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Why Has Liberty Flourished in the West?

by Jim Powell

Despite the claims of those who say one culture is as good as another, the West is clearly superior in at least one crucial respect: it brought liberty into the modern world, and liberty has made possible many other good things.

In this politically correct era, some intellectuals have been surprised to discover that the West is unique in this. For example, Harvard historical sociologist Orlando Patterson had started out to write a book explaining the origins of slavery, but he quickly realized that slavery was universal throughout the ancient world. The question to ask was why liberty emerged in the West and nowhere else, which became the subject of his National Book Award–winning *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (1991).

Patterson talked about slavery in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Slavery was commonplace in Africa before Europeans came on the scene, and in China slaves were buried alive. Patterson discussed Cherokee Indians who enslaved the war prisoners they didn't kill. He told of the Tupinamba tribe that, living in South America before the Europeans arrived, actually ate their slaves.

Patterson wanted to know why, "after taking slavery for granted since the beginning of history, the West, in a remarkably short period of time during the late eighteenth century, redefined slavery as the greatest of evils." He continued: "One of the major objectives…is to show that freedom was a peculiarly Western value and ideal…freedom has been the core value of Western culture throughout its history…. It is the West that must be scrutinized and explained for its peculiar commitment to this value."

When researching *The Triumph of Liberty,* I tried to include people from as many different countries as possible. The largest group is Americans, followed by English and French. There are three Austrians, two Dutchmen, two Italians, two Scots, a German, a Hungarian, an Irishman, a Russian, a Spaniard, a Swede, and a Swiss. Women, blacks, and Jews are well represented. I had a couple of good non-Western candidates but wasn't able to get enough biographical material on them, so the more than 60 people I ended up with were all Westerners, and I've often been questioned about this.

Well, aside from some fragmentary thoughts attributed to the Chinese wise man Lao Tzu, almost all the ideas of liberty are Western: individual rights, secure private property, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of religion, freedom of trade, separation of powers, equality before the law, and so on.

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Jim Powell is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, editor of Laissez Faire Books, editor of www.libertystory.net, and author of **The Triumph of Liberty: A 2,000-Year History, Told through the Lives of Freedom's Greatest Champions.**

In a ceremony at the Cato Institute, federal judge James L. Buckley (right) swears in Cato adjunct scholar Bradley A. Smith to the Federal Election Commission. Smith's wife, Julie, holds the family Bible.

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"Liberty flourished where enough courageous independent thinkers risked their lives for it."

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Similarly, all the protections for liberty, such as a written constitution, a bill of rights, an independent judiciary, privatization, and term limits, developed in the West. The West was the first civilization to abolish slavery. While there have been conquerors in the West, there has also been a distinguished anti-militarist tradition, with dissidents courageously speaking out against military conscription and for peace.

Why, then, did liberty originate and develop furthest in the West? Patterson suggested that Greek female slaves were the first to make liberty a value, and during the Persian Wars (492–449 B.C.) Greek men began to fear that they, too, could become slaves if captured, so liberty became a value for them.

Geography probably played a role in the development of liberty. Greece has many harbors that could shelter ships and many islands whose people were most likely to advance themselves through overseas commerce. Europe's irregular coastline, with thousands of harbors, some opening to major rivers, likewise encouraged commerce. Since commerce means contact with all kinds of people, ideas, and goods, merchants must be tolerant and rational if they are to be successful. "Coastal peoples," Thomas Sowell observed in *Migrations and Cultures* (1996), "have tended to be culturally distinctive. In touch with the outside world, they have usually been more knowledgeable and more technologically and socially advanced than interior peoples."

That there was much political competition in Europe, fragmented into many states, surely helped make it easier for liberty to arise there. Moreover, the 16th century brought religious competition. Not, it's true, within particular regions where Catholicism (southern and western Europe) or Protestantism (northern Europe) had a monopoly. But there was serious religious rivalry, something not seen in many other parts of the world. Furthermore, Protestantism itself involved competing sects. This meant tragic wars, but it also meant there was no centralized religious state. As Voltaire wrote, "If there were only one religion in England, there would be danger of tyrrany; if there were two, they would cut each other's throats; but there are thirty, and they live happily together in peace."

