striking fear in the hearts of slaveholders and extensive searches of slave quarters.

Rebellion was the ultimate demonstration of liberal agency valued in America: "Give me liberty, or give me death"; resist oppression and throw off tyrannical rule. Rebellion was what led to American independence from England, and the young nation was proud of its achievement. Samuel Adams stated, "Nations are as free as they deserve to be".¹⁶ Since American colonists were willing to give the ultimate price for freedom, they "deserved" to be free. In their minds, if slaves were committed to their freedom at the same level, they too should be willing to give their lives. Rebellions, both successful and unsuccessful, were manifestations of that commitment and clearly demonstrated the slaves' desire to be free. Furstenberg states in his article that there were two

¹⁵ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, NY 1970), 219-223. From *Honors 3214-001: Reader*, 84.

¹⁶ Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery," 1295.

African American Agency

responses to slave resistance: outright denial or admission that resistance made slaves worthy of freedom.¹⁷ Flight, economic independence and rebellion all demonstrated the individual agency that African Americans possessed. Although the success of these labors must have seemed frustratingly small during the time that they were executed, they truly did plant the seeds of abolitionist thought in the minds of many people. Slowly but surely, the African American population was proving itself, against behemoth adversity, that not only were they capable of freedom, but more than deserving of it. And although these acts of agency were imperative to the beginning of the abolitionist cause, it was the leaders of the African American community that emerged in response to the contradiction of ideologies that truly proved to the nation that African Americans deserved freedom.

Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass were three African Americans who far surpassed solely demonstrating that they possessed individual agency. They proved themselves to be leaders of their communities and country. All three of these individuals escaped from slavery; a feat not achieved by many and a mark of agency in and of itself. Harriet Tubman continued her legacy through quiet action. Her efforts not only secured her own freedom, but also the freedom of two hundred other slaves.¹⁸

Truth and Douglass found their calling on the podium. Although both had very different approaches to the abolitionist movement, Truth relying on religious beliefs and Douglass focusing his efforts on the academic and political aspects, their oratory skills and proclivity to educate and inspire the masses proved their worth as individuals, citizens and leaders. A report on one of Douglass' speeches declared, "he gave a fair view of ideas, but no printed sentences can convey any adequate idea of the manner, the tone of voice, the gesticulation, the action, the round, soft swelling pronunciation with which Frederick Douglass spoke, and which no orator we have ever heard can use with such grace, eloquence and effect as he."¹⁹ Douglass himself said of Truth that she was, "a strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense... her quaint speeches easily gave her an audience."²⁰ Both individuals proved on a large scale that African Americans were human

¹⁷ Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery," 1317.

¹⁸ Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996), 201.

¹⁹ McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 213.

²⁰ Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 98.

beings who possessed individual agency and therefore deserved to be given the opportunity of freedom.

Frederick Douglass' contribution to the abolitionist movement was irreplaceable. He traveled tirelessly to speak on behalf of the antislavery movement. While still in the beginning stages of his career, he traveled to over 60 New England towns to speak in only two years.²¹ Even more influential was Douglass' relationship with Abraham Lincoln. The extent of the relationship between the two men is still unknown; however, during the course of the relationship, Lincoln changed his stance on the Civil War to that of emancipation rather than preservation of the Union. After one of the two meetings between the two men, Douglass is said to have left elated from hearing what Lincoln had to say on the subject of emancipation.²² Douglass undoubtedly had an effect on the president. His intelligence, oratory skills and perseverance were the ultimate mark of liberalism and agency; how could a man so obviously deserving of freedom be denied? Douglass' efforts aided much of the success of the abolitionist movement and the subsequent emancipation of slaves and abolition of slavery.

Flight, independent economic success, rebellion and influential leaders all served to demonstrate African Americans' agency as a people and consequently their right to freedom. All of these actions were in direct response to contradictions that existed in a young nation that boasted its liberty and protection of rights. By their actions, African Americans proved that exclusion from freedom based on the ideas of classical and Lockean liberalism was unfounded. The cross-fertilization of the two ideologies championed the ability to acquire and establish property, individual agency, a resistance to oppression and an iron will to gain freedom. It took dedicated effort and countless small actions, but eventually African Americans could not be ignored. Their actions, rather than contradict the existing ideologies, aligned with them. And after a long and up-hill battle, their efforts were acknowledged and they were given the opportunity for freedom.

²¹ McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 92.

²² McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 229.

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