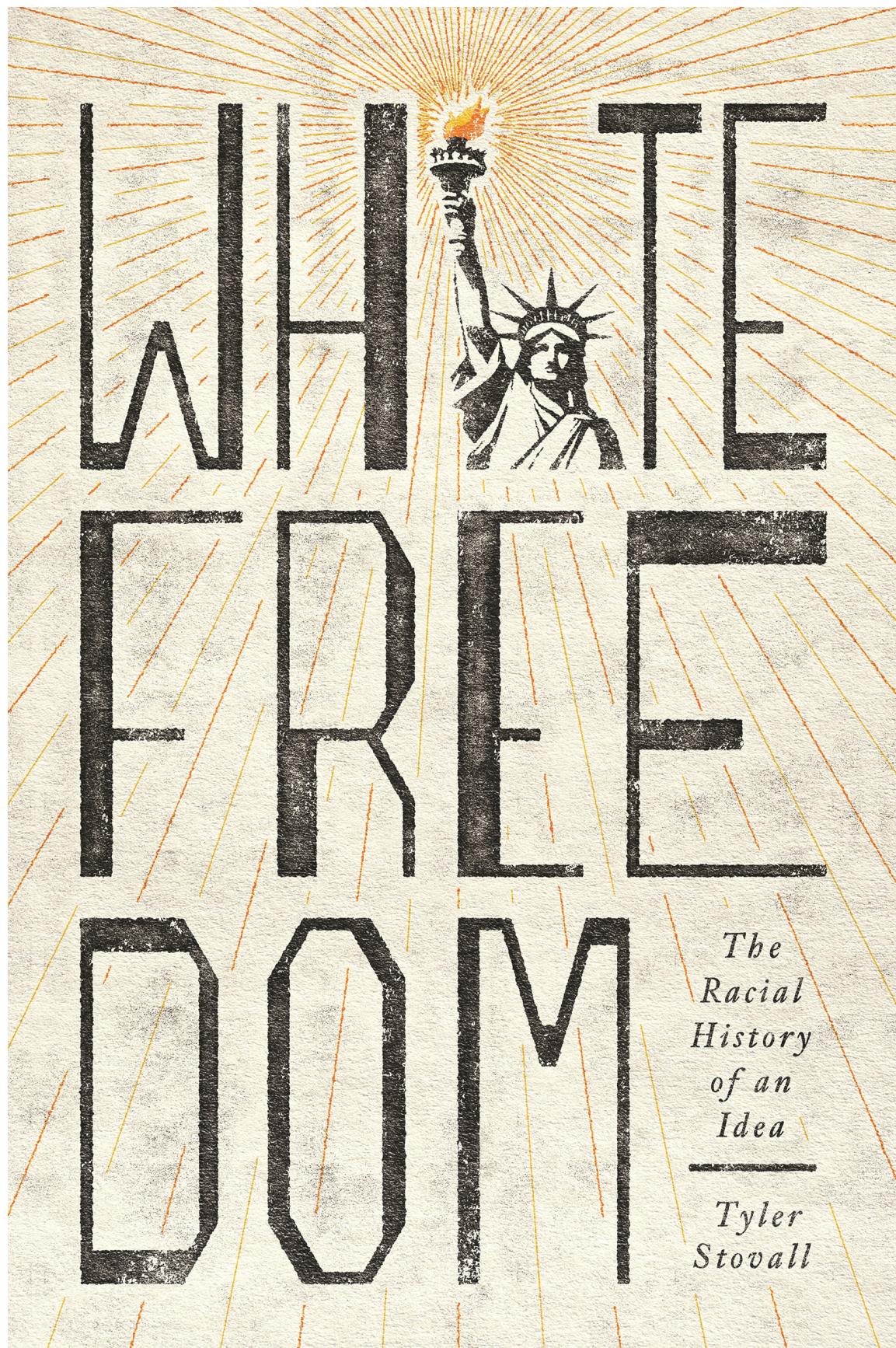


# White Freedom

Tyler Stovall





WHITE FREEDOM



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*The Racial History of an Idea*

Tyler Stovall

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*For Justin*

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If we are lucky, there comes a time in the life of every historian of the modern world when the histories we study and our own life experiences

begin to intersect. I remember at one point in the late 1990s introducing my course on twentieth-century Europe by saying I'd been teaching the course since before the fall of the Berlin Wall, prompting many students to regard me as an ancient relic. This is true of my experience writing this book, in more ways than one. Its final chapter mostly deals with events that happened during my lifetime. I was born a few months after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that marked the start of the civil rights movement, and involvement in that movement shaped much of my childhood and youth. Like everyone I knew, I grew up the child of a World War II veteran, in my case one who boasted of having seen opera in La Scala and who kept a German Luger in the house. As a graduate student in French history I chose to study the Paris suburbs, and over time saw that area emerge as the new symbol of multicultural France in the twentieth century. I lived through the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in Europe and the rise of the New Right here in America. Much of my life has thus been shaped by changing ideas of freedom and race and the intersections between them.

These personal reflections help explain why I came to write this book, why I felt I had to. I did so not just because I regarded the subject as critically important for our past, present, and future, but equally because the

idea simply would not leave me alone, waking me up in the middle of the night more than once to ponder the subject. In the end, so much of what I and many other historians and scholars have studied seemed to come down to different visions of these two key concepts, so I decided it was worth trying to write a history of them, and of the relationship between them.

\* \* \*

*White Freedom* deals with a subject at once personal, national, and global, belonging both to the past and the present. It explores the ways in which two seemingly opposite philosophies, liberty and racism, are in significant ways not opposites at all, and its explorations cover two centuries, from the Enlightenment to the present. Global in scope, at the same time it devotes particular attention to two countries where this opposition has loomed largest in modern history, France and the United States. In doing so, it attempts to offer new perspectives on some very old problems and concerns, to help us understand not just the interactions of freedom and race over time but the making of the modern world in general. I certainly admit this is an ambitious undertaking: whether or not it has succeeded is up to the reader to judge.

If history and my life as an historian have taught me one thing, it is that no one can do this alone. Many people and institutions played a role in

bringing *White Freedom* to the light of day, and I am privileged to express my gratitude and indebtedness to all of you. First and foremost I should thank my editors at Princeton University Press, who helped me take a vague idea, or hope, and transform it into a book. Brigitta van Rheinberg first listened to my idea and shepherded me through developing a proposal and starting to write the book. Since she moved on to other responsibilities I've been very fortunate to work with Eric Crahan, who has consistently encouraged me along while at the same time challenging me to write my ideas as effectively as possible. I'd also like to thank Thalia Leaf, who has been a godsend in dealing with some of the more technical aspects of publishing a book as well as contributing her own solid critical ideas. All in all, working with the people at Princeton University Press has been a dream, and I am honored to be one of their authors.

Friends and colleagues in France made a major contribution to making this book a reality. I have been extremely fortunate to have found a group of colleagues at the Université de Paris VIII, probably the leading academic institution in France when it comes to the study of race. I gave my first presentation based on this material as part of their groundbreaking *Seminaire sur l'histoire sociale des populations noires en France*, and ever since then have remained in close contact with them. In particular I would

like to thank Emmanuelle Sibeud, Sylvain Pattieu, Audrey Celestine, Michel Giraud, and Sarah Fila-Bakabadio for making Paris my academic home away from home, for giving me a sense of intellectual comradeship so important to me while writing this book.

Colleagues and friends at my own institution, the University of California at Santa Cruz, have also earned my thanks and my gratitude for helping make *White Freedom* possible. The Center for Cultural Studies graciously let me present some of my findings at their weekly seminar; I would like to thank Anjali Arondekar, Maya Peterson, Mayanthi Fernando, Gail Hershatter, Alan Christy, Hunter Bivens, Wlad Godzich, Jodi Greene, and the other attendees for their suggestions and encouragement. I was particularly honored that the directors of The Humanities Institute, Nathaniel Deutsch and Irena Polic, chose to adopt the idea of freedom and race as the organizing theme for the institute's academic program one year; I learned a lot from the various seminars and talks held at Santa Cruz on the subject. I wrote this book while serving as dean of the Humanities at Santa Cruz, and I am especially grateful to the divisional staff for all their efforts on behalf of my work on this book. In particular I'd like to thank Judy Plummer, Katie Novak, Julie Kruger, Jay Olson, and Amy Bruinooge for all their help. I also want to thank the Humanities Division and the Academic

Senate of UC Santa Cruz for their support of my research.

During this period I also served as president of the American Historical Association, which gave me my first opportunity to publish my findings from this project in the pages of the *American Historical Review*. I am very grateful to the staff of that journal for the work in publishing my article. I'm grateful to Oxford University Press for allowing me to use material from that article in my book. More generally, I would like to thank James Grossman, the AHA executive director, for constantly encouraging my work and never letting me or anyone else forget why history matters.

Finally, and most important, I want to thank my friends and family. I have been privileged to work with graduate students at both Santa Cruz and Berkeley, and my former students remain some of my closest intellectual peers. Michael Vann invited me to give my first talk on this project at CSU–Sacramento, embarrassing me with his effusive introduction, and Naomi Andrews recruited me to give a keynote address at the Western Society for French History. Both Robin Mitchell and Felix Germain have remained close colleagues and friends, their own scholarship inspiring my own work. In Paris, Jim Cohen, Richard Allen, and Elizabeth Altschull have always laid out the welcome mat for me, facilitating not only my research but my understanding of France in general. I thank you all.

Above all, I am grateful to my wife, Denise Herd, and our son, Justin Stovall. Throughout the years Denise has done all she could to support my research, including keeping the home fires burning during trips to conferences and for research. Her own very important scholarship on race, Black culture, and public health remains an inspiration to me. When I started this book Justin was just entering middle school, and now he is a sophomore in college; the boy has become a man. I owe him more than I can ever say, or perhaps even understand, but let me just thank him for constantly reminding this historian devoted to the study of the past that it's the future that really counts.

My thanks to you all! I hope you enjoy this book and find it worthy of your investments in me over the years. It could not have happened without you.

## WHITE FREEDOM

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Freedom and Its Dark Sides*

We hold these truths to be self-evident: 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.

—AMERICAN DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, 1776

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.

—DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND THE CITIZEN,  
PARIS, 1789

Free, white, and twenty-one.

—TRADITIONAL AMERICAN SAYING

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the American Congress appointed a task force to investigate the veracity of a persistent rumor that the US Capitol Building, among other official structures in Washington, DC, had been built by the labor of Black slaves. Rumors to this effect had existed for some time, but recent revelations of receipts for payments for slaves found in the Treasury Department had lent them new credence. Accordingly, Congress created the Slave Labor Task Force, in order to investigate the rumors and decide what, if anything, the federal government should do in response to them. In 2005 the task force released its report, entitled “History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol,” concluding that the rumors were true:

Soon after it was finished in the 1820s, the Capitol began to be called the “Temple of Liberty” because it was dedicated to the cherished ideas of freedom, equality, and self determination. How, then, can a building steeped in those noble principles have been constructed with the help of

slave labor? The first step in the Capitol’s evolution was taken in the last decade of the eighteenth century and was, in fact, assisted by the toil of bondsmen—mainly slaves rented from local owners to help build the Capitol and the city of Washington....

The irony of slaves helping to build America’s “Temple of Liberty” is potent. It is instructive, however, to recall that other landmarks of American freedom were also built with a similar labor force or in other ways intertwined with the institution of slavery. Faneuil Hall, for instance—Boston’s celebrated “Cradle of Liberty”—was given to the city by a slave owner whose fortune was founded on the slave trade. America’s oldest lending library, the Redwood Library in Newport, Rhode Island, was founded in 1747 with the help of New England’s largest slaveholder, Abraham Redwood. Two well-known Massachusetts leaders, Cotton Mather and John Winthrop, were also slave owners. Independence Hall was built at a time when slavery was widespread in Pennsylvania. Indeed, the colony’s Quaker founder, William Penn, was also a slave owner. [1](#)

The report’s conclusions led Congress to take several actions to rectify the historical record and acknowledge the role played by African slaves in building the Capitol. Unlike most congressional activities at the time, they

represented a bipartisan effort, reaffirming the accord of both Democrats and Republicans. In 2007 Congress agreed to rename the Great Hall of the Capitol Visitor's Center "Emancipation Hall," in honor of the slaves who helped build it. As Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. argued, "Emancipation is the great, enduring theme of our nation's still unfolding story. Without emancipation, our house divided would not have stood. We would not be a beacon of freedom and democracy around the world. We would never have had, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, 'a new birth of freedom.' "<sup>2</sup> Both the House and the Senate overwhelmingly approved the measure in November 2007, and President George W. Bush signed it into law the following January. Two years later, on June 16, 2010, congressional leaders from both parties unveiled two plaques in Emancipation Hall that honored the work of enslaved African Americans in building the Capitol. <sup>3</sup>



FIGURE 1. “Emancipation Hall.” Scott J. Ferrell/Congressional Quarterly/Getty Images.

The story of Emancipation Hall in many ways tells an inspiring and moving story of a nation’s willingness to come to terms, across party lines, with its slave heritage. But it also raises some interesting and ultimately rather unsettling questions. Why would one name a building constructed by slaves Emancipation Hall as a way of honoring their legacy and history? They certainly weren’t emancipated when they worked there. Freedom undoubtedly represented the aspiration of those whose forced labor built the Capitol, and so much of America, but it was definitely not their reality and

did not express the nature of their lives. Probably very few of them lived to see the end of slavery. How could naming the structure they built Emancipation illustrate the nature of lives lived without freedom? If one really wanted to acknowledge them, why not call the building Slave Hall? Why would it be impossible to imagine an official government building in a country that claimed freedom as its greatest value with that name? Did the name Emancipation Hall, far from honoring the slaves who helped build it, instead represent yet another denial of their own history? If so, why did all of official Washington, including African American legislators descended from slaves, rush to embrace it?

Questions like these inspired and lay at the heart of this book, *White Freedom*. This study considers two seminal values in the modern world, freedom and race, and the relationship between them.

The relationship between freedom and race has been one of the key themes of modern society and politics in the Western world. Scholars and social commentators have long noted that the era of the Enlightenment, which emphasized the importance of freedom and in many ways codified our modern understandings of the idea, also witnessed the height of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>4</sup> The enduring presence of racism in the history of America, a nation built simultaneously upon ideas of liberty and upon

African slavery, Indian genocide, and systematic racial discrimination, has provided one of the most dramatic (but certainly not the only) example of this complex [relationship.<sup>5</sup>](#) To take one specific example, historians of the American Revolution have struggled for generations to conceptualize a war for liberty that preserved and reinforced slavery, and the debate has by no [means come to an end.<sup>6</sup>](#)

Commentators have often portrayed the relationship between freedom and race in paradoxical terms, as the quotation from the 2005 Congressional report cited above makes clear. If liberty represents the acme of Western civilization, racism—embodied above all by horrible histories like the slave trade and the Holocaust—is its nadir. The two classic statements of freedom that open this introduction illustrate this contradiction: the first was written by a man, Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves; [7](#) the second was written by representatives of a nation that owned one of the greatest slave colonies, Saint-Domingue, the world had ever [seen.<sup>8</sup>](#) Some argue that one represents the essence of modern societies while the other is more peripheral; [9](#) others (for example, Black nationalist Malcolm X) contend the reverse, that racism is the true inescapable reality of Western culture and society. [10](#) In general, however, perspectives on freedom and race tend to posit them as opposites, and the relationship between them as paradoxical and ironic, one due more

to human inconsistencies and frailties than to any underlying logics.

*White Freedom* takes issue with this consensus, suggesting instead that the relationship between liberty and racism is not necessarily contradictory but rather has its own internal consistency. In short, I reject the idea of a paradoxical relationship between the two; to my mind there is no contradiction. The central theme of this study is that to an important extent, although certainly not always, ideas of freedom in the modern world have been racialized. In particular, many have considered whiteness and white racial identity intrinsic to modern liberty. Models of autonomy and self-empowerment have often come with a racial dimension, as reflected in the popular saying, “free, white, and twenty-one.” To be free is to be white, and to be white is to be free. In this reading, therefore, freedom and race are not just enemies but also allies, *frères ennemis* whose histories cannot be understood separately. Put baldly, at its most extreme freedom can be and historically has been a racist ideology.

The example with which I began this book, Emancipation Hall, illustrates this point nicely. As I will discuss later in this introduction, scholars of various persuasions have long argued that slavery and the treatment of nonwhites in general fundamentally contradicted Western ideas of freedom, and as a case in point would point to the use of slave labor to

build the US Capitol building. The dedication of part of the building as Emancipation Hall in memory of the slaves who built it shows, however, that one cannot simply extend the narrative of freedom to those who were not free without making a mockery of their own history. This approach in effect seeks to preserve traditions of liberty grounded in whiteness, rather than to unpack the role played by race in creating and maintaining those traditions. It tries to integrate African American ideas of freedom into a building constructed in violation of them as a way of embracing a multicultural vision of liberty, but can do so only by ignoring the dominant narrative that saw freedom as embodied in whiteness.

*White Freedom* thus challenges the idea that freedom and race are necessarily opposites, arguing instead that both historically and in the present day they have worked together to construct white identity. The pages that follow will show the many different ways in which freedom has functioned as an essential part of white identity, and by contrast the ways lack of freedom and the lack of white racial identity have gone together. Rather than see this relationship as paradoxical, it argues that in many cases it has been absolutely essential to what it means to be white (and therefore to be nonwhite). The book will therefore consider not just different examples of white freedom but more generally its evolution as concept and

practice over the two hundred-plus years from the Enlightenment to the present day.

One can easily anticipate objections that many might make to such a thesis. Two in particular stand out in my mind. First, how can one condemn as racist, or even racialized, a broad human goal that has stood for the best in mankind, that has motivated millions and millions of people throughout history to fight and die for the rights of all? Let me state from the outset that this study does not aim to condemn the desire for freedom, to sully it by labeling it racist. Rather, I wish to consider the ways in which the ideal of freedom, like many other aspects of modern human politics and society, has had a racial dimension. Notably, the notion that whites in particular should be (and have been) free, and that freedom foregrounded the interests and goals of white populations, is one this study will explore.

The second objection also bears a lot of weight. Given that so many movements *against* racism have embraced an identity as freedom struggles (decolonization and the civil rights movement are perhaps the most prominent examples of these), how can one refer to freedom as a racist ideology? How can one characterize as white an ideal that inspired so many people of color to sacrifice everything for it? My answer to that is that freedom has never just been white; there are many political variants of

human liberty. In particular many great popular struggles have been waged in the modern era to bring freedom to all men and women. But in many ways that is my point: peoples of color have had to fight for inclusion into the idea of freedom, in fact not just struggling to be part of white freedom but to overthrow it as a concept and as a social and political reality. Those struggles have had their victories but also their defeats, and have never succeeded in completely destroying the relationship between freedom and race in the modern world.

To a certain extent both these objections rest upon a foundational belief that freedom is a positive human value, whereas racism is its evil antithesis. I certainly believe in human liberty and reject racial discrimination, as do probably most people in the contemporary world. But also, as an historian I understand that such convictions are not only not universal, but have also changed over time. As I will discuss more extensively in [chapter 1](#), people have not always viewed freedom as a positive value, and there are important ways in which that is still true. One need only substitute *anarchy* for freedom, for instance, to understand that the idea of liberty can have serious negative connotations. Similarly, the idea of the *libertine* represents a person whose freedom is immoral, destructive, and ultimately self-destructive. The contrast between ideas of a political activist understood as

a *freedom fighter* versus a *terrorist* shows how warriors for liberty can be seen in both positive and negative [terms.<sup>11</sup>](#) A central theme of the history of freedom, one which this book will consider, is how as a social and political value it was in effect domesticated, embedded in governmental systems that limited the autonomy of the individual for the effective functionality of the collectivity.