Although these factors explain why conditions were favorable for liberty in the West, that outcome certainly wasn't inevitable. During some periods, such as the mid–20th century, Europe was ruled by murderous dictators. Whatever gave birth to liberty wasn't always enough to preserve it.

Liberty Depends on Individuals

When all is said and done, liberty flourished where enough courageous independent thinkers risked their lives for it. We in the West are the fortunate beneficiaries of the courage of somebody who stuck his neck out first and encouraged another and another until the tradition of liberty became well established.

For example, Marcus Tullius Cicero dared to denounce the tyranny of Julius Caesar, the conqueror who had bragged that he slaughtered a quarter million Germans. After Caesar's assassination, Cicero denounced the tyranny of his successor Mark Antony, for which Antony had him beheaded, but more than a thousand years later Cicero's ideas and deeds continued to inspire people in the West.

Cicero was cherished by Erasmus, the Dutch-born champion of toleration during the 16th century. Then in 17th-century England, according to one observer, it was "the common fashion at schools" to use Cicero's *De Officiis* (On Duties) as a text on ethics. Philosopher John Locke recommended Cicero's works. Cicero's vision of natural law influenced thinkers like Locke, Samuel Pufendorf, and *Cato's Letters'* authors John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, who had the most direct intellectual impact on the American Revolution. In Germany, Cicero was admired by dramatist Friedrich Schiller. The French Baron de Montesquieu, who urged the importance of a separation of powers, considered Cicero "one of the greatest spirits." Voltaire wrote that Cicero "taught us how to think." Inspired by Cicero during the French Revolution, journalist Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray boldly attacked Maximilien de Robespierre for promoting the Reign of Terror.

Many of the due process protections we take for granted in criminal justice proceedings go back to the English "Leveller" John Lilburne, who stuck his neck out for liberty. He wrote pamphlets challenging the brutal religious monopoly of the Church of England. The standard legal practice of the time was to interrogate witnesses until they incriminated themselves, at which point they were off to prison. Lilburne refused to testify against himself. Imprisoned without being formally charged, he demanded that charges be filed so that he would have an opportunity to prove his innocence in a jury trial; these habeas corpus rights had often been disregarded. Lilburne demanded the right to be represented by a lawyer. He demanded enough time to prepare a defense. He demanded the right to cross-examine his accusers. For making these demands, he spent most of his adult life in prison, and he faced the death penalty four times.

After Lilburne's death in 1657, others followed his example and made similar demands, but they weren't hit as hard, and gradually there was a remarkable change. Historian G. M. Trevelyan observed: "The Puritan Revolution had enlarged the liberty of the accused subject against the prosecuting Government, as the trials of John Lilburne had shown.... Questions of law as well as of fact were now left to the jury, who were free to acquit without fear of consequences; the witnesses for the prosecution were now always brought into court and made to look on the prisoner as they spoke; witnesses for the defense might at least be summoned to appear; and the accused might no longer be interpellated by the King's Counsel, entangled in a rigorous inquisition, and forced to give evidence against himself. Slowly, through blood and tears, justice and freedom had been advancing." Added historian H. N. Brailsford: "Thanks to the daring of this stripling, English law does not aim from the first to last at the extraction of confessions. To Americans this right appeared so fundamental that they embodied it by the Fifth Amendment in the constitution of the United States."

Equal Rights for Blacks and Women

The ideas of Cicero, Lilburne, and Locke shaped the American political culture through the Founders, especially Thomas Jefferson,

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"William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, the greatest leaders of the movement to abolish American slavery, based their case on natural rights."

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whose eloquence on behalf of natural rights, expressed in the Declaration of Independence and other official documents and thousands of letters, had an enormous impact beyond his time. William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, the greatest leaders of the movement to abolish American slavery, frequently cited the Declaration of Independence and based their case on natural rights.

Garrison needed considerable courage, because most people in the North didn't want to hear about slavery. Anti-slavery talk threatened to disrupt business and split the Union, and besides, even people who opposed slavery didn't generally like blacks. Garrison was jailed in Baltimore. North Carolina indicted him for promoting slave revolts. The Georgia legislature offered $5,000 to anybody who brought him back to Georgia for trial and probable hanging. Six Mississippi slaveholders offered $20,000 for anyone who could deliver Garrison. Pro-slavery advocates put up a nine-foot-high gallows in front of Garrison's house, and a Boston mob tried to lynch him.