If freedom has not always been good, equally race and racial discrimination have not always been seen as bad. Obviously, this was true in fundamentally racist societies like Nazi Germany and the antebellum American South, but the idea of racial differentiation as a positive value—one that emphasized the biological differences between peoples—also existed in cultures that did not embrace overt racism. A belief in racial difference did not have to necessitate racial oppression, for example, but could be seen instead as a way of maximizing the inherent and distinct qualities of each race. Ideas of race were intimately intertwined with the rise of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe, for example, to the extent that the modern nation was seen as a political formation that could affirm and advance the racial interests of a people. Romantic literature also embraced a frequently positive vision of race, as one can see in novels like Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* or James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the*

*Mohicans.* [12](#) Finally, the rise of racial pride movements such as Black nationalism often served to mobilize and empower members of ethnic minority groups. [13](#) The response to racial discrimination has been as much racial pride as antiracism, and the two have at times gone together. Very few people willingly embrace what they perceive to be evil. The construction of white freedom rested on the idea that both liberty and white racial identity were not only positive values but also in many ways inseparable. This history will explore the rise of this phenomenon across the modern period, considering how a belief in freedom developed in the context of increasing racial differentiation. This study will explore, for example, how the first represented a reaction to the second, and also how the two phenomena interacted and even mutually reinforced each other. The chronological scope of this study is the modern era, from roughly the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth, in particular the two hundred years from 1789 to 1989. Although freedom and racial difference have existed for a long time, they came together in the modern era, and together they have played a major role in shaping the world we know today. In terms of geography, it lies somewhere between comparative and world history. As a generation of transnational historians has argued, the story of mankind is not limited by the boundaries of the nation-state, and so

we must consider the ways in which those boundaries are transgressed or even ignored as much as created and maintained.<sup>14</sup> In fact, one type of freedom, freedom to migrate elsewhere in search of a better life, directly speaks to the global nature of liberty. At times, therefore, this study will look at the relationship between freedom and race in different parts of the world, considering how particular issues played out in a variety of geographical settings.

At the same time, however, this is not a world history per se. It does not systematically pursue the history of freedom and race on a global scale. Rather, I generally focus on two areas: Europe, and within Europe France in particular; and the United States. An American born and bred, I trained professionally as an historian of France and have during the course of my career written books and articles that consider the intersections of both national histories. For me, a comparative approach to history is a fruitful way to consider transnationalism, one that considers not the absence of nation-states but their interactions.

There are other justifications for focusing a transnational history of freedom and race on France and the United States. There now exists a significant historical literature comparing the world's two great republics, one that has made important contributions to comparative and world

history.<sup>15</sup> In particular, France and America are both countries for whom the ideal of freedom is absolutely central to their national identities. For the French, liberty is intimately associated with their national history. The Germanic tribes who settled post-Roman France called themselves Franks, which meant free in their language, and gave the name to their nation. Modern France is of course grounded in the experience of the French Revolution, whose classic slogan, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, gives freedom pride of place. <sup>16</sup>

Equally, most Americans would argue that the United States stands for freedom more than anything else, and perhaps more than any other nation. As historian Eric Foner states in the preface to his seminal study *Give Me Liberty! An American History*: “No idea is more fundamental to Americans’ sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political language, freedom … is deeply embedded in the record of our history and the language of everyday life.” <sup>17</sup> Moreover, in both countries the idea of freedom has generally had a universal character: all peoples should be free, not just their own, a belief that at times has guided imperial expansion, foreign policy, and participation in the great wars of the modern era.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, as this study will explore, the histories of both France and the United States have been shaped by racial difference,

highlighting the perceived contradictions between freedom and racism in the modern world as a whole. In both cases these two concepts and practices often represent the best and the worst of their national histories. The modern histories of France and the United States, and the comparisons between them, thus form the meat of this book. However, they are not its exclusive focus. One could hardly write a study of freedom and race in the modern era without considering the history of imperialism, for example, and that means attention to other imperial formations, especially Britain and the British Empire. [19](#) Similarly, twentieth-century fascism also speaks to this complex history in a variety of ways, so one must take into consideration the history of fascist Italy and especially Nazi Germany. [20](#) Moreover, in the twentieth century conflicts between capitalism and communism helped shape debates about both freedom and race, especially (but not only) in the era of decolonization and the cold war, so that one must also explore that history. Ultimately, of course, there are few aspects of modern world history that do not touch upon the themes of race and/or freedom to some degree, so as this project grew I found myself frequently venturing into unfamiliar territory. It is a measure of the importance of this topic that I nonetheless managed for the most part to keep it at the center of my narrative.

Finally, I should note that my thinking about the relationship between freedom and race has been strongly influenced by ideas of whiteness, and the scholarly literature on whiteness studies.<sup>21</sup> Whiteness scholars have shown how racial identity belongs just as much to socially dominant strata as to the oppressed, and it makes sense to consider the history of an ideology that generally symbolizes empowerment in this light.

Consequently, this book's analysis of freedom links it not so much with racial categories of all sorts, but more specifically with racial superiority, i.e., whiteness. One could easily imagine a negative image of freedom as savagery, and that idea of freedom being associated with blackness; I will in fact consider aspects of this possibility in [chapter 1](#). But for the most part this study will consider the ways that positive ideas about freedom interacted with, both drawing upon and promoting, ideas of white racial identity as an elite social and political status.

*White Freedom*, then, explores the modern history of two seminal concepts, freedom and race, and the relationship between them. In particular it considers how our ideas about freedom have been shaped by racial thinking, arguing that for much of the modern era liberty and white privilege have frequently been strange bedfellows at worst, soul mates at best. It certainly does not argue that white freedom is the only kind of

freedom, that all modern visions of liberty are racist. It does suggest, however, that belief in freedom, specifically in one's entitlement to freedom, was a key component of white supremacy. In societies governed by racial hierarchy, the whiter one was, the more free one was. Conversely, those who could not claim white identity were in many cases those who lacked freedom. The contrasts between white citizens, nonwhite colonial subjects, and Black slaves provide the most obvious examples of this, but they are not the only ones. As this study will show, the nature of white privilege and freedom certainly changed over time, but the link between the two remained tight enough to accentuate its continued existence as an historical phenomenon.

Ultimately to chronicle the history of white freedom is also to chronicle the history of struggles against it, struggles for a more conclusive idea of liberty that would free all women and men. This study focuses more on the former than the latter, primarily because I feel this story is less familiar, but both are of crucial importance. To explore the history and power of white freedom is hopefully to give a better sense of what those who fought against it were up against, a better understanding and appreciation of their heroic efforts. If whiteness and freedom are frequently allied in modern history, so are struggles against both racism and the lack of freedom, and not

necessarily just for peoples of color. In exploring how freedom was limited and shaped by racial difference, one must also consider the history of those who insisted on freedom for all. This too, in the end, is part of the history of white freedom.

### Defining White Freedom

So far I have discussed white freedom as the relationship between two seminal concepts, but the time has come for a more organic, concise statement of definition. What is white freedom? How can one define a concept born of such different and contrasting ideas?

For the purposes of this study, I therefore define white freedom as the belief (and practice) that freedom is central to white racial identity, and that only white people can or should be free. Such a definition can lend itself to several different interpretations. At one level, white freedom seems merely another version of white supremacy, the belief that whites are superior to other peoples on racial grounds. From this perspective, freedom seems the ultimate symbol of white racial superiority and privilege. Whites are free because they are smarter, more powerful, or more morally deserving than other peoples. Such an argument can easily slip into a kind of circular logic: whites are freer than other races because they are better, and they are better than others because they are more free. White supremacy did not in modern

history necessarily imply racial hostility; one can portray whites as better than others without attacking those others (as we shall see, much writing about race during the Enlightenment did exactly that). In practice, however, the idea that one must subjugate other races in order to preserve the freedom of whites has played a central role in the development of white freedom, just as the example of such subjugation has served to affirm the association of freedom with whiteness.

Ultimately, however, the meaning of white freedom transcended racism and white supremacy, emphasizing instead how ideas of liberty in general were grounded in whiteness. The classic exploration of this is Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*. In this seminal study Morgan considers how African slavery contributed to the development of the idea of freedom in colonial Virginia, a key aspect of what he terms "the central paradox of American history."<sup>22</sup> He shows not only how slavery lay at the root of the prosperity that made visions of freedom and independence in colonial America possible, but also how the creation of a massive slave population (forty percent of the residents of colonial Virginia by the eighteenth century) enabled the unity of elite and working-class whites around ideas of freedom. According to Morgan, whites in colonial Virginia prized freedom so much precisely because they could see every day what it

meant to live without it.<sup>23</sup> As he argued in his conclusion:

Racism thus absorbed in Virginia the fear and contempt that men in England, whether Whig or Tory, monarchist or republican, felt for the inarticulate lower classes. Racism made it possible for white Virginians to develop a devotion to the equality that English republicans had declared to be the soul of liberty. There were too few free poor on hand to matter. And by lumping Indians, mulattoes, and Negroes in a single pariah class, Virginians had paved the way for a similar lumping of small and large planters in a single master class. <sup>24</sup>

Although grounded in the racist belief that slaveholding America was a land of free people because African slaves were not people, this idea of white freedom emphasized the identity of whites rather than the oppression of Blacks. In fact, for it to function as a hegemonic creed of what it meant to be American, the position of African Americans and other peoples of color had to be reduced to inconvenient exceptions in a grand narrative of freedom, or preferably ignored altogether. In this sense, therefore, white freedom transcended, or at least sought to transcend, white supremacy and racism by casting freedom as a universal value. As scholars of whiteness have shown, portraying white identity as universal served to mask the very real relations of power that made it possible. I argue that in fact the

juxtaposition of white freedom and Black slavery was not a paradox, precisely because it arose out of the immutable facts of race. As this book will show, celebrations of liberty in the modern world often had a racial dimension, and the refusal to recognize this dimension played a key role in the development of white freedom.

White freedom thus lay at the heart of the constitution of whiteness as a social and ultimately political identity. As an ideology it argued that to be white meant having control of one's own destiny, of being free from domination by others. The myth of the freeborn Englishman or the ideal of the yeoman American farmer rested above all on not being a slave, and in the modern era that increasingly meant not being a Black slave. And it also meant a sense of natural rights that by the nineteenth century more and more people viewed as universal. Analyzing the history of white freedom thus means uncovering the racial dimensions of a concept usually defined as belonging to all members of the human race. It means remembering that to be human itself has often been defined in racial terms.

### Freedom and Race in Historiography and Theory

As Eric Foner has pointed out in his sweeping history of freedom in America, the idea of liberty is so popular that virtually every significant political movement in American history has embraced it as an identification

and a goal. [25](#) Freedom seems universally valued and sought after, not just in the United States but throughout much of the modern world, yet it is at times difficult to define. What, after all, does it mean to be free, and how have the meanings changed according to time and place? [26](#)

In one sense, of course, women and men have been writing about freedom as long as they have been free to write. Many eras of human history, notably ancient Greece and Rome, the Renaissance and Reformation, and the Enlightenment, have produced major texts about liberty. [27](#) In this book, however, both for reasons of economy and because of

my particular topic, I will discuss modern historical and theoretical writers about freedom. This modern historiography really begins with John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), followed by the essays of Lord Acton in the late nineteenth century, and then is carried on by a number of writers in the mid-twentieth century, notably Isaiah Berlin. [28](#) The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of Soviet communism spurred a new interest in the history of liberty. [29](#)

A number of scholars have written general histories of human freedom, seeking to reveal the basic outlines of this idea across historical time. A few basic themes and traits characterize much of this historiography. Much of it has a teleological orientation, charting the evolution of humanity from

oppression to freedom. Often this goes along with the story of the rise of the West, starting with the ancient Greeks and Romans and culminating with contemporary liberal democracy. In the preface to the first volume of his massive study *Freedom*, sociologist Orlando Patterson observes, “No one would deny that today freedom stands unchallenged as the supreme value of the Western world.... There is now hardly a country whose leaders, however dubiously, do not claim that they are pursuing the ideal. The very hypocrisy and absurdity of many of these claims attest to the enormous power of this ideal. People may sin against freedom, but no one dares deny its virtue.”<sup>30</sup>

Closely aligned with this emphasis on freedom as a key factor in the making of the modern world is a strong emphasis on the politics of freedom, and of liberalism in particular. For many writers on the topic, freedom and classic liberal philosophy are virtually indistinguishable, and the basic principles of liberalism largely define modern ideas of freedom. This is especially true of the many books about freedom written during or after the collapse of Soviet communism and the resurgence of neo-liberal politics at the end of the twentieth century. <sup>31</sup> In *Freedom: A History* (1990), Donald W. Treadgold sees freedom as characterized by a few essential traits: political pluralism; social pluralism and diversity; property rights; the

rule of law; individualism. [32](#) Similarly, in a book publishing the results of a conference comparing liberty in France and the US, editors Joseph Klaits and Michael H. Haltzel make the evolution of liberalism in both countries key to the history of freedom. [33](#) Some writers see not just liberalism but also democracy, especially in the form of liberal democracy, as integral to the history of freedom. [34](#)

Another important approach to the history of freedom is the story of freedom struggles. Historians of minority and oppressed groups have also frequently crafted those histories as narratives of overcoming discrimination and achieving freedom. A classic example of this is one of the first major studies of African American history, John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*, which cast the long fight against racism and for racial equality as a freedom struggle. [35](#) Both the civil rights movement and anticolonial struggles for national independence during the decades after World War II adopted the idea of freedom as a key way of defining their movements, and this vision has characterized much of the historiography of these movements as well. [36](#) Other movements against discrimination and for equality in the postwar era adopted the banner of liberty: both feminist and gay struggles frequently used the term *liberation* to characterize their

goals. [37](#)

Some scholars have written about freedom as essentially the opposite of slavery and have seen the history of the two as deeply intertwined. No one has embraced this perspective more thoroughly than Orlando Patterson, whose earlier works on slavery led him to explore its relationship to the idea of liberty from the ancient Greeks to the modern era in his massive history of freedom. Another major study, David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966), explored at length the paradox of slavery and freedom in human history, noting that John Locke and other advocates of liberty at times supported the institution of human bondage. [38](#)

Other historians have noted the extent to which the call for freedom often assumed the form of a rejection of servitude, even among slaveholders themselves. [39](#)

The historical discussion of the relationship between slavery and liberty brings us close to my own reading of the rise of white freedom. Before exploring this in more depth I now wish to turn to the other relevant historiography, that of race and racial thinking, in the modern world. Like liberty, race has been explored and analyzed from many different perspectives, resulting in a rich and complex body of scholarly literature. As I will argue below, the two intellectual traditions at times parallel and

intersect with one another, exhibiting important differences as well as a good deal in common.

Like that of freedom, the historiography of race has taken different forms over the years, and also like freedom, race as a concept has proved notoriously difficult to define. Discussions of physical, biological, and cultural distinctions between peoples go back to the ancient world, notably Aristotle's differentiation between the superior northern races (Greeks) and the barbaric "Eastern" [races.<sup>40</sup>](#) But, much more so than is the case with the historiography of liberty, most historians of racial thinking see it as the product of the modern era. In his pathbreaking synthetic study *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, Ivan Hannaford argues that the word *race* did not enter into general use in northern Europe until the sixteenth century, and was not fully conceptualized until the [eighteenth.<sup>41</sup>](#) In general, contemporary historians of race have been at pains to reject the idea that racial thinking is a universal part of the human experience, instead linking it to the specific history of modernity. [42](#)

Intellectual history has often taken the lead in the historiography of race, again similar to the history of freedom. Hannaford's seminal study starts with the ancient world and proceeds through the Middle Ages considering texts by Aristotle, Socrates, Cicero, Saint Augustine, Maimonides, and

Shakespeare before arriving at the birth of modern racism in the seventeenth century. Other authors have adopted a similar trajectory, looking at the roots of racial thinking in early recorded history but arguing that racism itself begins with the European discovery and conquest of the Americas. The Enlightenment has been a major focus of intellectual historians of race; some have argued that the great thinkers of the eighteenth century rejected both slavery and racism, while others see the era as a seminal one in promoting the idea of classifying humankind along racial [lines.](#)<sup>43</sup> Scholars of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust have also made major contributions to the historiography of race. George Mosse's *Toward the Final Solution* and Leon Poliakov's *The Aryan Myth*, for example, ground modern anti-Semitism in the evolution of racial thinking since the Enlightenment, arguing that it differed fundamentally from the religiously based hatred of Jews in the past.<sup>44</sup>

Such studies on the intellectual history of race have produced what is by now a standard historical chronology, which sees racial thinking as originating in early modern Europe, being developed by the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the rise of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, combining with the rise of the nation-state and nationalist culture to produce virulent forms of racism, and culminating with the Holocaust,

the example par excellence of racial genocide and the racial state. Like the historiography of freedom, therefore, it tends to adopt a teleological narrative of racial thinking.

Similarly, just as many studies of liberty have concentrated on freedom struggles, so too has a considerable body of scholarship on race focused on the condition of nonwhites and those racially Othered. Virtually all of the history of African Americans, and to a large extent that of peoples of African descent in general, takes questions of race as a central issue.<sup>45</sup> The scholarly disciplines collectively known as ethnic studies take as their subject racialized communities and population groups.<sup>46</sup> The tremendous expansion of this scholarship since the 1960s has made studies of race far more central to the intellectual life of American universities than before, and increasingly has established a presence far beyond the boundaries of the United States. These fields of study are usually interdisciplinary, combining perspectives from various fields in the social sciences and humanities, and interdisciplinarity in general has often stimulated new approaches to the academic study of race.<sup>47</sup>

A central paradox of the historiography of race is the fact that while racial thinking, especially scientific racism, was overwhelmingly repudiated

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after the Holocaust, the scholarly study of race has become more prominent than ever. From the heated battles over affirmative action in the United States<sup>48</sup> to questions of universalism versus difference in France<sup>49</sup> and controversies over race relations in Britain,<sup>50</sup> politicians, public intellectuals, and activists have wrestled with how to deal with a phenomenon that almost all agree has no objective or scientific reality.<sup>51</sup> As we shall see below, the histories of both race and freedom are replete with [paradoxes, a topic I will take up in chapter 1.](#)

I have organized *White Freedom* in three sections, of two chapters each. [Part 1](#) deals with both broad theories and specific practices of white freedom, organized thematically rather than chronologically. [Chapter 1](#) considers alternate ideas of freedom, notably those related to piracy and childhood, and how they were increasingly suppressed and relegated to the margins of modern bourgeois society in Europe and America. Both children and pirates represented a kind of racialized “savage” freedom, attractive and easily romanticized yet nonetheless at odds with white freedom in the modern era. [Chapter 2](#) takes as its subject a specific case study, the Statue of Liberty. Probably the most famous symbolic image of freedom in the world, the Statue of Liberty also represents ideas of freedom in both France and the United States. This chapter explores the racial history of the great

statue, from its forgotten and suppressed links to antislavery to its changing relationship to immigration. Together, the two chapters give an overview of the main outlines of the book.