Douglass was born into slavery, fled to Massachusetts, and became a powerful speaker with his personal testimony on the horrors of slavery. He was heckled and beaten a number of times, and he remained subject to capture and return until his friends purchased his freedom. In his speeches he demanded that "the great principles of political freedom and natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence," be extended to black as well as white Americans.

Housewife Elizabeth Cady Stanton, too, was inspired by Jefferson's words. In 1848, she launched the movement to achieve equal rights for women, and her Declaration of Rights and Sentiments began much like the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Susan B. Anthony wrote in her last and most poignant letter to her compatriot Stanton, a few months before Stanton's death in October 1902, that "in age as in all else I follow you closely. It is fifty-one years since first we met and we have been busy through every one of them, stirring up the world to recognize the rights of women. . . . We little dreamed when we began this contest, optimistic with the hope and buoyancy of youth, that half a century later we would be compelled to leave the finish of the battle to another generation of women. But our hearts are filled with joy to know that they enter upon this task equipped with a college education, with business experience, with the fully admitted right to speak in public—all of which were denied to women fifty years ago. They have practically one point to gain—the suffrage; we had all. These strong, courageous, capable young women will take our place and complete our work. There is an army of them where we were but a handful. Ancient prejudice has become so softened, public sentiment so liberalized and women have so thoroughly demonstrated their ability as to leave not a shadow of doubt that they will carry our cause to victory."

Challenging Totalitarianism

It's hard to imagine a more hopeless century than the 20th, when governments murdered more than 150 million people in peacetime and tens of millions more during wars, yet it was during this time that some courageous independent thinkers vastly strengthened the case for a free society. Every one of these thinkers lived in the West, and some were exiles from tyranny.

There was the Austrian Ludwig von Mises, who, as a young economist, identified fatal flaws of socialism even before Vladimir Lenin consolidated his power in the Soviet Union. In 1940, after the fall of France, Mises fled Hitler's Europe for the United States where his books *Bureaucracy* (1944), *Omnipotent Government* (1944), and *Human Action* (1949) explained, with great sophistication, why free-market economies outperform government-run economies. He wrote these books while dozens of countries were adopting Soviet-style five-year plans, and prestigious economists ignored or ridiculed his work. Mises was dramatically vindicated by the humiliating collapse of the Soviet Union. As Robert Heilbroner conceded in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1990, "It turns out, of course, that Mises was right."

F. A. Hayek, who had studied with Mises in Vienna, proved to be every bit as independent minded as Mises. He had emigrated to London in 1931 and maintained that the Great Depression was caused by government intervention in the economy. The English economist John Maynard Keynes, however, prevailed with his view that government intervention was needed to save the economy. Since Keynes told politicians what they wanted to hear, they embraced him, and Hayek became virtually an outcast in the economics profession. During the early 1940s, in a converted barn in Cambridge, England, he wrote *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), which outraged intellectuals by saying, among other things, that totalitarianism follows from socialism. Typical of the mean-spirited attacks on Hayek was Herman Finer's book *The Road to Reaction*. Hayek, like Mises, has been vindicated by unfolding events, in particular his insistence that political liberty is impossible without economic liberty.

Milton Friedman didn't have an easy time, either. The son of Russian immigrants, he encountered fierce resistance. His Ph.D. was held up four years because of his maverick views. He took a lot of flak for saying that the Great Depression was caused by bad monetary policies rather than the private sector, but the massive documentation he gathered with Anna J. Schwartz has prevailed among economists. And although Friedman was long ridiculed for advocating the repeal of many popular laws, he went on to win friends for liberty around the world.

If there ever was a bold independent thinker, it was Ayn Rand. She grew up under Soviet communism and resolved to escape, which she did in 1926. She dreamed of becoming a Hollywood screenwriter, which seemed preposterous. She earned only $100 in royalties from her first novel, *We the Living* (1936), but she wouldn't give up. She had a very hard time finding a U.S. publisher for her little book *Anthem*. Her third book, *The Fountainhead* (1943), brought only a $1,000 advance after four years of work, but still she kept at it. The success of this book and the resulting movie enabled her to spend 14 years working on *Atlas Shrugged*, which together with her

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other writings made such a compelling moral case for individualism and liberty.

Over the years, there have been many unsung heroes working behind the scenes. For example, the Greek bookseller Atticus who paid Cicero's bills during his years of exile. Hugo Grotius had been imprisoned for defending free will in Calvinist Holland, but a 20-year-old maid, Elsje van Houwening, helped him escape, and he went on to write his most famous work, *The Law of War and Peace*. The Dutch Quaker merchant Benjamin Furley provided a sanctuary for William Penn, John Locke, and Algernon Sidney when they were exiles. Robert Morris arranged much of the financing for the American Revolution and raised money so George Washington could take his troops from New York to Yorktown, Virginia, where he defeated British General Charles Cornwallis. Marguerite de Bonneville brought the impoverished and dying Thomas Paine into her New York City home, so he could spend his last days in a little comfort. Arthur Tappan, Louis Tappan, and other Quakers backed William Lloyd Garrison, enabling him to carry on. Support from Ellen Winsor, Rebecca Winsor Evans, and Edmund C. Evans made it possible for Albert J. Nock to write some of his best books including *Mr. Jefferson* and *Our Enemy, The State*. Journalist Henry Hazlitt helped land some writing assignments for Ludwig von Mises after he arrived in the United States. Hazlitt helped Mises' stepdaughter get out of Nazi-controlled Paris and helped persuade Yale University Press to publish Mises' books *Bureaucracy, Omnipotent Government,* and *Human Action*. Harold Luhnow paid Mises' salary at New York University; he paid F. A. Hayek's salary at the University of Chicago; he funded lectures that Milton and Rose Friedman turned into *Capitalism and Freedom;* and he approved the grant that enabled Murray Rothbard to write *Man, Economy and State*. Inspired by Hayek, Antony Fisher provided the seed money for the Institute of Economic Affairs in London and then helped to establish free-market institutes around the globe.

History shows that when liberty isn't adequately defended, it tends to slip away as intellectuals promote statist ideas, special interests lobby for favors, and politicians gain more power. All of us can play an important role by keeping ourselves informed, educating our children, speaking up at school meetings, telling our friends, using our professional influence, contributing time and money to help keep this uniquely glorious civilization alive. ■

EVENTS *Continued from page 5*

◆**July 20:** House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) led a panel discussion of the infringements on free speech that go hand in hand with campaign finance restrictions at a Cato Policy Forum, **"The Future of Campaign Finance Reform,"** sponsored by Cato's new Center for Representative Government. He emphasized the importance of an open political process, warning that "big government is the corrupting influence about which we should be most concerned." Joining DeLay on the panel were Alexander Vogel, deputy counsel to the Republican National Committee, who took a more conciliatory stance against spending restrictions, and James V. DeLong, adjunct scholar at the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

◆**July 27:** Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was voted out of power in July, bringing to an end seven decades of rule. Fausto Alzati, economic adviser to president-elect Vicente Fox of Mexico, discussed the incoming administration's economic policies at a Cato Policy Forum, **"Mexico in a New Era of Openness: What to Expect from Vicente Fox."** Alzati predicted that Fox's "commitment to high growth will be maintained. He's not stepping back. He believes strongly that high growth is needed" to bring down interest rates and recreate a credit market. Roberto Salinas-León, director of policy analysis at T.V. Azteca in Mexico City and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, warned against "unrealistic expectations" of Fox. Luis Carlos Ugalde, chief of staff of the Mexican embassy in Washington, discussed the changing nature of the Mexican presidential system.

◆**July 29–August 4:** As part of its Cato University program, the Cato Institute sponsored a seminar at the elegant Rancho Bernardo Inn near San Diego. Faculty at **Cato University** included Cato's Tom Palmer and Dan Griswold; University of Alabama history professor David Beito; Foundation for Economic Education president Donald Boudreaux; Boston University law professor and Cato adjunct scholar Randy Barnett; and Stephen Davies, professor of history at Manchester University in the United Kingdom. Guest lecturers included Virginia Postrel, editor-at-large, *Reason* magazine; Charles Mensa, managing director of the Institute of Economic Affairs in Ghana; best-selling author Barbara Branden; Madeleine Pelner Cosman, professor emerita at the City University of New York; and Deroy Murdock, cofounder of Third Millennium and a policy adviser to Cato. ■

Cato executive vice president David Boaz chats during lunch with Cato University participants. Erne Lewis of Washington listens.