[Parts 2](#) and [3](#) proceed chronologically. [Part 2](#) looks at the relationship between freedom and race in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the Enlightenment to the outbreak of the Great War. [Chapter 3](#) considers the Age of Democratic Revolution and how it brought together liberty and whiteness. It examines the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Saint-Domingue Revolution, to show the many ways in which struggles around both white freedom and Black slavery intersected. This chapter concludes by arguing that the crusade for freedom at the beginning of the modern era ended up by emphasizing the links between liberty and race. [Chapter 4](#) deals with the rise of modern industrial and bourgeois society and the rise of liberal democracy in Europe and America. In Europe it explores the link between the rise of mass democracy at home and the growth of massive empires in Africa and Asia, producing polities organized around white citizenship and nonwhite subjecthood. In America the chapter considers the rise of mass democracy, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, showing how the struggle against Black slavery ended up reaffirming white freedom. It also

investigates the history of immigration and whiteness at the turn of the century.

[Part 3](#) of *White Freedom* focuses on the twentieth century. [Chapter 5](#) discusses the history of the two world wars and the interwar years. It explores the ways in which World War I brought the planet together into one global social and political unit, and how that unit was segmented along racial lines. The chapter considers the history of fascism and how it interacted with racialized ideas of freedom, and then analyzes the great antifascist crusade for freedom and the racial dimensions of that crusade. It ends by looking at how the struggle against fascist racism undermined the idea of white freedom. This leads into [Chapter 6](#), which considers the fall and rise of white freedom in the latter half of the twentieth century. Beginning with decolonization and the civil rights movement in America, it notes the triumph of struggles against white freedom up to 1965, then the return of that ideological practice in the 1970s and 1980s. It concludes with the fall of European communism in 1989, a date justly celebrated as a banner year for freedom but one that had its own racial implications. Such is the story of *White Freedom*. It intends not to condemn the idea of liberty but rather to explore a rarely considered dimension of that ideology, its relationship to ideas of race and racial difference in the modern world. I

hope this book will inspire other studies on the complex nature of liberty in our history and ultimately help us to understand how we can make all the world's peoples more free. If it can do that, or even if it simply inspires and provokes debates about race and freedom in our time, I feel it will have served its purpose.

## PART 1

### CHAPTER 1

#### *Savage Freedom*

#### PIRACY, CHILDHOOD, AND ALTERNATE RACIAL VISIONS OF LIBERTY

Some of the most intriguing characters in J. M. Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan* are the "lost boys," refugees from Victorian childhood living in the magical world of Neverland. Consisting of male [infants1](#) who had fallen out of their baby carriages and found their way to this alternate realm, the lost boys live a carefree life of eternal childhood alongside other beings sheltered from historical time: Captain Hook and his pirates; the Native Americans (or "redskins") and their Tiger Lily. [2](#) They ally themselves with the ultimate lost boy, their leader Peter Pan, whose entire existence revolves around a refusal to grow up. The lost boys have much in common with these two groups, camping out in the woods, dressing up as animals, and in

many ways living like primitives. As Barrie notes in [chapter 5](#), “On this evening the chief forces of the island were disposed as follows. The lost boys were out looking for Peter, the pirates were out looking for the lost boys, the redskins were out looking for the pirates, and the beasts were out looking for the redskins. They were going round and round the island, but they did not meet because all were going at the same [rate.”<sup>3</sup>](#) The lost boys do not go to school or have to obey adults in general. Like Native Americans, pirates, and animals, they represent an image of savage freedom.

After a climactic battle in which Peter Pan and the lost boys kill the pirates, the boys return with the young heroine Wendy to the real world of middle-class England. They slay the pirates and leave behind their Native American allies and animal familiars to embrace all the pleasures of bourgeois childhood, and in doing so kill the primitive beings inside themselves. By the time the play ends, sometime in the future, the primitive boys have grown up to become white Englishmen with beards and jobs, at home in Edwardian middle-class society. Pirates must die and children, especially male children, must grow up as a part of the triumph of Western civilization. In *Peter Pan*, and in the world that produced it, savage freedom inexorably gives way to white freedom. [4](#)

Few concepts loom larger in the history of modernity and Western civilization more generally than freedom, on the one hand, and race on the other, and yet few seem more intrinsically different and opposed to each other. The idea of liberty is almost universally praised and seen as a key part of human progress, endlessly celebrated and reaffirmed. Few words in English or many other languages have a more positive connotation. Ideas of race and racial difference, in contrast, are generally condemned and considered something to be refuted or overcome. If the one represents the highest strivings and achievements of modernity, the other symbolizes its underside, how far Western civilization has to go in realizing its full potential. One stands for the potential of the individual to realize all of his or her potential and desires, the other the limits imposed by biology, community, and destiny. One represents light, the other darkness.

In this chapter I consider points of intersection between these two so radically different and opposed ideas in order to explore the idea that the coexistence of racism and freedom in the modern world is less a contradiction than the articulation of the variegated nature of both concepts and their manifold interactions over time. The fact that freedom could symbolize resistance to oppression and at the same time create its own types of racialized injustice speaks to the power and complexity of the idea,

and the impossibility of considering it in isolation from other central modern concepts like race. I will explore how the amalgam of liberty and racial thought I call white freedom could arise out of the affinities between the two, how it is a product of their textual and theoretical interstices. The theory and historiography of both race and freedom is far from Black-and-white.<sup>5</sup>

In considering this complex relationship, the bulk of this chapter will focus on two very different groups and histories that illustrate alternate experiences of liberty, models that deviated from liberalism and ultimately had to be suppressed in order to create a liberal ideological and political order, and that represented a racial challenge to the idea of white freedom. I first will consider the history of piracy in the modern and contemporary eras. Piracy has represented a rejection of the integrity and laws of the liberal nation-state, while at the same time often symbolizing a romantic idea of freedom. The suppression of the first aspect of piracy helped create the second, so that piracy presented a dual aspect that remains potent to this day.

The second is the history of childhood. The romantic idea of children as free and carefree has gone hand in hand with increasing regulation of childhood in the modern era, creating a fascinating dichotomy between

ideas of liberty and authoritarian realities. This dichotomy has frequently sparked revolts by children and especially by teenagers, so that many have regarded adolescence as a particularly turbulent time of life. Like piracy, the idea of childhood freedom was both a romanticized fantasy and a racialized reality that had to be suppressed to enable the triumph of liberal ideas of freedom.

This chapter will thus consider the histories of childhood and piracy as examples of racial alternatives to white freedom, visions of “savage” freedom that had to be suppressed. As I will explore in greater detail below, in the modern era both pirates and children represented a departure from, even a rejection of, increasingly racialized ideas of freedom. In both cases it was not a great leap from the rebel to the barbarian, from the political and cultural outsider to the racial Other. In particular, the dominant society portrayed both as savages, groups that one must either civilize or eliminate. Children would hopefully grow into a mature idea of freedom, facilitated by the rise of an extensive infrastructure of formal education. Civilized society must eradicate piracy, either by capturing and executing the actual pirates or by integrating their economic practices into the broader structures of liberal capitalism. Both piracy and childhood represented the kind of savage liberty white freedom must ultimately destroy.

As noted above, freedom has not always been a positive value nor has it always followed the strictures of liberal political theory; as Isaiah Berlin observed, “Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep.”<sup>6</sup> Liberty was thus not automatically benevolent but had to be made so by suppressing the negative aspects of the idea, and the process of constructing a positive image of freedom had a strong racial dimension. This chapter will briefly consider that process, arguing that liberty became white by divesting itself of qualities seen as primitive or retrograde. True freedom belonged to the civilized, and civilization was itself increasingly defined in racial terms during the modern era: the barbarians of the jungle might revel in a spirit of anarchy, but only those of culture and enlightenment could build a society based upon freedom. Racial difference was built into the very definition of liberty, therefore, in ways that would both foster and result from racialized ideas of freedom as white.

## Liberty and Race

### *Similarities, Differences, Intersections*

I began this chapter by noting how freedom and race are both extremely important ideas in Western civilization, and how at the same time they seem to be so different from each other, one positive, one negative. In particular, the historiography of racialized minorities has embraced the idea of

freedom as freedom struggles; an individual or a group becomes free by overcoming racism and the limits of racial identity. The end of racial difference is the triumph of [freedom.<sup>7</sup>](#) Upon closer examination, however, the Manichean polarity between liberty as good and race as bad tends to break down. Race became a powerful means of categorizing humanity precisely because so many people, scholars as well as ordinary women and men, saw it as useful and beneficial. At the same time freedom has had its own negative aspects; as Orlando Patterson has observed, liberty has not been the most important concept in many cultures throughout human history. The concept of white freedom challenges the polarity between liberty and race as good and evil, underscoring the ways in which modern political cultures integrated a racialized view of the world into their ideas of freedom.

The trauma of the Holocaust, the crusade for Black civil rights in the United States, and the tidal wave of decolonization that swept the globe in the twenty years after the end of World War II all combined to craft an image of racial thinking as an unmitigated evil. It is important to emphasize, however, that this was not always the case. From the late seventeenth until the mid-twentieth century racial categorization was viewed as very much a part of progressive science, further illuminating the

relationship between humanity and the natural world. The emphasis of Enlightenment intellectuals like Kant on classifying and ranking different human races, the social Darwinism and scientific racism of the nineteenth century, all illustrated the importance of racial thinking. One must also stress the fact that racial science did not necessarily equal racism: Count Arthur de Gobineau, for example, rejected anti-Semitism and he and other racial theorists opposed slavery. For many, the study of racial difference would enable scientists to improve the lives of all racial communities by understanding their biological potentials and limitations.

Another important positive dimension of racial thinking lay in its relationship to the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The mingling of ideas of nation and race represented a sharp departure from the tradition of racial thought in Europe, which had first become prominent as a way of characterizing the aristocracy, a group linked by blood and certainly not by national identity.<sup>9</sup> Yet the rise of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century highlighted the importance of national character shaped by history, turning the idea of the nation into an organic cultural unit rather than simply a political [structure](#).<sup>10</sup> *Völkisch* ideology in Germany is the most salient example of this new view of the nation as race, but it hardly stood alone. <sup>11</sup> Even Ernst Renan, the French scholar whose famous 1882 essay “What Is a

Nation?” challenged the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and others who championed racial nationalism, saw France as a mixture of racial types rather than characterized by their absence. [12](#) Moreover, Renan’s portrayal of France as united around history and spiritual principle in effect tended to racialize the [nation.](#)[13](#) By the end of the century the increased predominance of the nation-state as a political and cultural construct made racial pride an important part of national patriotism.

Racially subordinate groups have also embraced the ideal of racial pride, usually as a response to and rejection of racial oppression. The processes by which peoples who are lumped together according to stereotypes and discrimination develop a positive sense of group identity are extremely complex; like nations, racial minorities must be constructed over time. Scholars have studied how slaves from a variety of places in Africa gradually became Black Americans in the United States, or how modern Zionism crafted a new nation from diverse Jewish [populations.](#)[14](#) The point is that such processes involved creating a positive sense of racial identity, often modeled on that of the nation: the term *Black nationalism* is no accident. From the idea of the “race man” as someone dedicated to Black community empowerment to the “Black is Beautiful” movement of the 1960s, racial pride has constituted not only a key African American

ideology but also a powerful weapon against racism. [15](#)

Many other peoples have embraced a sense of racialized identity as a rejection of racial oppression: for example, in 1933 famed German composer Arnold Schoenberg renounced his conversion to Lutheranism and reembraced the Judaism of his birth as a defiant response to Nazi anti-

Semitism.[16](#) Many things tie racialized communities together, including at times cultural traditions, residential closeness, and a sense of a common history, but a shared history of racist victimization often plays a key role. To give one example, current debates in France about the identity of French Blacks have wrestled with how to define as a unified community people who come from a variety of different backgrounds and histories. The most popular solution, one championed by historian Pap Ndiaye, has been to argue that all those who suffer racial discrimination as Blacks are in fact Black. In this case, as in many others, the negative fact of racial categorization and bigotry is transformed into a group assertion of identity, one that gives the very idea of race a positive dimension. [17](#)

Racial thinking has therefore been considered by many people, both historically and in the present day, as an important dimension of social identity. That people often believe this for different, even diametrically opposed, reasons does not diminish the fact. Such ambivalence also exists

in modern ideas about freedom. The near-universal praise accorded the concept of liberty in the modern world tends to obscure the fact that political freedom was not always viewed in such a positive light. Struggles for freedom have often been so dramatic and difficult precisely because many—and not just evil despots—have opposed them. Even campaigns for national liberation, often portrayed as the battle of a united people against an oppressive outsider, have usually involved major internal conflicts, often amounting to civil wars; for example, up to twenty percent of white American colonists fought for the British during the US war of independence. [18](#) For all the allure of freedom, throughout history many people have firmly rejected its clarion call.

Much of this conflict, of course, arises from the fact that people often have different ideas of what constitutes freedom. But the opposition to liberty at times goes deeper than that: the very etymology of terms like *freedom* and *liberty* is revealing in this regard. For example, whereas the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *freedom* as the ability to act without restraint, its definitions of *licence* and *libertine* are very similar: *licence* it defines as “Freedom to behave as one wishes, especially in a way which results in excessive or unacceptable behaviour”; *libertine* as either a religious freethinker or “a person … who freely indulges in sexual pleasures

without regard to moral principles.” <sup>19</sup> Both *licence* and *libertine* generally denote undesirable qualities and behaviors. Their similarities to the idea of liberty thus suggest that freedom, by itself, uncontrolled by morality or moderation, is in many ways a negative phenomenon. This of course has been a staple argument of liberal ideas about liberty: a free society must be controlled by the rule of law, by principles that will guarantee freedom for all and prevent the strong from oppressing the weak. At the same time, however, liberal ideas of political freedom have emphasized the importance of negative freedom, freedom *from*, as central to the ideal of liberty. The modern world has built political structures, notably parliamentary government and liberal democracy, to make freedom an institutional reality, but the essence of liberty remains much more complicated and paradoxical. This helps to explain why movements for political liberty have had a controversial history. The history of modern republicanism provides a useful example. Republicanism, the idea that the people of a nation or other political unit are sovereign, has a long history going back to ancient Greece, the Roman republic, and the city-states of the Italian Renaissance—Venice, Florence, etc. In the modern era republicanism has been closely associated with political liberty, above all in the United States, which as an independent nation has always been a republic. Yet it has also often been

associated with instability and revolution. Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth during the English Revolution and the Jacobin Republic during the French Revolution both executed kings and abolished their respective monarchies to affirm the centrality of popular sovereignty, but these actions convinced many that republicanism was a radical and dangerous ideology that, far from promoting freedom, brought its own type of oppression. In both cases revolutionary regimes gave way to restorations of the monarchy. Similarly, in the Americas, although the United States demonstrated that a republic could be moderate, the instability of the Latin American republics that followed the overthrow of Spanish rule in the New World seemed to confirm skeptical views of the ideology.

As a result, liberalism during the nineteenth century tended to reject republicanism in favor of constitutional monarchy, most notably in Great Britain but elsewhere as well. Not until France established the Third Republic in 1870 did a major European nation embrace a conservative vision of republican rule, and even in the twentieth century the collapse of many of the republican governments established after World War I revealed the weakness of this type of regime. As the fate of Germany's Weimar Republic demonstrated so tragically, the republican ideal of freedom was by no means universally accepted or viewed as positive.

The history of anarchism provides an even more dramatic example of negative liberty. As an ideology, anarchism has always emphasized a rejection of authority, especially state authority, and the complete liberty of the individual as the heart of all political structures. Like republicanism, its pedigree goes back to the ancient world, not just Greece and Rome but also Taoist China. In the modern era anarchism came to mean not just the absence of the state but also a communal organization of society based on freedom, equality, and common property. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in France and Peter Kropotkin in Russia made anarchism a key part of struggles for socialism and revolution. By the late nineteenth century anarchism had become associated with terrorism, as anarchist militants staged a spectacular series of assassinations of heads of state throughout Europe and America in the 1880s and 1890s. A movement that emphasized individual freedom thus turned into one that seemingly justified murder. Anarchism became more known for lawlessness and chaos than for resistance to oppression; as one dictionary defines it, anarchy is “a state of disorder due to the absence or nonrecognition of authority.”<sup>20</sup> Here again, freedom is a social problem rather than a solution.<sup>21</sup>

Both liberty and race therefore have positive and negative connotations, both historically and in the present. They are similar in some other

important ways as well. Both have a significant universal quality, seeking to explain essential aspects of the human condition as a whole. Both are strongly rooted in intellectual history, especially that of the modern era.

Both have also inspired important political movements, at times dominating entire states. Finally, as we have seen in the discussion above, both are extremely varied and open to multiple interpretations, interpretations that often reflect the social and political positions of those that hold them.

Freedom and race have been adopted equally by dominant authorities and by subordinate groups opposing them. In both cases, the diversity of these two concepts has been an important source of their power.

There are of course important differences between the two ideas as well, especially when one considers their evolution in the modern era. Although, as I have tried to show, the idea of freedom as universally good versus race as primarily racism and therefore evil has not always existed, is in fact fairly recent, nonetheless this polarity shapes much of current thought about the two ideas and the relationship between them. It is precisely this polarity that white freedom undermines, showing how much these two great ideas have in common.

The rest of this chapter will consider two examples of alternate visions of freedom, piracy and childhood. In ways that are both strikingly different

and curiously parallel, these two conditions offer insights into how the modern world has conceived of liberty and how, in particular, it has developed a circumscribed vision of that ideal. Both represent the kind of primitive freedom that had to be excluded in order to develop this circumscribed vision. As a result, both childhood and piracy help illustrate how part of the limits of modern liberty could be racial, leading to the creation of white freedom.

### Liberty's Stepchildren

#### *Freedom on the High Seas*

What does it mean to be free, and when do we feel the most free? The two questions will often elicit very different responses. Do we feel more free standing in a voting booth or driving a fancy new car down a picturesque, uncrowded highway on a brilliantly sunny day? To give another example, a staple of political freedom in the United States is the right to a trial by jury, but probably most Americans feel more free when they get out of jury duty than when they serve on it. Political and personal liberty are perhaps two different things, but since the point of the former is to facilitate the latter, one can hardly treat them in isolation from each other. How do we consider cases where, as in the second example, the two seem dissonant, even opposed? In part this speaks to the classic need to create a society of

freedom for all by restricting the ability of individuals to do whatever they want. It also, however, illustrates the existence of many alternate visions of liberty not necessarily represented in the realm of liberal political theory. Such visions can certainly reinforce the ideology of political freedom, but they can also challenge it. In different ways both piracy and childhood represented alternate ideas of freedom, and the rest of this chapter will explore how both fed into a racialized vision of liberty.

One of the most famous visual representations of the ideal of liberty is Eugène Delacroix's 1830 painting *Liberty Leading the People*. An iconic image in the history of modern France and in Romantic art, Delacroix's painting represents freedom as a militant goddess leading a national revolt against monarchy and tyranny. A century earlier, however, a Dutch artist created a strikingly similar image that gives a very different portrait of liberty. The *Historie der Zee-Rovers*, published in Amsterdam in 1725, included as a frontispiece an engraving of the famed English female pirate Anne Bonny. <sup>22</sup> Like the image of Marianne in *Liberty Leading the People*, this image centers around a bare-breasted woman holding a sword and brandishing a flag, in this case the skull and crossbones. The painting is much rawer than Delacroix's, the woman's face displaying a passion that seems as much sexual as militant. Nonetheless the two paintings have a

great deal in common. It is fascinating that the image of a female pirate, one who transgressed norms of gender as well as law during her life, should resemble so closely one of the classic symbols of modern freedom. [23](#)

Maritime piracy has of course existed ever since mankind had the skills to take to the sea in boats. It bedeviled the ancient world, leading the great Roman writer Cicero to define piracy as a crime against civilization and pirates as the enemies of all nations. Throughout much of human history piracy has afflicted the commerce of the Mediterranean in particular. The heroes of Homer's epics were often nothing but pirates, seizing ships and raiding coastal settlements. The Roman Empire waged a series of military campaigns against Mediterranean pirates, at its height successfully enforcing the *Pax Romana* [over much of the high seas.](#)[24](#)

The height of Mediterranean piracy came during the early modern era. From the sixteenth century until the French conquest of Algeria in 1830, pirates based in North African cities like Tunis, Tripoli, and Algiers regularly raided shipping throughout the Mediterranean, stealing cargoes and enslaving crewmen and passengers. Known as the Barbary pirates, they were nominally subject to the Ottoman Empire, but in practice often functioned independently of the sultan's wishes. Their attacks against the ships of Christendom thus combined religious antagonism, Ottoman foreign

policy, and a search for profits. In addition to capturing ships from Europe, Barbary pirates frequently raided coastal settlements, not only in the Mediterranean but as far afield as Britain, Ireland, and Denmark, seizing captives to be used or sold as slave labor.[25](#)



FIGURE 2. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). Musée du Louvre, Paris, [www.Eugene-Delacroix.com](http://www.Eugene-Delacroix.com).

The Barbary pirates had a tremendous impact on Europe and beyond before their demise; America's first overseas war was its campaign against

them in the early nineteenth century. [26](#) Nonetheless, no era and place have had a greater impact on our ideas of what it means to be a pirate than the early modern Caribbean. During what historians have called the golden age of piracy, from roughly the 1620s to 1725, a variety of pirates, corsairs, privateers, and buccaneers established settlements in places like Tortuga, Hispaniola, and Port Royal, Jamaica, and raided established shipping across the Caribbean and Atlantic. The contemporary image of pirates, complete with peg legs, parrots, and the skull and crossbones flag, comes down to us [from that era.](#)[27](#)



## HISTORIE DER ZEE-ROOVERS.





## HISTORIE DER ZEE-ROOVERS.

FIGURE 3. Anne Bonny, Pirate, *Historie der Zee-Rovers* (1725). JCB Archive of Early American

Images; Call number D725 D314hA. © John Carter Brown Library, Box 1894, Brown University,  
Providence, RI.

Caribbean piracy arose in the context of European colonization of the New World; many pirates were Europeans adrift in the Americas, shipwrecked sailors, debtors, or escaped servants in search of a new life; others were escaped African slaves or native Americans fleeing the destruction of their communities. Many, notably the great privateers like Sir Francis Drake, worked as agents of the English, French, and Dutch governments, charged with raiding and harassing the great Spanish treasure fleets. [28](#) Others attacked any and all shipping, searching above all for profits and owing loyalty to no one other than themselves. In the early eighteenth century piracy began to decline as nations developed more regular naval forces, and as the burgeoning profitability of the Atlantic slave trade led the British and Spanish governments to agree on new arrangements to share the wealth. By the time the British Royal Navy caught and killed the notorious pirate Blackbeard off the coast of North Carolina in 1718, the golden age of piracy had essentially come to an end. [29](#)

The pirates of the Caribbean, as the success of several Disney movies

bearing that name makes clear, have been remembered ever since. No other era of piracy in human history has had the same impact on the modern imagination. The golden age of piracy remains attractive for several reasons. Pirates symbolized an exotic, untamed world, one in which fantasy and reality still coexisted. They lived in a lush tropical natural landscape and seascape, representing all the physical allure of the Caribbean. In addition, they embodied a powerful masculine warrior tradition, in which men won battles through individual skill, strength, and courage rather than overwhelming firepower. Finally, the piracy of the seventeenth century is close enough in time to be documented but distant enough to seem hazy and



romantic; from our perspective, for example, the celebrated peg leg [represents a dramatic costume rather than physical pain and mutilation.](#)<sup>30</sup> Above all, and central to this study, the pirates of the golden age stand for freedom. As the early-eighteenth-century Welsh pirate captain Bartholomew Roberts, the famed “Black Bart,” proclaimed: “In an honest service there is thin commons, low wages, and hard labour. In this, plenty and satiety, pleasure and ease, liberty and power; and who would not balance creditor on this side, when all the hazard that is run for it, at worst is only a sour look or two at choking? No, a merry life and a short one shall

be my motto.” [31](#)

FIGURE 4. “Caribbean Pirates, Bartholomew ‘Black Bart’ Roberts.”  
Lebrecht Music & Arts/Alamy

Stock Photo.

Several aspects of Caribbean piracy in the early modern era highlight this emphasis on pirates as free men. Many fled to the pirate ships to escape slavery or other types of servitude, and several Black pirates rose to the rank of captain. The decline of Caribbean piracy in the early eighteenth century took place at roughly the same time as the rise of the Caribbean plantation economy and society, so that in this region slavery and freedom existed cheek by jowl. [32](#) Pirate captains took part in the slave trade, often capturing slave ships and selling their captives, but sometimes they also gave them the opportunity to join the pirate crews. Some pirates also referred to themselves as “maroons,” adopting the name given to rebel slaves in the colonial Caribbean. The image, and frequently the reality, of the pirate ship as a refuge from slavery thus underscored the idea of piracy as freedom. [33](#)

Pirate ships were also often governed by a rough practice of democracy, very much in contrast to both colonial society and emerging national navies. Many pirate captains were elected by their crews, according to the principle of one man, one vote, and could be deposed by popular vote as well. Pirate

ships also practiced the separation of powers, vesting significant authority in other officers like the quartermaster. Only during actual battles did the captain exercise absolute authority.<sup>34</sup> On some ships a rough racial democracy prevailed; Blacks were by no means equal in general, and many worked as servants or even slaves aboard pirate ships, but certainly they enjoyed much more power and respect than on land in the Caribbean and the Atlantic world during this era. Historians Marcus Rediker, Peter Linebaugh, and others have argued that pirates often took part in political struggles for liberty during the eighteenth century constituting a kind of *sans-culotte* society at sea. <sup>35</sup>

However, the linkage between piracy and freedom arises equally from the place of pirates in modern popular culture. There is a clear connection between the decline of piracy as an actual threat to seagoing commerce in the early eighteenth century and the rise of fictionalized accounts about it: the first major study of pirates during the golden age, Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates*, appeared in 1724. <sup>36</sup> It was enormously popular and gave colorful portrayals of leading pirates like Blackbeard and Anne Bonny. The popularization of fictional pirates really took off in the nineteenth century, with the publication of Byron's poem "The Corsair" in 1814 and Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Pirate* in 1822. Perhaps the most

influential of all fictional works about piracy, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, appeared in 1883.

Nineteenth-century writers and their twentieth-century successors bequeathed to modern popular culture an image of pirates as symbols of adventure and romance. To be a pirate in the contemporary imagination means to sail one's own ship across the shimmering blue waters of the Caribbean, to become rich by finding legendary hoards of gold and jewels, and to drink rum and carouse without stopping. Perhaps most important, it means being able to do whatever one wants whenever one wants, not to have to obey any rules, or as one popular children's book put it, never having to change [diapers.<sup>37</sup>](#) In American culture in particular, the pirate Jolly Roger waves alongside the Confederate Stars and Bars as the emblem of the rebel, [38](#) a beloved figure of popular culture that expresses resentment of and resistance to the increasingly routinized and bureaucratic character of modern society.[39](#) The pirate symbolizes, in short, the spirit of freedom. This idea of piracy as freedom has not only survived but thrived in the contemporary world. While in many respects the world of wooden ships and the skull and crossbones seems utterly different from that of smartphones and laptops, the rise of Internet piracy in the twenty first century has suggested an important link between the two. In the words of

Internet historian Aram Sinnreich, for example:

In 1390, an army of crusaders set out to wage war on piracy, with disastrous consequences for the soldiers themselves, their nations, and the entire Western world.... Over six hundred years later, we are in the midst of another, very different crusade, which nonetheless shares many similarities with Mahdia and may threaten to wreak just as much havoc and destruction over the long term. In this instance, it is Hollywood, rather than Genoa, playing the role of the righteous crusader, with the US government as its military ally, and digital technology innovators and their millions of online users cast in the role of the “pirates.” ... The similarities between today’s piracy crusade and its fourteenth-century predecessor are more than superficial, and more extensive than a cursory comparison might suggest. [40](#)

# You call it Piracy We call it Freedom



Online piracy, or the downloading and sharing of Internet content in violation of copyright and other laws, really began in 1999 with the founding of Napster in the United States. A computer software program that facilitated peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing, Napster enabled consumers to download music, videos, and other types of files without paying for them. Not surprisingly it achieved instantaneous popularity: by 2001 millions of Internet users were using Napster to download over 2.5 billion files per month. [41](#) Four years later Internet users in Sweden created The Pirate Bay, which became very popular in Europe. Defenders of file sharing viewed it as a question of free speech and civil liberties versus capitalist profits. A popular image associated with the movement featured a pirate ship with a

cassette tape mounted over a crossbones on its mainsail, and the slogan *You call it Piracy, We call it Freedom.*

FIGURE 5. “You call it Piracy, We call it Freedom.”

[https://twitter.com/Sector404\\_Arg/status](https://twitter.com/Sector404_Arg/status/292354243791306752)

[/292354243791306752.](https://twitter.com/Sector404_Arg/status/292354243791306752)

The global music industry, which saw a sharp decline in profits during the first decade after the founding of Napster, certainly disagreed, and launched a major legal campaign against file-sharing networks, which at different times managed to shut down both Napster and The Pirate Bay. [42](#)  
In

both the United States and Europe government agencies and courts scrambled to ban file sharing, culminating with the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) of 2011, signed by eight nations. As fast as industry and political authorities could suppress such services, however, new ones sprang up to take their place, so that P2P file sharing has remained a presence in the Internet to the present day.

The politicization of Internet piracy by industry and government authorities provoked a political reaction by the pirates themselves.

Thousands of protestors took to the streets of European cities in 2012 to protest the ACTA, and the European Parliament eventually refused to ratify it. At the beginning of 2006 activists in Sweden founded the Swedish Pirate

Party, devoted to freedom of communication and the Internet. A government raid on The Pirate Bay that summer sharply increased its profile and its popularity; by 2009 it managed to win a seat in the European Parliament and its youth group became the largest political organization of young people in Sweden. The same year saw the birth of the Pirate Party of Germany, which soon became even more successful, winning 8.5 percent of the vote and 15 seats in the 2011 Bundestag elections.<sup>43</sup> In 2010 pirates created the Pirate Party International, which now has members and affiliates in over forty European countries as well as some American states. Drawing on the precedent of the Green Party movement in Europe, the pirate parties represented a major new force in global politics.<sup>44</sup> The movement even developed a spiritual side: in 2010 a Swedish philosophy student founded the Church of Kopimism, which saw file sharing as a sacred act of devotion and won recognition from the Swedish government two years later.<sup>45</sup>

Pirate politics emphasized freedom above all, freedom of communication and expression, freedom from control by corporations and the state. As the Swedish Pirate Party argued in its 2006 manifesto:

The development of technology has made sure Sweden and Europe stand before a fork in the road. The new technology offers fantastic possibilities to spread culture and knowledge all over the world with

almost no costs. But it also makes way for the building of a society monitored at a level unheard of up until now.... The right to privacy is a corner stone in an open and democratic society. Each and every one has the right to respect for one's own private and family life, one's home and one's correspondence. If the constitutional freedom of information is to be more than empty words on a paper, we must [ *sic*] defend the right for protected private communication. [46](#)

If the pirates of the early modern Caribbean and Mediterranean represented a challenge to and rejection of the nation-state in the era of its rise to global power, the pirate parties opposed modern nations in a postmodern and transnational era.

The history and current state of the Internet piracy movement thus highlights the powerful association of piracy with freedom as well as with plunder. This image of liberty stands opposed to the standard political narrative of liberal freedom in two important respects. First, this vision of freedom is one of escapism rather than political engagement, flight from oppression rather than commitment to building a free society. It is a classic vision of negative freedom, freedom *from*, as outlined by Isaiah Berlin and so many others, but it doesn't grapple with the problem of making negative freedom work in a large and complex society to ensure the rights of all.

Instead, it embraces a dream of individual autonomy and rebellion, rebellion directed in the modern world precisely against liberal society. Its popularity illustrates the central contradiction within negative freedom, namely that relative liberty for all can be attained only by limiting the rights of each; otherwise put, a free society must contain both positive and negative aspects of liberty.

Second, the image of the pirate as free man directly contradicts the centrality of the rule of law to political liberalism and the liberal ideal of freedom. Pirates were at bottom criminals, and the view of them as romantic rebels tends to ignore that fact. But the paradox of this vision of liberty goes much deeper. There is ample room in Western libertarian tradition for breaking laws viewed as unjust or overly oppressive; Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* is a classic case, as is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." But squeezing the pirates of the early modern Caribbean into such a tradition, let alone seeing them as romantic rebels from contemporary perspectives, is more difficult than it may first appear. Pirates often behaved with great brutality, at times slaughtering not only their military opponents but innocent men, women, and even children as well.

Perhaps more to the point, piracy was above all a crime against *property*.

Most liberal accounts of freedom see the rule of law and the right to private property as essential to modern liberty, and pirates directly opposed both.

This is of course precisely the main criticism of Internet piracy by the music and entertainment industries today: that it practices the theft of cultural products. [47](#) The relationship between piracy and slavery also reveals this.

Slaves constituted a significant share of property in the Atlantic world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, [48](#) and seizures of slave ships and their cargo formed an important and illicit part of the pirate economy. Moreover, the fact that many pirates were themselves runaway slaves itself contravened the rules of property at the time. [49](#) The very existence of piracy thus challenged the property rights so crucial to liberal ideas of freedom.

The piracy of the early modern Caribbean thus represented both a powerful model of freedom (then as now), and at the same time a sharp departure from the standard narrative of political liberty. A final important aspect of piracy as alternate vision of freedom has to do with its association with childhood during the modern era. Like many other parts of traditional cultures, as piracy ceased to be a real presence and threat it was gradually relegated to the realm of childhood fantasy, leading to the contemporary era's pirate-themed birthday parties, television shows, and amusement park

[exhibits.50](#) The first major example of this was Robert Louis Stevenson's 1883 novel *Treasure Island*. The hero and narrator of the novel is Jim Hawkins, a youth in his early teens who encounters a series of pirates and other motley maritime characters as the son of a tavernkeeper in an English port. He goes to sea aboard a ship that is seized by pirates, led by Long John Silver, and ends up having a number of adventures culminating in the successful recovery of a treasure hoard from a deserted Caribbean island. *Treasure Island* introduced many of the classic tropes of pirate romance, not only the legendary character Long John Silver himself but also "X marks the spot," the peg-legged pirate, and the talking parrot. [51](#)

Especially compared to the romanticized images of pirates that followed, *Treasure Island* is relatively realistic. A particularly striking aspect of the novel, however, and one that represents a significant departure from previous pirate literature, is the presence of a boy as its central character. In some respects Jim Hawkins is not a typical child, or rather represents a premodern and preromanticized era of childhood: his age is indeterminate and he is in many ways treated like an adult. Nonetheless, *Treasure Island* soon became not only a classic children's adventure story but also forged an important link between childhood and piracy.

This link became far more powerful with the appearance some twenty

years later of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, where piracy departs entirely from the real world to become a part of children's fantasy. In the play, which premiered in 1904, a group of middle-class London children, Wendy Darling and her younger brothers, are whisked off by the mysterious and playful sprite Peter Pan to the magical realm of Neverland, populated by fairies, mermaids, Native Americans, and pirates, notably the sinister Captain Hook. Both the pirates and the Native Americans represent peoples who exist in fantasy because they are no longer a real threat to the advance of modern civilization, but at the same time stand for freedom from the increasingly controlled character of that civilization. [52](#) Peter Pan and his fellows, the lost boys, are children who magically refuse to grow up, wishing to hold onto the wonder and freedom of childhood. After a climactic battle scene in which Peter Pan slays Captain Hook, however, Wendy decides she does want to grow up after all and returns with her siblings and the lost boys to the conventional domesticity of bourgeois London. But Peter Pan refuses to stay and remains a free spirit outside the world of mature society. The story ends ambiguously, with Wendy accepting her decision to grow up and yet still yearning for the freedom Peter Pan represents. [53](#)

In *Peter Pan* Captain Hook and his fellow pirates represent evil, but they

also symbolize a certain type of freedom, that of a child's imagination. Moreover they, and the story in general, suggest that childhood *is* freedom, the absence of the constraints imposed by society upon individuals (and accepted by those individuals) as they mature into responsible adults. Wendy, her siblings, and the lost boys cannot leave the realm of fantasy to return to England until Captain Hook dies, for example. In Neverland children can fly, do as they wish when they wish, have exciting adventures, and do not worry about what adults want them to do. Not only the lost boys but all of Neverland's inhabitants represent beings who have not grown up; both pirates and Native Americans are adults trapped in a childlike state, having failed to mature along with society in general. When Peter Pan defiantly proclaims, "I won't grow up!" he, like the pirates and other residents of Neverland, insists that true freedom consists in remaining a child. [54](#)

### *Immature Freedom*

The association of piracy with children is part of the transformation of childhood in the modern era, and in particular the rise of the concept of the Age of [Innocence](#).[55](#) The classic text on the history of children remains Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*. In this enormously influential study Ariès argued that the idea of childhood as a separate stage of life

arose only in the modern era, that in the Middle Ages people generally regarded children as little adults, when they paid attention to them at all. His argument inspired a generation of historians to challenge his work and bring a new depth of research to the historiography of childhood. Ariès also argued, however, that the transition to modern ideas and practices of child-rearing tended to make children less free, to give them greater protection and security at the price of limiting their autonomy.

The school shut up a childhood which had hitherto been free within an increasingly severe disciplinary system, which culminated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the total claustrophobia of the boarding-school. The solicitude of family, Church, moralists and administrators deprived the child of the freedom he had hitherto enjoyed among adults.... But this severity was the expression of a very different feeling from the old indifference: an obsessive love which was to

#### dominate society from the eighteenth century on.<sup>56</sup>

Just as the modern nation-state strove to eliminate the freedom of pirates, so too did it harness and restrict the freedom of children. It did so not just to protect young people but also to protect society in general. As J. M. Barrie realized, pirates and free children inhabited the same world, one that modern society was determined to stamp out.

The idea of children as special beings to be cherished and protected rather than smaller versions of adults began in Europe and America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it focused primarily on the offspring of the middle and upper classes. Economic, social, and cultural factors played a role in this new perspective. The increasing importance of capitalism buttressed the need to invest in children's education and skills to prepare them for success as adults, success that could not necessarily rely on inherited wealth. If the aristocracy looked to the past the middle classes looked to the future, and nothing better symbolized that future than the next generation. The religious convulsions of the early modern era likewise played a role by gradually weakening the doctrine of original sin, as one could now view children as innocent and benign rather than born evil. Finally, by the mid eighteenth century infant and child mortality rates began to drop significantly, facilitating the ability of parents to bond emotionally with their children.<sup>57</sup>

By the eighteenth century the issue of child-rearing had become a major concern of European Enlightenment intellectuals. In particular, both John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote extensively about the subject. Locke's enormously influential *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) viewed the child as an innocent being to be carefully molded by

education and moral principles into an upstanding adult and member of society.<sup>58</sup> Rousseau's great novel of education, *Émile* (1762), also embraced the idea of the innate natural goodness of children, opening with the famous sentence, "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man."<sup>59</sup> Locke and Rousseau thus struggled with how to preserve the innocence and benevolence of childhood in an imperfect society.

Both authors wrestled with the question of freedom, and their perspectives illustrate changing ideas of childhood liberty. Locke in particular argued that children are born with a love of freedom, in particular a love of playing freely, and that educators should use this to imbue them with a taste for learning and reason by making them seem like play.<sup>60</sup> The issue of freedom is of course one of the great themes in the writings of Rousseau (see [chapter 3](#) for more on this), and in *Émile* he devotes considerable attention to how to train the young Émile to grow up into a free, self-sufficient man. More than Locke, however, Rousseau emphasized that children had to be trained to be free, they could not simply rely on their own desires. For both authors, therefore, the idea of childhood freedom rested upon adult authority and control.<sup>61</sup>

The Romantic era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries

brought to fruition the ideal of childhood as innocent and idyllic, in the context of the triumph of bourgeois society in Europe and America. In 1788 the English painter Joshua Reynolds completed his classic painting *The Age of Innocence*. The young girl portrayed in the painting is beautiful and adorable, protected, safe and secure; she is also motionless, passive, mute. *The Age of Innocence* offers a portrait not just of a child but of the modern idea of childhood in general, reflected in the classic phrase “children should be seen and not heard.” The painting’s subject seems well taken care of and loved. Whether she is free or not seems less evident. [62](#)



FIGURE 6. Joshua Reynolds, *The Age of Innocence* (c. 1778). Tate Britain.

The modern vision of childhood thus sacrificed freedom and autonomy

for security and adult authority. The middle-class child in particular became in effect a bird in a gilded cage, and in some ways has remained so down to the present. Few people today have less autonomy than children, after all; their parents and elders tell them what to eat, what to wear, and how to spend their days. Moreover, whereas in most societies in the past children have worked for a living, often starting at a very young [age,<sup>63</sup>](#) the modern era has generally replaced work with school, formal education imposing its own [constraints.<sup>64</sup>](#) Most laws guaranteeing freedom, including of course the right to vote, do not apply to those under eighteen. To the extent that children enjoyed freedom, it was negative freedom, freedom from cares or wants. The Age of Innocence created an image of the child as a being without cares or concerns, his or her every need and want met by loving parents. Innocent children should be free from all the problems that challenged adult life. [65](#) Contemporary debates around the overbearing nature of “helicopter parents” and their restrictions on their indulged and controlled children only highlights the difficulties modern society has in coping with the idea of children as free. [66](#)

Not surprisingly, this image of childhood freedom has not gone unchallenged. Most notably, the benevolent authoritarianism of modern parenthood sparked a counterreaction among children themselves, a

demand for freedom. This became most obvious with the rise of modern adolescence in the West. The existence of a gap between physical and social maturity, between puberty and full-fledged adulthood, has been a major characteristic of childhood long before the twentieth century, and “youth” have often been noted for social and political turbulence. In France, for example, young people created a Bohemian youth culture in Paris during the 1830s, and young artisans played a prominent role in the revolutions of 1848. [67](#)

Until the early twentieth century, however, most young people worked for a living. The rise of modern adolescence, like that of children as innocents, occurred as an aspect of middle-class society, of the increasing prominence of families that could afford to keep their physically mature children out of the labor market. In particular, it developed in tandem with mass secondary education. During the nineteenth century America and Europe largely succeeded in creating compulsory primary education for its children, but secondary education, as exemplified by Britain’s “public” schools, remained the privilege of social elites until well into the twentieth. Once that changed, however, masses of young people, usually postpubescent and sometimes bigger than their teachers, were nonetheless still subject to school discipline and treated like children in general. The

modern teenager was born.

The twentieth century in particular witnessed the triumph of modern adolescence, and to a significant extent the concept achieved particular prominence in the United States. In 1904 the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall published *Adolescence*, the first scholarly treatment of the subject, and Americans coined the term *teenager* during World War II. Not for nothing did John Lennon state during the 1960s that “America had teenagers and everywhere else just had people.”<sup>68</sup> Yet the rise of adolescent groups and movements went far beyond the boundaries of the United States. The two great world wars, which brought millions of young people together, helped spur the sense of adolescence as a stage of life apart. Mass conscription became one of the biggest examples of youth mobilization, and outside the military many nations organized official youth movements. Nazi Germany’s Hitler Youth, for example, enrolled millions of young people under the [Third Reich](#).<sup>69</sup>

Yet the heart of adolescent culture in the twentieth century was social and cultural, as well as increasingly commercial, and frequently involved revolts against established authority. The 1920s brought the excitement of the Jazz Age, leading young people in Europe and America to defy the social and sexual taboos of their parents. As the world plunged into a new

world war during the 1930s, groups of young people like the Swing Kids of Nazi Germany, the *Zazous* of Vichy France, and the Black and Latino Zoot Suiters of wartime Los Angeles challenged the cultural and political authority of the established order, sometimes at great risk to themselves.<sup>70</sup>

Most dramatically, during the 1960s the postwar baby boom generation exploded in a series of campus and urban protests, including the near overthrow of the French government in May 1968, as well as creating a vibrant youth [counterculture.](#)<sup>71</sup> In the United States in particular, the revolt against the draft and the Vietnam War constituted a particularly sharp rejection of adult authority.<sup>72</sup>

Teenagers, physically mature yet still controlled and treated as children, became prototypical rebels and adolescence widely viewed as a turbulent time of life.<sup>73</sup> More generally, the image of free children, whether as members of youth gangs, beggars, or truants, became another negative idea of liberty.<sup>74</sup> Like piracy, childhood presented an idea of freedom at odds with some basic tenets of political liberalism. In modern societies in particular, children lacked the economic autonomy so often seen as a precondition for freedom. In this respect, childhood represented the antithesis of liberty.

At the same time, the political project that created liberal democracy

during the nineteenth century in America and Europe closely tied freedom to education and maturity, that is to say, to the end of childhood. The shift from work to school was inspired not only by new visions of childhood and revulsion against the abuses of child labor during the Industrial Revolution but also by the conviction that only educated men could be free and responsible citizens.<sup>75</sup> The Third Republic in France, which made primary secular education free and mandatory during the late nineteenth century, considered the education of young children central to its liberal republican mission.<sup>76</sup> Schools also provided discipline: as one British school inspector noted in the late nineteenth century, “if it were not for her five hundred elementary schools London would be overrun by a horde of young savages.”<sup>77</sup> Here, as in many other aspects of modern childhood, responsibility and freedom stood at odds to each other. *78* As *Peter Pan* made clear, growing up meant the end of a child’s vision of liberty.

Both piracy and childhood thus represented alternate visions of freedom, visions that had to be suppressed or relegated to the realm of fantasy in order to make way for the hegemony of the modern liberal political order. At the same time, as I noted at the start of this chapter, both childhood and piracy had a significant racial, or racialized, dimension. I have already considered the relationship between piracy and the resistance to slavery, for

example. More generally, the pirates of the early modern Caribbean were generally viewed as savages, a perspective grounded both in their brutality and in their odd, picturesque way of life.

The idea of the pirate as savage looms much larger in the case of piracy in the Mediterranean. Unlike the corsairs of the Caribbean or Internet piracy today, few have viewed the Barbary pirates as symbols of freedom. The historian Adrian Tinniswood makes this point sharply in the introduction to his *Pirates of Barbary*, stating:

In the West ... neither group [Barbary or Somali pirates] has been able to boast the glamour of the buccaneers of America—the Henry Morgans and the Captain Kidds, the swashbuckling Errol Flynn's of old romance.

*Those* pirates have been held up by historians as heroic rebels without a cause, cheerful anarchists or ardent democrats, proto-marxists or proto-capitalists, promoters of gay rights and racial equality, praiseworthy dissidents rather than villains.

The pirates of Africa, past and present, have not. The white West regards them as the irreconcilable Other—not rebels against authority

but plain criminals, not brave Robin Hoods ... but cowardly thieves.<sup>79</sup>

More so than their Caribbean equivalents, the corsairs of the Barbary Coast were the inveterate enemies of white freedom precisely because racialized

views of them did not permit their enemies to associate ideals of freedom with them at all.

Two points illustrate this. First, the very word *Barbary* came from the ancient Greek word for “barbarian,” and even though the Islamic cultures they represented in many ways stood superior to those of Christian Europe for many centuries, the name and concept of the North African pirates as racial barbarians stuck. The fight against the Barbary pirates thus became a fight for Christian, or white, civilization. Second, the slave practices of the Barbary pirates represented the last time in modern history that nonwhites enslaved masses of white Europeans. As Gillian Weiss has argued, for the West in general and France in particular, the idea of “white slavery” became increasingly intolerable by the early nineteenth century, leading ultimately to the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 and the end of the Barbary pirate era. The fight against Mediterranean piracy was thus literally a fight for white freedom. [80](#)

Four years before *Liberty Leading the People*, Eugène Delacroix completed another canvas that uses the image of a woman to speak to issues of freedom, but in a very different way. In 1826 Delacroix painted *Greece on the Ruins of Missalonghi* in tribute to the Greeks’ current war of independence against the Ottoman Empire, a war that won tremendous

support from European intellectuals down to its triumph in 1830. The painting, like *Liberty*, centers around a white woman, but in this case she is defeated and bloodied, not victorious. In the background stands the menacing figure of a Black warrior. It represented a narrative of white slavery that drew upon both the Greek conflict and the Barbary pirates, making the scene even more extreme by suggesting the rape of a white woman by a Black man. Delacroix thus integrated support for Greek independence into opposition to white slavery; in 1830 both the victory of the Greeks and the French occupation of North Africa would mark a definitive triumph for a racialized vision of liberty. [81](#)







FIGURE 7. Eugène Delacroix, *Greece on the Ruins of Missalonghi* (1826).  
Musée des Beaux-Arts de

Bordeaux, [www.Eugene-Delacroix.com](http://www.Eugene-Delacroix.com).

In making this point, however, one must note another: the fact that one could represent the pirates of the seventeenth century Caribbean as white does not so much reflect historical reality as underscore the processes of racialization germane to the rise of white freedom. The actual pirates of the era came from many different races, including former Black slaves; most probably did not look like Errol Flynn or Johnny Depp. One of the most striking characteristics of films like *Pirates of the Caribbean* is that one can watch them without ever realizing that most people in the region are of African ancestry. The modern era of white freedom has room for romantic rebels only if they are white, or made to seem so; in this sense, Tinniswood's remarks above apply just as much to the actual buccaneers of the early modern Caribbean as they do to Barbary pirates. The romantic whitewashing of Caribbean piracy thus played an important role in integrating that tradition into narratives of white freedom.

Moreover, one should emphasize the fact that the decline of Caribbean piracy after 1715 coincided with the triumph of the Caribbean slave economy during the eighteenth century. Suppressing the “Black” freedom of piracy went hand in hand with perhaps the greatest example of Black

slavery in history, a social and economic phenomenon that provided a significant share of the wealth that fueled American and European societies during the Enlightenment. This suppression thus helped create, as we shall see in [chapter 3](#), the theoretical and ideological framework of modern liberty. It not only overwhelmingly benefited white planters in the Caribbean but more generally underwrote the prosperity of the Western world as a whole. The end of Caribbean piracy thus formed a key aspect of the historical triumph of white freedom. [82](#)

If the piracy of the early modern era has links to current cyberpiracy, these links also have a certain racial dimension. Certainly, most Internet pirates see themselves as progressives in the tradition of the Green movement, embracing racial and gender equality, environmentalism, and respect for LGBTQ communities. Yet the issue of the digital divide along racial lines remains real, with whites in general having greater access to the wonders of the Web than nonwhites. At the end of 2016 a report, *Digital Denied*, detailed the existence of the divide in America: “In this report, we demonstrate that communities of color find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide for home-internet access—both in terms of adoption and deployment—in a manner that income differences alone don’t explain. Once we control for other economic and demographic factors that

contribute to this divide, the data illustrate persistent broadband adoption and deployment gaps for people of different races and ethnicities.”<sup>83</sup>

This gap appears much more significant on a global level. A 2016 article in the online business journal *Strategy + Business*, “Why Are 4 Billion People without the Internet,” noted that only seventeen percent of the population of South Asia and eleven percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa could afford to use the Internet.<sup>84</sup> The membership of the Pirate Party International remains overwhelmingly European. For all its universal idealism, the world of Internet piracy nonetheless has definite links to the practice of white freedom.

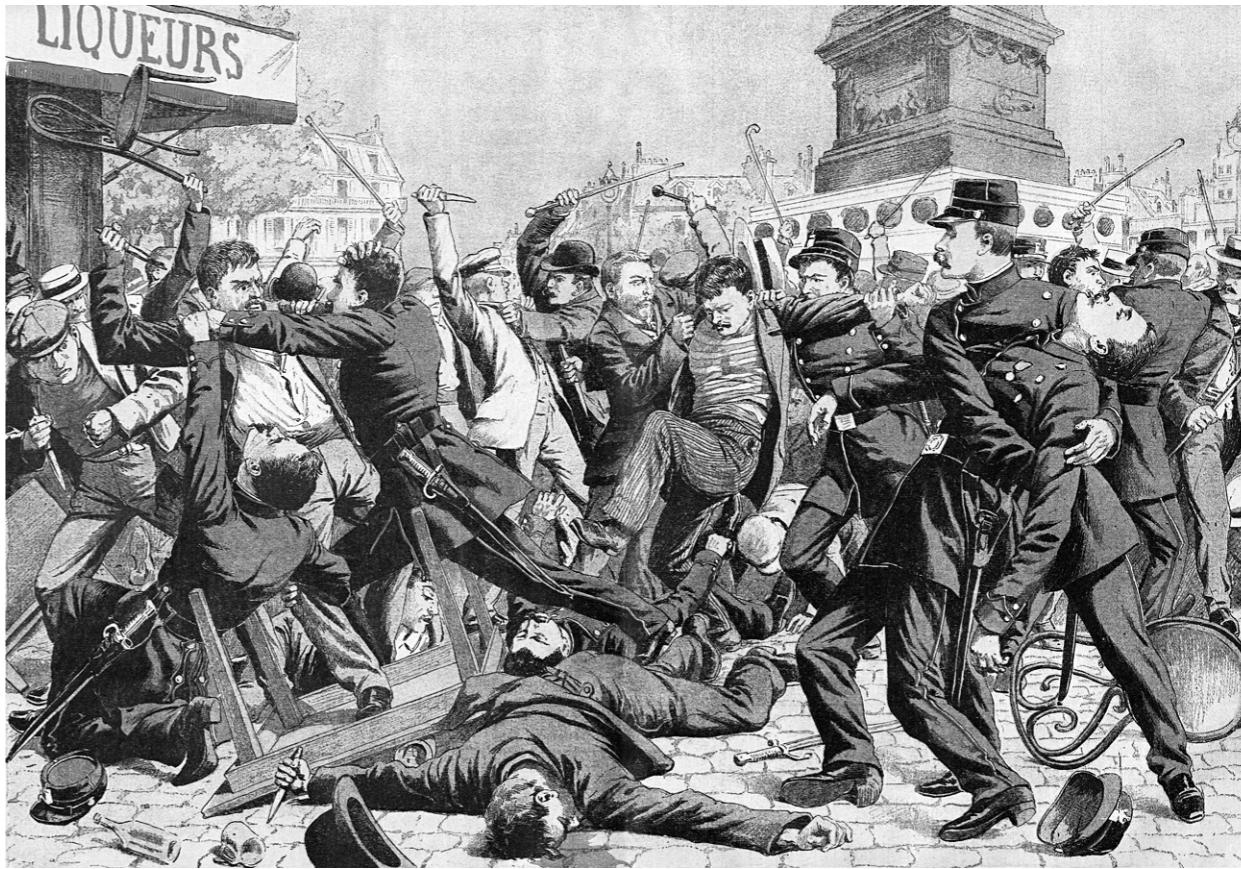
The image of children as savages who need to be forced into civilization also has a long history. Especially during the modern era, philosophers and educators often drew parallels between educating children and civilizing colonial natives; one trained both natives and children to be enlightened, refined human beings, in effect by making them grow up. It was perhaps no accident that Jules Ferry, one of the great statesmen of France during the Third Republic, made his mark primarily in two areas: the expansion of childhood education at home and of empire abroad. 85 As Karen Sands O’Connor, a scholar of children’s literature, has argued, “Educators and psychoanalysts examined childhood in the same ways that so-called

primitive races were being viewed. Edwardian children's authors combined the approaches, creating works that concentrated on contrasts between childhood and savagery on one hand, and adulthood and civilization on the other. The end result was children's literature that consciously privileged [white, British children over all others.](#)<sup>86</sup>

At the same time, paternalist imperial ideology often treated the colonized as children, people who also needed to be civilized by force of arms if necessary; not for nothing did Rudyard Kipling famously characterize the native as “half devil and half child.” [87](#) For example, in *On Liberty* John Stuart Mill argued that freedom should be restricted to the “mature [races.](#)<sup>88</sup> In her discussion of what she calls “the child-savage trope,” Elisabeth Wesseling notes how this parallel often became a reality for colonial administrators: “As an outgrowth of the child-savage trope, colonial regimes in the overseas territories were often patterned after parent-child and teacher-child relationships in the metropolis. Raising children and ruling natives were structured as kindred practices.” [89](#) Both observers of adolescence and teenagers themselves frequently compared their cultures to those of nonwhites. The nineteenth century Parisian aesthetes who called themselves Bohemians used the term to refer to the Gypsies, exotic and nonwhite outsiders in modern Europe. [90](#) Cultural

commentators on youth culture during the American Roaring Twenties labeled fashionable young men “sheiks,” following the runaway success of Rudolph Valentino’s 1921 movie *The Sheik*.<sup>91</sup> Native Americans in particular became symbols of youth culture. Paris in the Belle Époque confronted the social problem of street gangs known as *les Apaches*. Both the German *Wandervogel* and the British Boy Scouts drew upon romanticized visions of Indian traditions, and during World War II one German youth gang in Cologne labeled itself the Navajo.<sup>92</sup> Youth movements in twentieth-century Europe and America often privileged influences from African American culture, especially African American music. In a celebrated 1957 essay, “The White Negro,” American writer Norman Mailer explored this relationship:

So no wonder that in certain cities of America, in New York of course, and New Orleans, in Chicago and San Francisco and Los Angeles, in such American cities as Paris and Mexico, D.F., this particular part of a generation was attracted to what the Negro had to offer. In such places as Greenwich Village, a ménage-à-trois was completed—the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life. If marijuana was the wedding ring, the child



was the language of Hip for its argot gave expression to abstract states of feeling which all could share, at least all who were Hip. And in this wedding of the white and the Black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry. [93](#)

It seems appropriate that the powerful youth movements of the 1960s occurred in conjunction with freedom struggles by peoples of color in both the United States and the colonized world. In short, a rejection of whiteness constituted a key dimension of the adolescent search for freedom.

FIGURE 8. “Encore les rôdeurs! Rencontre d’Apaches et d’agents de police sur la place de la Bastille.”

Supplément illustré du *Petit Journal*, August 14, 1904.

In essence, in the modern world pirates and children have at times stood for a vision of liberty that not only challenges and departs from liberal orthodoxy but is also racialized as Other, a kind of “Black,” or savage, freedom. In the case of piracy, the decline of such savage freedom in the Caribbean and of white slavery in the Barbary coast both coincided with the rise of transatlantic slavery, and Black slavery had as its inevitable opposite white freedom. In the case of children, the embrace of savagery and nonwhite cultures represented their immaturity and their need to grow into a white model of liberty.

Such alternate visions of freedom were both threatening and alluring at the same time, thus doubly dangerous; the continuing attraction of primitivism in Western culture illustrates the enduring appeal of savage freedom.<sup>94</sup> The project of translating liberal ideas of freedom into the institutional framework of liberal democracy involved suppressing such alternate ideas of liberty, of in effect rendering them Other. The increasingly powerful template of racial difference in the modern era provided an influential way of doing so. Ultimately, the antidote to savage liberty was white freedom.

## Conclusion

This chapter has endeavored to challenge the contemporary polarity between liberty and race by considering the historical evolution of both concepts, to illustrate both differences and also affinities between them. The result has been different forms of liberty, often far removed from the ideas of classic liberal political theory. Pirates and children represent two important examples of this: both are in some senses doomed to perish, either by elimination or by maturation, with the rise of modern society, yet both also retain a strong appeal precisely because of their instability. The tremendous popularity of Internet piracy today suggests that such alternate visions will never completely disappear. In making my central argument that modern concepts of freedom have often been racialized I suggest that white freedom is one of those forms, one result of the intersection between two of the most foundational ideas in modern history.

The next chapter will approach the history of that intersection by considering perhaps the most famous representation of freedom in the world today. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes not only the idea of freedom in general but more specifically the fundamental national character of the United States as the “land of the free.” As I will show, this great icon of freedom has an important racial dimension, rarely acknowledged but nonetheless present and in many ways central to its symbolic presence.

Analyzing the Statue of Liberty from this perspective will offer new insights into the complex relationship between freedom and race, and the ways in which white freedom arose out of those interactions.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Lady of Freedom, Lady of Whiteness*

#### THE STATUE OF LIBERTY AS SYMBOL OF WHITE FREEDOM

The Statue of Liberty is a fake.

According to a persistent rumor among African Americans, the sculpture that rises grandly from Liberty Island in New York Harbor is not the original Statue of Liberty. The true original was modeled after a Black woman and had African features. In addition, the point of the statue was to honor not immigrants but rather the abolition of slavery in America by the Civil War, and in particular the service of Black Union soldiers. The statue carried broken chains to symbolize emancipation. Furthermore, the legend goes, the current white statue was substituted for the original when American politicians objected to portraying Liberty as a Black woman. Some have even argued that the original Black statue still exists, either in France or hidden somewhere in the catacombs of New York.<sup>1</sup>

No evidence exists to verify this legend, but its mere existence illustrates the racialized nature of America's most famous monument. Of all the memorials to freedom throughout the world, none is more important or widely known than the Statue of Liberty. Towering majestically over the entrance to New York Harbor since 1886, the great statue has become, more than any other monument or physical site, the symbol of both human freedom and American national identity. Originally a gift from France to the United States, it also represents the historical ties between the two great republics and the significance of liberty as a global phenomenon. Endlessly reproduced as a tourist object, commercial symbol, or nationalist icon, the Statue of Liberty is one of the great monuments of the modern world. [2](#)







FIGURE 9. View of the Statue of Liberty from Liberty Island (2008). Daniel Schwen/CCA-SA-4.0.

National monuments not only have but are power. They represent a combination of myth and history: frequently representing historical events, such as the great war monuments of the twentieth century, they generate their own myths around them that bring together and are embraced by national communities.<sup>3</sup> They thus exemplify what literary scholar Lee Bebout has termed the “mythohistorical,” which he considers the intersection of myths and history to build a sense of identity and community.<sup>4</sup> Through this combination national monuments build a sense of national community. The Statue of Liberty has functioned as one of the

greatest monuments in America by building what it means to be American around the myth of freedom, thus enabling Americans as a people to build their sense of national identity on the basis of that myth. It symbolizes the idea that American history is above all the forward march of liberty, for the nation and the world in general. [5](#)

In this chapter I wish to consider a little-explored aspect of the Statue of Liberty's history, its role as a racial icon, and more specifically as a symbol of whiteness. Most obviously the statue's European physical features, but also the lack (indeed, as we shall see, the suppression) of any markers identifying it with rebel or freed slaves, give it a strong sense of racial identity. Moreover, the symbolic role played by the Statue of Liberty in allowing European immigrants to the US to claim white status affirms its racial character, as does its complicated but largely exclusionary or at best irrelevant relationship to African Americans and other peoples of color.

Most important for the purposes of this book, the Statue of Liberty embodies both racial difference as well as an unparalleled representation of human liberation. It is thus the perfect symbol of white freedom.

This chapter will explore the racial history of the Statue of Liberty from both an American and a transnational [perspective.6](#) Recent studies of the statue have increasingly considered its French origins and the context of

French politics and culture in the late nineteenth century, and my study will continue that emphasis, considering how questions of race and class shaped the statue's [birth.<sup>7</sup>](#) I will then review the shifting racial meanings associated with the Statue of Liberty in the United States, ranging from its origins to the celebration of its centennial in 1986. Finally, I will briefly look at other statues of liberty throughout the world, notably China's *Goddess of Democracy*, which was associated with that nation's democracy movement in the late 1980s. Throughout, I will argue that the Statue of Liberty is the world's most prominent example of the racialization of modern ideas of freedom.

A Domesticated Vision of Republican Freedom in France  
Conceived by French scholar and activist Édouard de Laboulaye and wrought by French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, the Statue of Liberty not only represents the admiration of the people of France for America but equally illustrates the changing nature of liberty, including its racial dimensions, in French history. The idea of France as a land of freedom has been central to modern French identity, summarized by the famous slogan of the French Revolution, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, which ranked freedom first. [8](#)

In particular, the ideal of freedom has taken the political form of

republicanism, emphasizing popular sovereignty and the rejection of aristocratic rule. Emerging out of the cauldron of the French Revolution, republicanism espoused a new vision of France, and indeed of all humanity, centered around individual liberty and political democracy. By the beginnings of the twentieth century a republican ideology dominated French political culture, and it continues to do so to this day.<sup>9</sup> The creation of republican hegemony took decades, however, involving a series of tumultuous political struggles throughout the nineteenth century. The Statue of Liberty was conceived and constructed during this era of republican apprenticeship in France, eventually symbolizing not just freedom in America but also the triumph of the republican ideal in the land of Liberty's birth.

Republicanism as a political idea goes back to antiquity, notably the Roman Republic, and played a prominent role during the Renaissance with the rise of the republican city-states, Florence, Venice, etc. In the early modern era republican nation-states emerged in the Netherlands and in revolutionary England under Oliver Cromwell.<sup>10</sup> During the Enlightenment, French intellectuals such as Montesquieu and Rousseau developed republican political philosophy in opposition to absolute monarchy, at times aligning it with liberal ideology.<sup>11</sup> But it was the French Revolution that

created the first republican political movement in France, one destined to shape the future of the nation in the modern era. It also emphasized a key theme in the history of republicanism, its association with political extremism and violence. Like Cromwell's seventeenth-century Commonwealth, the first French Republic of 1794 grew out of regicide; the people became sovereign by executing the king as well as abolishing the monarchy. Radical measures like the deestablishment of the Catholic Church and the abolition of slavery in France's colonies also gave republicanism a revolutionary air. The overthrow of the republic by a military dictator, Napoleon, further underscored the violence and instability of the movement.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, republicanism in France struggled with its revolutionary heritage. French political history in the 1800s seems like a crazy quilt of republics, dictatorships, and empires, constantly interrupted by revolutionary upheavals: rebels overthrew the national government in 1830, 1848, and 1870. <sup>13</sup> At the base of the turmoil, however, was the core tension between republicanism and liberalism, between the emphasis on democracy and the stress on individual freedom. Not for nothing did the liberal prime minister of the July Monarchy, François Guizot, scornfully dismiss those campaigning for universal suffrage by

saying that if they wanted to vote they should get rich. How could the radical vision of democracy championed by the Jacobin republic and the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution coexist with property rights, the rule of law, and civil liberties? [14](#)

The contrast between these two visions of republicanism formed part of the broader struggle throughout Europe and beyond to reconcile popular sovereignty and private property, a struggle that would ultimately create the powerful compromise we know as liberal democracy. In order for republicanism to win the allegiance of the affluent bourgeoisie in particular and the majority of the French population in general, it ultimately had to shed its revolutionary trappings and come to terms with the nation's established order. The ideal of "the social republic," a republicanism that emphasized social equality and justice, had to be suppressed, by force of arms if necessary.[15](#) Not until the creation of the Third Republic in 1870 did French republicanism succeed in making this key ideological shift, and not until the republicans' victory in the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the century did republicanism become the uncontested dominant political ideology and culture in France.

This struggle came to a head during the early years of the Third Republic. In 1851 Napoleon's nephew, Louis Napoleon, had violently

suppressed the Second Republic created by the revolution of 1848. A year later he proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III, establishing the Second Empire and driving republican forces into an underground opposition movement. Perhaps the most curious of modern French regimes, the Second Empire oscillated between iron-fisted repression and progressive ideas; it made trade unions legal in France, for example, and maintained the tradition of universal manhood suffrage established in 1848. Yet the liberalism of the Second Empire failed to mollify its republican critics, so that when the emperor was ignominiously taken prisoner after a major defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, a new Parisian revolution overthrew his regime and established the third of France's [republican governments](#).<sup>16</sup>

The challenge for the new Third Republic was to make republicanism respectable. Caught between the radical republican Left and the powerful monarchist Right, as well as facing defeat at the hands of the Prussians, its prospects at first seemed bleak. Many republican leaders argued that the new regime could only survive if it renounced its radical heritage; as the new provisional president, Adolphe Thiers, proclaimed, the republic must be conservative or it would not be.<sup>17</sup> The showdown between these two republican visions came in March 1871 when radicals seized control of the Paris city government and staged the armed uprising known as the Paris

Commune. The republican government led by Thiers brutally suppressed the Commune, invading the city and conquering it block by block as the rebels fought back behind barricades and set fire to large parts of the capital. Tens of thousands of Parisians died in the fighting, shot by the forces of a republican regime that had itself come to power through revolution. [18](#) The defeat of the Commune represented the triumph of bourgeois republicanism in France over its revolutionary alter ego. By the end of the 1870s republican forces had achieved political dominance in the country, and the Third Republic would go on to be the longest-lasting regime in modern French history. [19](#)

The idea of the Statue of Liberty took shape in this France racked by empire, republicanism, and revolution. The life and politics of Édouard de Laboulaye, the man who more than any other conceived of the idea, illustrates the ways in which the political turbulence of mid-nineteenth century France shaped the statue that would come to dominate New York harbor. Laboulaye was born in 1811, at the end of Napoleon's First Empire, and spent his childhood and youth under the Restoration, the July Monarchy, and the Second Republic. An ardent republican whose hero was the Marquis de Lafayette, Laboulaye was in his early forties when Louis Napoleon smashed the French republic, replacing it with the Second

Empire. [20](#)

Bitterly disappointed by this new turn to despotism in France, Laboulaye focused on the United States as a successful example of republican government and popular sovereignty. A professor of law at Paris's prestigious Collège de France, he became one of the nation's first and most prominent specialists in the study of the United States, publishing studies of American life, giving popular lectures and courses about America, and translating many key American works into French, including the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. [21](#) Like a fellow Frenchman whom he greatly admired, Alexis de Tocqueville, Laboulaye saw in the United States a successful example of moderate and stable republicanism that could serve as a model for France and the rest of Europe.

During the 1860s in particular Laboulaye used his admiration of the United States to criticize France's imperial regime. Much divided the two nations during these years: Napoleon III's regime openly favored the cause of the Confederacy during the American Civil War and also took advantage of that conflict to intervene in Mexico, overthrowing the government of Benito Juarez in favor of a Habsburg puppet, the emperor Maximilian. [22](#) French censorship prevented Laboulaye from voicing his admiration of the American republic too openly, but he nonetheless made it clear that the

United States remained a model of freedom for France. As he wrote in 1862, at the height of the American Civil War, “Frenchmen, who have not forgotten Lafayette nor the glorious memories we left behind in the new world—it is your cause which is on trial in the United States.... This cause has been defended by energetic men for a year with equal courage and ability; our duty is to range ourselves round them, and to hold aloft with a firm hand that old French banner, on which is inscribed, Liberty.” [23](#)

The 1865 triumph of the North in the Civil War was followed five years later by the collapse of the Second Empire in France and the advent of the Third Republic. The defeat of the Confederacy removed Laboulaye’s one major criticism of the United States, slavery. Like many French liberals a strong abolitionist, Laboulaye had struggled to understand how a regime as noble as the American republic could tolerate such an abomination against human rights. During one of his celebrated lectures at the Collège de France, Laboulaye commented, “Why is it that this friendship [between France and America] has cooled? Why is it that the name of American is not so dear to us as it was in those days? It is due to slavery.” [24](#) For Laboulaye, the Civil War and the emancipation of America’s slaves reaffirmed his faith in that nation’s republican vision. The overthrow of the Second Empire brought the end of a regime that had antagonized the United States, and

France was once again a republic. As a result, Laboulaye ardently hoped for an alliance of the two great sister republics, one that would bring liberty and [enlightenment to all the peoples of the world.](#)<sup>25</sup>

By the beginning of the 1870s Laboulaye had developed the idea of a giant statue symbolizing liberty that France would give to the United States in honor of the centennial of the American [Revolution.](#)<sup>26</sup> At the end of the 1860s he met Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, an ambitious young French sculptor devoted to monumental public art who would make his vision a reality. Bartholdi had long been interested in larger-than-life sculptures, influenced by classical works like the Colossus of Rhodes and the great statues of Thebes in Egypt. In the late 1860s he had designed a great statue, *Egypt Bringing Light to Asia*, for the Egyptian viceroy, Ismail Pasha, which was intended to stand at the entrance to the new Suez Canal. The project never came to fruition, but in many ways it represented a first exploration of the themes that would culminate with the Statue of Liberty. Most important, the image of a female colossus symbolizing liberty and progress inspired Bartholdi's creation of the American statue.<sup>27</sup>

Why would one give the ideal of liberty a female form? There is a long history of female representations of nations and political ideas, one which, as many feminists have trenchantly noted, has often coincided with the

political exclusion and suppression of women in real life.<sup>28</sup> The ancient Romans celebrated the goddess Libertas, and during the early modern era in Europe the idea of freedom as a woman challenged the masculine authority of kings. The French Revolution gave birth to the idea of Marianne as the great symbol of the Republic, and throughout the modern era she has represented both republicanism and the nation of France in general. <sup>29</sup> No representation of modern liberty is better known, or more powerful, than Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People* ([Fig. 2](#)). Created in the year that the 1830 Revolution overthrew the Restoration monarchy, Delacroix's great work portrays Liberty as a powerful woman, armed and bare-breasted, leading the insurgents of Paris in the fight for freedom. <sup>30</sup> Marianne is the direct ancestor of the Statue of Liberty, but the American monument incorporated some very important changes, symbolizing a different vision of freedom. Most notably, the classic image of Marianne united republicanism and revolution, emphasizing the overthrow of oppression. Key to this vision was the presence on so many Mariannes of the Phrygian cap, the ancient Roman symbol of the freed slave. Throughout the modern era in Europe, as "La Marseillaise" itself demonstrates, the struggle against monarchism and capitalism often adopted the metaphor of the slave uprising. <sup>31</sup> Marianne thus represented not just resistance to

oppression but more specifically freedom as the end of slavery. As in Delacroix's painting, many Marianne also bore weapons, emphasizing that the fight for liberty was a violent struggle. Finally, Marianne often bore a torch of some sort, symbolizing both illumination and also the fires of revolution.

The effort to produce a nonrevolutionary Marianne formed a key part of the fight for a conservative vision of republicanism in France. The Paris Commune also saw the proliferation of Marianne images, usually adorned with red Phrygian caps, and produced its own [Mariannes](#).<sup>32</sup> One of the most dramatic (and for its opponents, horrific) images of the Commune was the *pétroleuse*, or female incendiary; persistent rumors suggested that working-class Parisian women would fill empty bottles with gasoline and use these homemade bombs to attack the forces of order and set fires throughout the city.<sup>33</sup> The *pétroleuse* was Delacroix's *Liberty* come to life, a revolutionary woman holding a flame in her hand. She symbolized everything bad about republicanism, and the French troops that suppressed the Commune summarily executed women throughout the city suspected of being *pétroleuses*, [even if their only crime was carrying empty milk bottles](#).<sup>34</sup>

The new Third Republic sought to craft a more peaceful, less revolutionary image of Marianne after 1870; like the Second Empire before

it, it sought to ban the Phrygian cap as part of this symbol.<sup>35</sup> More important

for the purposes of this study, the turmoil of the 1870 revolution and the Paris Commune reinforced Laboulaye's and Bartholdi's belief in moderate republicanism and the need to represent it in a monumental symbol.

Although neither was actually in Paris during the Commune, both had been close by and were able to witness firsthand the devastation it had wrought.

For them, the French civil war highlighted the dangers of the revolutionary republic, which must be suppressed symbolically as well as in actual combat. Their vision of the Statue of Liberty consequently emphasized freedom's moderate virtue. The statue is fully clothed, both majestic and modest, unlike the radical harridans of Paris. It also does not bear a Phrygian cap: as we shall see, the suppression of any links with antislavery also had an important American dimension, but in the French context it represented the rejection of freedom as insurrection, so violently embodied by the Paris Commune. In addition, the Statue of Liberty's torch is carefully contained, a light and not a fire, or as Laboulaye put it, "a torch and not a flame," to illuminate, not to destroy.<sup>36</sup> The French vision of the Statue of Liberty thus represented a domesticated version of the *pétroleuse*, weaponless and shorn of all revolutionary intent. <sup>37</sup>



FIGURE 10. Paul Klenck, *Une Pétroleuse* (c. 1871). Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris (Paris

Musées)/AKG-IMAGES.

The evolution of the image of Marianne, and the contest between moderate and radical visions of republicanism, formed part of the struggles around social class that so profoundly shaped life and politics in nineteenth-century France. The moderate republic was to an important degree a bourgeois republic, whereas the ideal of the social republic often symbolized by Marianne wearing a red Phrygian cap played an important role in working-class politics and [culture.38](#) French officials after 1870 struggled against popular and working-class desires for a Marianne with a Phrygian cap on the official buildings of the republic. [39](#)

At the same time, such conflicts based in social class and class ideologies had an important racial dimension. As I will argue more extensively elsewhere in this study, differences of race and class have often interacted in modern history, so that working-class Europeans have frequently been racialized as Other.[40](#) During the nineteenth century, many leftists portrayed workers as slaves and their struggles as a kind of slave uprising; Karl Marx himself called the Paris Commune a revolt against “the would-be slaveholders of France!” and compared it to the American Civil War.[41](#) Others considered the Communards savages, viewing them and

Parisian workers in general as unfit for civilization and liberty. For Count Arthur de Gobineau, France's most prominent racial theorist, the Commune and French workers in general represented racial degeneration and debasement analogous to Blacks and other peoples of color. [42](#)

Perhaps most important, the triumph of bourgeois republicanism in France coincided with imperial expansion overseas. It is one of the ironies of French history that the regime which overthrew the Second Empire would foster the nation's greatest period of imperial expansion. The Third Republic created a massive new empire, expanding and consolidating colonies in Africa, Indochina, and the Pacific, all in the name of republicanism. As I will discuss further in [chapter 4](#), it presented the strange contradiction of a republican empire without an emperor. The essence of this contradiction was of course racial difference, so that republican France became an empire of Black and brown natives ruled over by white citizens. [43](#)

The great statue France bequeathed to the United States in 1886 was therefore far more than a straightforward symbol of liberty. It represented the changing view of republicanism, and freedom in general, in France during the nineteenth century. In particular, it represented the triumph of a new view of freedom, one that increasingly rejected the concept's more

radical history in favor of the rule of law and respect for the rights of property. This bourgeois vision of liberty also had a significant racial component, especially noteworthy because the Third Republic would not only emphasize conservative republicanism but also go on to create the greatest overseas empire in French history, so that when Liberty came to America's shores, this racial dimension already prefigured in France would become more important than ever.

### Republicanism and Race in the United States

The America that welcomed the Statue of Liberty stood poised on the edge of global prominence, while at the same time haunted by the shadows of the recent Civil War. To an even greater extent than in France, the political life of the United States centered around republicanism: the birth of the American nation constituted a definitive break with monarchy, and the United States had always been a republic. As in France, however, there were different visions of republicanism in America. America also faced a choice between more and less inclusive visions of the republic, radical versus conservative republicanism. In America the key issue dividing republicans (which is to say political thinkers in general) was slavery, and behind it, racial difference.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike France or any other modern nation, the United States began not

just as a republic but as a slave republic, and the intimate entanglement of freedom and race lay at the heart of the American experience from the beginning. The 1790 Alien Naturalization Act limited citizenship to whites, [45](#) a legal tradition reinforced by the Dred Scott decision of 1857, which held that even free Blacks could not be US [citizens](#).[46](#) The conflict over slavery led directly to the Civil War, the greatest military conflict in American history, which cost the lives of 600,000 Americans, more than any other war before or since. The importance of the war to American history cannot be overstated: in a sense the true American Revolution, the Civil War made the United States one nation and set the stage for the unprecedented economic growth of the late nineteenth century and the world dominance of the twentieth. [47](#) Most notably for our purposes, in abolishing slavery and making the freed slaves American citizens, the [victory of the Union spelled the end of the white republic.](#)[48](#)

Or did it? The Republican Party had been founded in 1854 as a political movement opposed to slavery, yet as became clear such opposition could take different forms. For many, including the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, opposition to slavery meant hostility to the presence of Blacks, slave or free, on American soil. The republic must reject slavery, but the best way to do so was to get rid of the slaves themselves. Lincoln

and many other Republicans had come only reluctantly to support the abolition of slavery, and the Emancipation Proclamation provoked furious hostility throughout the North during the war.<sup>49</sup> By 1865 the Republicans were clearly divided as to how to rebuild a bitterly divided nation and more generally about the shape of the American republic in the future. Moderate and conservative Republicans wanted not only to reconcile with the defeated South but also to prevent social or political equality for African Americans. Their support of Lincoln's successor, the Southern Democrat Andrew Johnson, illustrated these changing attitudes.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, the Radical Republicans insisted on a thoroughgoing political overhaul of the South, one that would give the freedmen full status as American citizens based on the principle that all Americans were equal regardless of race.<sup>51</sup> The conflict between these two perspectives haunted the Reconstruction era and ultimately brought it to its end. During the decade after the end of the Civil War the Radical Republicans controlled the US Congress, using that control to pass sweeping legislation (including the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution) that sought to empower the former slaves as equal citizens of the republic. Most important, they deployed federal troops throughout the former Confederacy to ensure the freedmen's right to vote, so that during Reconstruction Black

legislators often controlled the state governments of the South. These efforts were fought tooth and nail not only by white Southerners and the Democratic Party that represented them but also by Andrew Johnson and other moderate Republicans. Resistance to Reconstruction frequently turned violent, especially after a group of ex-Confederate soldiers founded the Ku Klux Klan in 1866, unleashing a wave of white terror against Black and white Republicans throughout the South. In 1873 white vigilantes massacred some 150 Blacks in Colfax, Louisiana. [52](#) Two years later similar terrorists killed hundreds of Black men in Mississippi as the Democrats [retook control of the state by force.](#)[53](#)

For most white Southerners, and many Northern Republicans as well, the very idea of Reconstruction state governments dominated by Blacks was an unthinkable outrage contrary to all civilized norms. The fact that such administrations created the first public school systems in the South meant little to their opponents, who condemned them as corrupt and savage. [54](#) Just as some opponents of the Paris Commune denigrated its members as savages, so too opponents of Reconstruction did not hesitate to tie the Radical Republicans to the forces of red revolution. In April 1871, the *Charlottesville Weekly Chronicle* charged that “The French Reds, like their brethren, the Black Radicals of this country, are appealing to a higher law to

justify their crimes. They threaten the guillotine in Paris. [The Radicals] would send halters to the leading men of the South. One set is as bad as the other. There is little choice between them.” [55](#)

The same year that saw the triumph of the moderate Republic in France, 1877, also witnessed the end of the radical Republican Reconstruction in the United States. In 1876 the moderate Republican Rutherford B. Hayes won a very closely contested presidential election, partly on his promise to stop meddling in the affairs of the South. He won Southern Democratic support by agreeing to withdraw federal troops from the region, a promise he kept in 1877. With their departure, little prevented white Democrats and the racist terrorists who supported them from ending Reconstruction and the promise of an egalitarian Republic. Blacks continued to exercise their right to vote for a while, but starting in the 1890s Southern state legislatures passed new constitutions using the poll tax and other means to effectively disenfranchise them. By the first decade of the twentieth century, white supremacy had destroyed Reconstruction and the dream of an inclusive republic. [56](#)

The end of Reconstruction was perhaps the most obvious example of the increasingly racialized nature of American republicanism in the late nineteenth century. The year 1877 also witnessed a massive series of

railway worker protests that turned into the first general strike in American history. While many hostile observers racialized the strikers as inferior Europeans,<sup>57</sup> the strike leaders frequently and increasingly emphasized the whiteness of the movement. Strikers in San Francisco turned the movement into a pogrom against the city's Chinese.<sup>58</sup> In 1882, little more than a decade after laborers from China had helped build the nation's first transcontinental railroad, America passed the first of several Chinese Exclusion Acts, making it a crime for workers to immigrate to the United States from China. <sup>59</sup> The decades after the Civil War also witnessed the final stages of the American wars against Native Americans in the Great Plains, culminating with the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. <sup>60</sup> Moreover, although to a lesser extent than France or Britain, at the end of the century the United States acquired an overseas empire, annexing Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Hawaii in 1898. America's colonies were, like those of France, largely inhabited by nonwhites and subject to authoritarian imperial rule.<sup>61</sup> The Civil War and Reconstruction had brought the hope that republicanism in America could embrace all peoples, but by the dawn of the twentieth century it was clear that America would remain a racialized white republic for the foreseeable future.

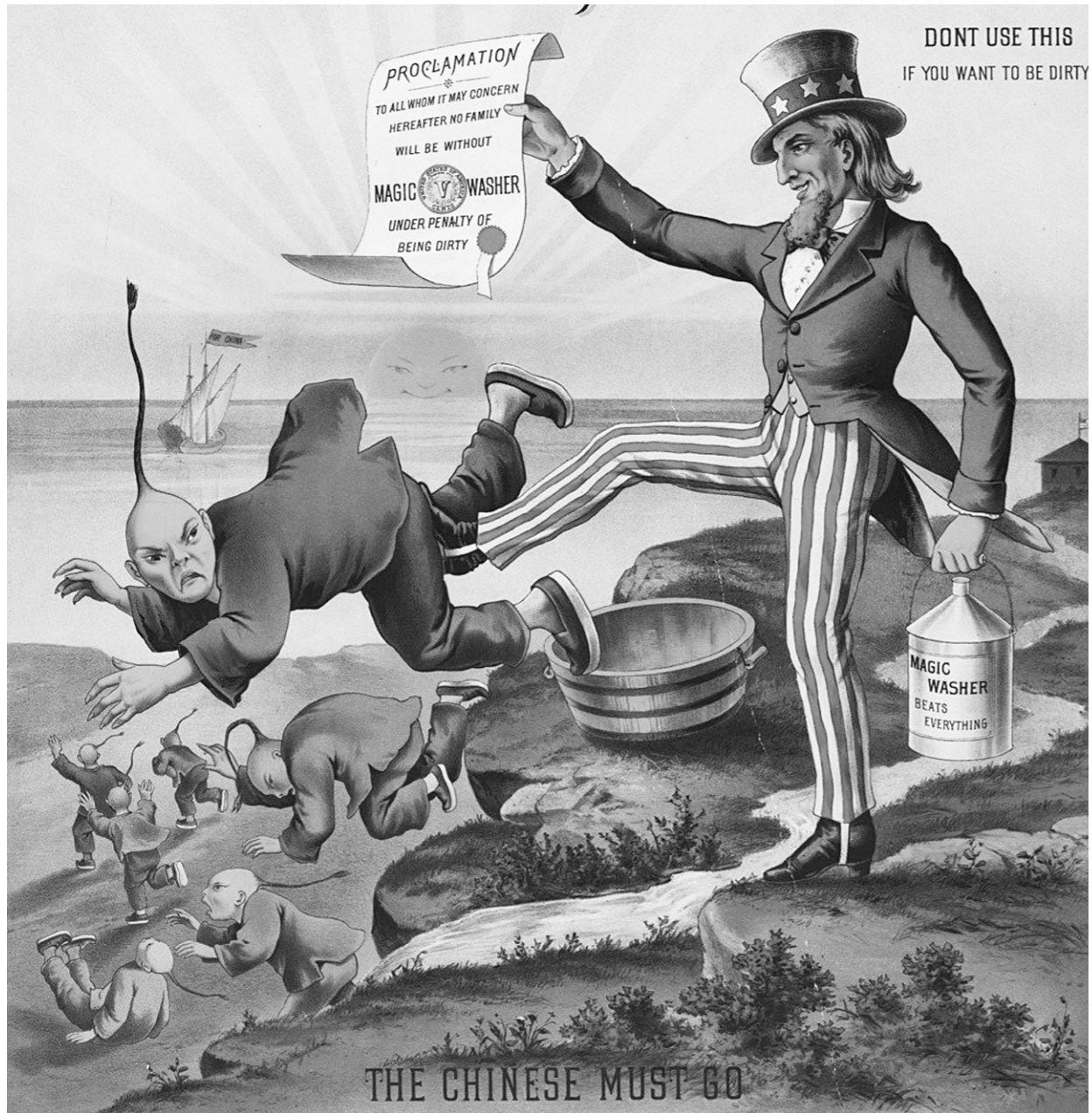


FIGURE 11. Poster for Chinese Exclusion. “The magic washer. The Chinese must go.” (1886). Color

lithograph. Everett Collection Inc./Alamy Stock Photo.

Historians David Roediger and Alexander Saxton have described the racialization of American politics after the Civil War as *Herrenvolk*

republicanism, the democratic hegemony of the master race. The battle against slavery had triumphed in the destruction of that institution, but that did not necessarily bring freedom to the slaves. As in other post-emancipation societies throughout the Americas, the antebellum elites of the South managed to preserve their racial hegemony by terrorizing and ultimately disenfranchising the “freed” slaves. Racial difference no longer existed as a function of slavery but now assumed center stage in American political and social life. As a result, by the turn of the twentieth century liberty in America was for whites only. [62](#)

The nation that welcomed the Statue of Liberty in 1886 was thus one that had embraced its own version of conservative republicanism that was, even more than in France, grounded in racial difference. The image of a Marianne shorn of references to insurgent politics found a ready audience in America. Correspondingly, while Laboulaye and Bartholdi personally supported the abolitionist cause, they designed the statue not to irritate what had become increasingly a sore subject in the United States. By the 1880s the Confederate narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction, viewing them as an unfortunate mistake at best, a crime against civilization at worst, had gained traction throughout the country and remains influential to this day.[63](#)

During his tour of the United States to explore support for the statue, the new political context became clear to Bartholdi and influenced his design of his magnum opus. He had originally planned to have the statue hold broken chains in her hand as a symbol of slave emancipation, but he replaced them with a book of law. The Statue of Liberty does in fact include broken chains at her feet, but they are effectively hidden both by her robe and by the pedestal on which she stands. Like the Phrygian cap, therefore, the effective absence of the broken chains distanced the statue not only from slave emancipation but from radical Republicanism in general. [64](#)

Political dynamics in both France and the United States thus served to distance the Statue of Liberty from republican egalitarianism, and in doing so gave it an important racial meaning. The resplendent white lady standing above New York harbor turned her back on the racialized working masses of Europe and the increasingly marginalized Blacks and other peoples of color in America. When Americans celebrated the inauguration of the Statue of Liberty in 1886 they celebrated a racialized vision of liberty; the original statue may not have been Black, but the one they embraced was certainly white. Right from the beginning of its history in America, therefore, the Statue of Liberty was a powerful representation of white freedom.

## White Woman on a Pedestal

As is well known, the United States met France's gift of the Statue of Liberty by funding and building a giant pedestal upon which to place it. Funded by a popular subscription launched by American newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer, the massive pedestal and base rise 154 feet from the soil of Liberty Island, slightly taller than the statue itself. The Lady of Liberty thus stands high above New York harbor, lifting her torch to a height of over three hundred feet and to this day dominating the maritime approach to America's largest city.[65](#)

This image of the woman on a pedestal corresponds to increasingly conservative and dominant images of gender and womanhood during the nineteenth century, in America and throughout the world. We have already seen how the design of the Statue of Liberty represented a more conservative vision of Marianne, illustrating the shift in republicanism in both the United States and France. This shift corresponded to a broader transformation of the image and reality of women's lives during the nineteenth century, one that historians have characterized as the rise of domesticity. Briefly stated, with the spread of industrial society and bourgeois culture middle-class women found themselves removed from the world of paid labor and increasingly relegated to the home. The doctrine of

separate spheres assigned to women management of the household and oversight of the children, while making them dependent financially and politically on men. While this new idea of femininity certainly did not reflect the lives of working-class women, the bourgeois standard of female behavior and status increasingly characterized what it meant to be a woman in the modern age. [66](#)

The image of the woman on a pedestal closely corresponded to the new model of domesticity. It was the image of a woman prized and cherished, even venerated, but also controlled and fixed firmly in place. Many feminists saw in this image an attempt to masquerade the oppression of women in a gentle guise, praising them as symbols instead of recognizing them as human [beings](#).[67](#) They rejected arguments of men like Senator George Vest of Missouri, who in 1887 declared on the floor of the Senate, “It is said that suffrage is to be given to enlarge the sphere of women’s influence. Mr. President, it would destroy her influence. It would take her down from that pedestal where she is today, influencing as a mother the minds of her offspring, influencing by her gentle and kindly caress the action of her husband toward the good and pure.” [68](#)

Scholars have commented on the ambivalent appearance and symbolism of the Statue of Liberty. Perhaps most famously, historian Marvin

Trachtenberg observed that though it represented a powerful, monumental image of woman, a “great lady,” at the same time “for a fee she is open to all for entry and exploration.” [69](#) This incongruity corresponded more generally to new bourgeois ideas of femininity, which rendered the ideal woman sexless and subservient, while at the same time struggled to repress sexual desire. Freud’s madonna-whore complex, a powerful representation of this ambivalence about women, thus found expression in the great statue dominating New York harbor after 1886. [70](#)

As many feminist historians have noted, these new ideals of domesticity often intersected with and were mutually reinforced by the new racial hierarchies and racism. In both Europe and America, the proper lady was a white woman who not only kept her distance from subaltern classes and races, but whose presence could also foster the hegemony of white bourgeois civilization. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the creation of new European empires in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific emphasized a vision of white womanhood grounded in domesticity and racial privilege. While European women, like European men, had long traveled to the colonies in search of wealth, adventure, or religious service, [71](#) colonial regimes began promoting the emigration of white women to their empires as wives and mothers. They would not only prevent the

need for interracial liaisons between European men and native women, but also domesticate colonial society by centering it around white family life. The rise of white domesticity in the colonies often corresponded to an increased sense of racial barriers and discrimination; historians have long debated whether or not this was due to the women themselves or to colonial society's view of them. Creating white domestic life meant, among other things, segregated white neighborhoods and social spaces in colonial cities. Imperial life thus placed the European woman on a pedestal, coming in contact with the natives below only as a benevolent but distant mistress.<sup>72</sup>

In the United States as well the presence of the white woman stood for bourgeois domesticity and freedom. Very similar to the European colonies, white pioneer women in the American West were seen as crucial to transforming the region from a wilderness populated by savages into a settled and domesticated part of the United States. Wives and mothers, farm women and schoolteachers—not saloonkeepers, prostitutes, or cowgirls—were instrumental to the civilizing of the West.<sup>73</sup> In no area did the racialized cult of domesticity prove more important than the American South, both before and after the Civil War. Rendered famous by *Gone with the Wind*, the cult of Southern womanhood has a complex history, involving both the embrace of patriarchal society and the emphasis on white women's

empowerment in a variety of spheres ranging from the church to the plantation. The ideal of the Southern plantation mistress in particular underscored how white women created and symbolized civilization in a society dependent upon the labor of enslaved Black women and men. [74](#)

The image of the lady on the pedestal was crucial for white Southern women; their gentility depended upon an isolation from the realities of slave society. Above all, it meant the complete absence of sexual relations between white women and Black men; in contrast, sex between white men and Black women was an unacknowledged staple of antebellum Southern society. After the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves, white Southerners sought to maintain racial dominance by the Jim Crow system of rigid legal and social segregation. Although several Southern states had repealed laws against interracial marriage during the Reconstruction era, they soon reenacted them throughout the region as part of the reestablishment of white dominance. Miscegenation, seen as the worst possible transgression of this system and a literal violation of the white woman on the pedestal, was vociferously condemned and ruthlessly attacked.[75](#)

During the late nineteenth century this emphasis on white biological and sexual purity became a key component of the form of racial terror known as

lynching. White segregationists lynched Black men and women as a way of reestablishing white supremacy throughout the South. It soon, however, also became linked to a defense of white womanhood against the threat of Black rapists. As South Carolina Senator Ben Tillman argued, “We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be the equal of the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him.” [76](#) Although, as contemporary antilynching activists like Ida B. Wells pointed out, most lynchings had nothing to do with sexual contact at all, let alone attempted rape, the idea that white men lynched Black men to preserve the honor of white women became a central theme of Southern life under Jim Crow. At a time when the image of liberty was enshrined in New York harbor as a white woman on a pedestal, racial terror became an important means of preserving that ideal in the states of the former Confederacy. The Statue of Liberty thus represented both freedom and racial segregation, and ultimately the violence needed to [preserve racial segregation.](#)[77](#)

As the ultimate representation of the white woman on a pedestal, the Statue of Liberty could thus symbolize the pure female needing protection from the Black rapist, and at the same time stand for retribution against

Black men in general. One Texas journalist, for example, warned New Yorkers about the danger posed to the statue by Black men, saying that “some morning they would find the old girl with her head mashed in and bearing the marks of sexual violence.” [78](#) The ambivalent gender symbolism of the statue, representing both female power and female vulnerability, assumed a more sinister meaning in the context of the racialized politics of late-nineteenth-century America.

In one instance a replica of the Statue of Liberty did play a role in an actual lynching. During the early years of the twentieth century a series of racial assaults forced many of the African American residents of Missouri’s Ozarks region to flee for their lives. These culminated on April 14, 1906, when an enraged mob of thousands of whites lynched three Black men, Horace Duncan, Fred Coker, and Will Allen, for allegedly having sexually assaulted a white woman, Mina Edwards. The crowd dragged the three men to the Gottfried Tower, one of the city’s tallest structures, which was topped by a replica of the Statue of Liberty, and hung them from it. An editorial cartoon in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* entitled “O Liberty, What Crimes Are Committed in Thy Name!” commemorated the grisly event. [79](#)

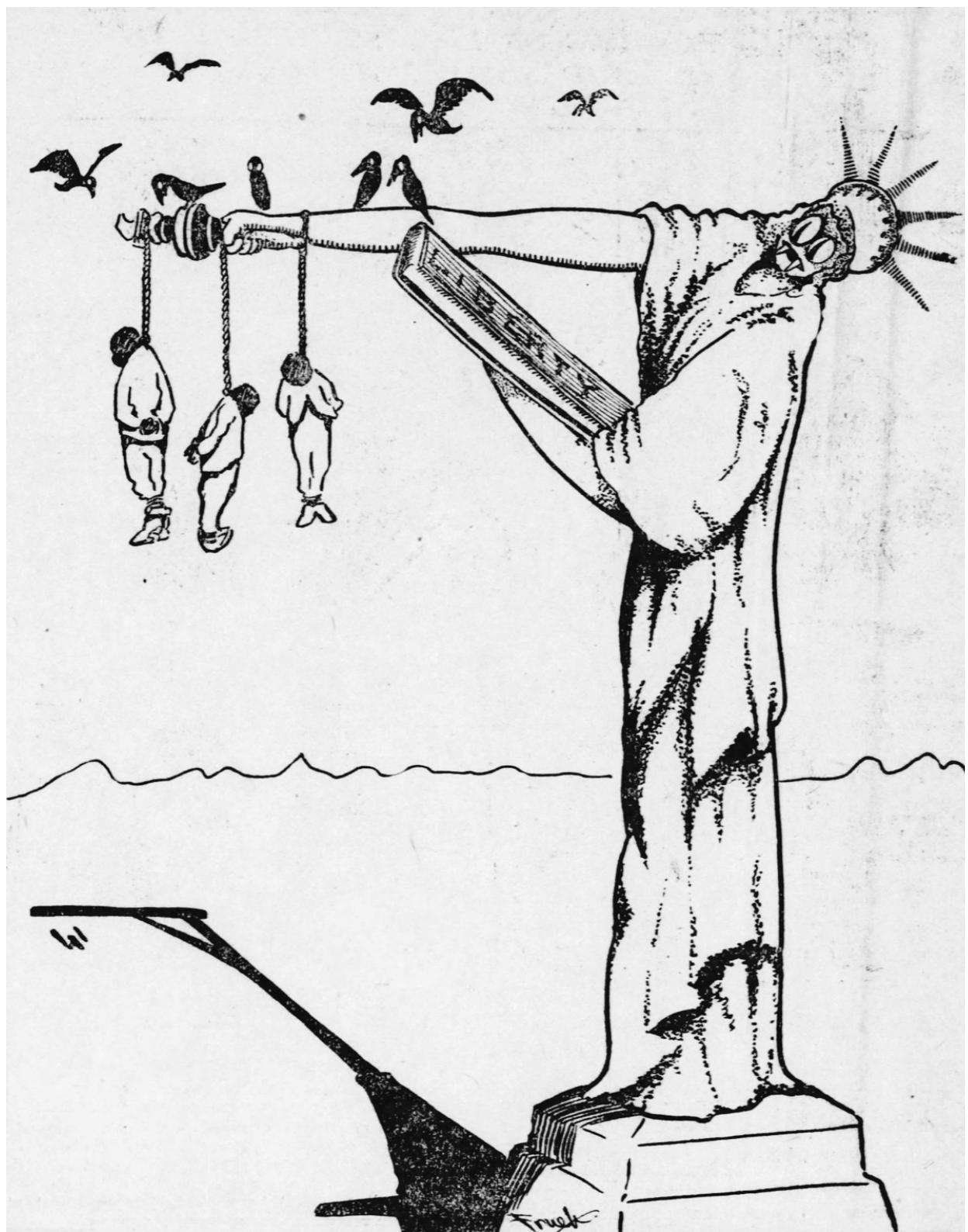


FIGURE 12. “O Liberty, What Crimes Are Committed in Thy Name!” (1906). Editorial cartoon,

“Suggested to a Post-Dispatch Cartoonist by the Springfield Lynching under the Statue of Liberty.”

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 17, 1906.

As the cartoon’s title suggests, the use of the Statue of Liberty in a lynching prompted widespread outrage among both Black and white Americans. There was a sense that the very notion of freedom had been defiled. The governor of Missouri not only condemned the crime but also argued that the statue should be removed from the Springfield public square until justice was [done.<sup>80</sup>](#) At the same time, the incident did express some more general aspects of the statue, notably the role played by white womanhood in violence against Black men. The image of three Black men lynched by the Statue of Liberty dramatically illustrated the racialized dimension of America’s [greatest monument.<sup>81</sup>](#)

The image of the white woman on a pedestal emphasized patriarchal control over women in general: at best it was an idea of protection, not freedom. In both Europe and America, the rise of new racial hierarchies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a racialized version of patriarchy, in which the white woman had to be protected from natives of color. That such “protection” entailed strong limits on the agency, social, and sexual freedom of white women merely reinforced the importance of white male dominance over both women and men of color. In

this context, the Statue of Liberty represented the kind of white female purity that served to justify the racial and gender hierarchies of the time.

### Immigration, Race, and the Statue of Liberty

For most Americans, the Statue of Liberty symbolizes above all the history of immigration to the United States, particularly immigration from southern and eastern Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the classic narrative of American history, it represented the nation's welcome to the oppressed from throughout the world, and its ability to turn them all into loyal citizens grateful for the freedom they had found on its shores. As an article for the National Park Service has put it, "Between 1886 and 1924, almost 14 million immigrants entered the United States through New York. The Statue of Liberty was a reassuring sign that they had arrived in the land of their dreams. To these anxious newcomers, the Statue's uplifted torch did not suggest 'enlightenment,' as her creators intended, but rather, 'welcome.' Over time, Liberty emerged as the 'Mother of Exiles,' [a symbol of hope to generations of immigrants.](#)"<sup>82</sup>

A closer analysis of the famed statue's relationship to American immigrants reveals a somewhat different story. As several historians have pointed out, in the late nineteenth century many Americans viewed and portrayed the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of anti-immigrant sentiment.

“More often than not—at least in the early years—the Statue of Liberty stood as a symbol of opposition to immigration rather than of welcome to the ‘huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’ ” [83](#) Those Americans who embraced nativism and saw the immigrant masses as a religious, racial, and political danger to the republic feared they would overwhelm not only the statue but the country as a whole. Not until well into the twentieth century did the idea of the statue as a welcoming beacon to immigrants become dominant in American society.

In exploring the reasons for this transformation, I focus on the racial identity of the Statue of Liberty, its representation of the ideal of white freedom. Historians of whiteness have studied the ways in which European immigrants were gradually accepted as white in America, and their relationship with the Statue of Liberty is part of this history.[84](#) In sum, the Statue of Liberty became a welcoming symbol of immigration when European immigrants became white. Those immigrants who gazed rapturously at the magnificent statue upon their arrival in New York harbor may have seen a symbol of freedom and prosperity, but they also saw a vision of whiteness, of what they ultimately could become in America. As this study has argued, whiteness and freedom were closely intertwined, and the changing relationship between European immigrants and the Statue of

Liberty dramatically illustrates the history of white freedom.

From the 1880s until World War I, the United States witnessed a wave of immigration unprecedented in both size and origins. During this period more than 20 million immigrants journeyed to America; whereas in the early nineteenth century roughly 125,000 arrived per year, by the 1880s and 1890s the number jumped to nearly half a million. In 1907 alone almost 1.3 million came to the United States.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, they came from different places. Before the late nineteenth century most American immigrants were natives of the British Isles, including Ireland; Germany; and Scandinavia. The new immigrants still came mostly from Europe, but starting in the 1880s they mostly left the eastern and Mediterranean parts of the continent. Some 4 million Italians journeyed to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; between 1910 and 1920 alone, more than 3.5 million came from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Many of these latter were Jews, some 2 million of whom came to the United States from the 1880s to the 1920s. <sup>86</sup>

Thanks to her location in New York harbor, the Statue of Liberty had a front-row seat to witness this massive human drama. Most European immigrants traveling to America by steamship first came to New York. In 1892 federal authorities turned Ellis Island, just upriver from the statue's

home on Bedloe's Island, into the nation's largest immigrant processing center. The immigrant ships passed by the Statue of Liberty en route to Ellis Island, where they would formally enter the United States. The sight of the great monument to the left was for many their first sight of America, and one of the most dramatic and enduring.

To the immigrants who battled tough times and rough seas, the Statue of Liberty was a welcoming beacon, a mystical madonna who made the homeless newcomers weep, pray and dance for joy.

Swathed in a morning's mist, the mesmerizing lady of the harbor appeared off to the left of their ships, hailing their entry to the new world. For many, it was the first time they dared to hope.

"The people were screaming and some of them were crying. It was all kind of a joyous feeling of coming to the land of freedom and a land of love," recalled Clara Larsen of New York City who came from Russia in 1911 [at age 13.87](#)

By no means did all Americans consider the Statue of Liberty a symbol of welcome to the new immigrants, however. As historian Peter Schrag has pointed out, if America is a land of immigrants, it is also one of anti-immigrant hostility and prejudice. [88](#) The massive new waves of immigration horrified many Americans, who frequently looked down upon the

newcomers as ragged, dirty, ignorant, criminal, and in general unfit to be citizens of the United States. Many turned to nativism, a tradition of hostility to foreigners and immigrants that experienced a major rebirth during this era. Led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, the nativists sought to keep foreigners out of the United States, seeing them as a mortal danger to the country. In an era of heightened racial prejudice it is not surprising that anti-immigrant hostility frequently crossed the line into overt racism. The beginnings of the twentieth century saw the rise of an influential eugenics movement dedicated to preserving the purity of “American blood” by contamination from outsiders. In 1916 Madison Grant published *The Passing of the Great Race*, a popular work of racial science that warned that immigrants from “non-Nordic races” threatened to overwhelm and ultimately destroy America. World War I and the Russian Revolution increased fears of immigrants, now also suspected as dangerous Communists and anarchists. In 1924 nativism triumphed with Congress’s passage of the Johnson-Reed Act sharply limiting immigration to [America.](#)<sup>89</sup>

Nativists, like many others in American history, adopted the Statue of Liberty to represent their own ideas. If the statue did in fact symbolize America, then it could not belong to the despised immigrant masses thronging into New York. Many argued that in fact Liberty stood opposed to

the immigrants, struggling to protect the integrity and purity of the American people. A series of cartoons in the late nineteenth century portrayed Liberty as under siege by motley hordes of foreigners, violent anarchists, or other undesirables. In 1895 Thomas Bailey Aldrich published the poem “Unguarded Gates,” summing up the nativist fear of the immigrant threat:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,  
And through them presses a wild motley throng—  
Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,  
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,  
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,  
Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn;  
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,  
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.  
In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,  
Accents of menace alien to our air,  
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!  
O Liberty, white Goddess! Is it well  
To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast  
Fold Sorrow's children, soothe the hurts of fate ...90

In this interpretation, and from the perspective of nativists in general, the Statue of Liberty did not welcome the new immigrants but in contrast sought to protect America against them.

So how did “the white goddess” end up embracing the immigrants from Europe in the twentieth century? In answering this question, it is important to note that southern and eastern European immigrants were never entirely bereft of white status or privilege. Albeit reluctantly, until 1924 they were allowed into the United States in large numbers, unlike the Chinese, for example. The Johnson-Reed Act imposed strict limits on them, but even stricter ones on hopeful immigrants from Asia or Africa. Nonetheless, it took several decades before European immigrants were fully accepted as Americans, worthy of the benevolent gaze of the Statue of Liberty. [91](#)

The immigrants themselves, and their descendants, played a key role in this symbolic transformation. Starting with that first spectacular view of the statue rising above New York harbor, many took it as a symbol of all that America had to offer, and those that succeeded in their new land remembered this initial vision of Liberty with gratitude. Joseph Pulitzer, who had arrived penniless in New York during the Civil War and became a leading newspaper publisher, took the lead in launching the campaign to raise funds for the statue’s pedestal, calling it “the people’s [statue.”<sup>92</sup>](#) Many

other immigrants contributed to the campaign; as one wrote, “I would send you more if I could, as I know how to appreciate liberty, because I am a Jew and emigrated from Russia to this city a few years ago.”<sup>93</sup> In 1902 William Flattau, a businessman of Russian origin, built a fifty-five-foot high scale model of the Statue of Liberty on the roof of his warehouse in Manhattan. <sup>94</sup> The descendants of the immigrants would in their own turn champion the statue; Lee Iacocca, the chairman of the Ford Motor Company and the son of Italian immigrants, led the planning of the one hundredth anniversary celebration of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.

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MARCH 22 1890.

PRICE 10 CENTS

# Judge

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THE PROPOSED EMIGRANT DUMPING SITE.

STATUE OF LIBERTY—"Mr. Windom, if you are going to make this island a garbage heap, I am going back to France."



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FIGURE 13. “Anti-Immigrant Cartoon, Statue of Liberty” (1890). Color lithograph by Victor. Paris,

Musée des Arts et Métiers/AKG-IMAGES.

Nothing more famously symbolizes the idea of the statue as “Mother of Exiles” than the famous poem by Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus.” Lazarus herself came from a well-established German Jewish family in New York, and by her early thirties had carved out a substantial reputation as a poet. Starting in the early 1880s she became aware of and horrified by the anti-Semitic pogroms in eastern Europe and the flight of many Russian Jews to America. Their plight inspired in Lazarus a new attention to her own Jewish identity as well as a determination to do what she could to aid her impoverished co-religionists in New York. Asked by friends to contribute to an art exhibition raising funds for the Statue of Liberty’s pedestal, she responded by writing the sonnet that would both become her most famous work and firmly link the statue to the history of European immigration.

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

"The New Colossus" received little attention at the time and played no role in the formal inauguration of the Statue of Liberty in 1886. In 1903, however, it was engraved on a bronze plaque and mounted on the base of the statue. [95](#)

Emma Lazarus's great sonnet, and the fond memories of millions of new Americans who passed through New York harbor, would ultimately turn the Statue of Liberty into the Mother of Exiles, a symbol of the United States as a nation of immigrants. It took decades, however, before this new vision of the statue would become dominant; Lazarus's poem was largely ignored by the American public until the late 1930s. By then major changes in national life had facilitated this transformation. During World War I the Statue of Liberty became more popular than ever, competing with Uncle Sam as the symbol of American national identity. Pictures of the famous statue were featured prominently on Liberty bonds, at times appealing directly to former immigrants. In August 1918 thousands of American soldiers in Iowa posed for a picture as a living Statue of Liberty before being shipped off to the war in [France.](#)[96](#) With the onset of World War II the desperate plight of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany brought new attention to "The New Colossus" and America's welcome of an earlier group of immigrant Jews.

Many observers noted the contrast between that time and the nation's failure to admit most refugee Jews in the 1930s, although the full tragedy of that decision was not clear until the extent of the Holocaust became known. With the US entry into the war, the idea of welcoming the tempest-tossed huddled masses once again became important to American identity. Most important, however, was the change in the immigrants themselves. John Higham has argued that the transformation of the Statue of Liberty became possible only with the end of mass immigration in 1924. [97](#) Americans could romanticize European immigration once it had largely receded into the past and was no longer present in the shape of millions of people speaking strange languages, eating strange foods, and crammed into miserable slums. By the 1930s, a nadir of immigration into the United States, not only were there few newcomers in America's cities and mill towns, but those who had come earlier had adjusted to American life politically, socially, and culturally. Many had learned English, and most of their children had grown up speaking the language fluently. Many immigrants had joined labor unions, and what had been seen as un-American subversion became with the advent of the New Deal in the 1930s a major means of integration into national life. World War II brought new opportunities for national service, along with acceptance as equal citizens.

By the war's triumphant end in 1945, the former immigrants were now

Americans.<sup>98</sup>

To an important extent, as Matthew Frye Jacobson and other historians of whiteness have observed, that meant being accepted as white. <sup>99</sup> Later in this study I will explore in greater detail the history of what Peter Schrag has called "The Great Awhitening," the ways in which immigrants from Europe were gradually accepted as and transformed into white Americans, and the implications of that process for the idea of white freedom. The point here is that this new acceptance of immigrants, and of the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of immigration, were a part of this process. In 1941 the *Detroit Free Press* would publish a cartoon, "Americans All!" about the statue. The cartoon, by Arthur Pronier, shows a maternal, smiling Statue of Liberty embracing a variety of happy children identified as coming from different immigrant backgrounds. Strikingly, all the children are of European origin and white. In this interpretation, Lady Liberty would welcome immigrants, and consider them Americans, as long as they had white skin.<sup>100</sup>

The years after World War II reinforced both the broad acceptance of the descendants of European immigrants, now known as white ethnics, and the centrality of their history to the Statue of Liberty as a national symbol of freedom and American identity. In 1956 Congress changed the name of the

statue's site from Bedloe's Island to Liberty Island and began planning for a national museum of immigration. [101](#) In 1965 the federal government passed a new immigration law overturning the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and removing that law's racial and geographical restrictions. President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law on Liberty Island at the base of the Statue. During the early 1980s the statue underwent a massive facelift and cleaning, which included equipping it with electric lights, in preparation for its one hundredth anniversary in 1986. That year the Reagan administration orchestrated a huge four-day celebration, "Liberty Weekend," in honor of the centennial. The theme of immigration occupied pride of place during the ceremony, highlighted by Chief Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger's naturalization of sixteen thousand immigrants en masse. [102](#)



FIGURE 14. Arthur Poinier, “Americans All!” (1941). *Detroit Free Press*, June 19, 1941.

Some commentators at the time and since noted that these celebrations took place in a period when the United States was debating new restrictions on immigration, calling into question the symbolism of the statue as the Mother of Exiles. To charge such hypocrisy is, however, to miss the point, for in a very real sense the Statue of Liberty never celebrated immigration. Rather, as the 1941 cartoon made clear, it honored the descendants of immigrants who had become Americans, not the immigrants themselves. The centennial apotheosis of the Statue of Liberty took place in a time when most immigrants were coming from Asia and Latin America, not Europe. The statue saluted those of European immigrant background who had achieved whiteness in America while at the same time turning a cold shoulder to those who had not. No one proposed building similar statues on the US-Mexico border, in Miami, or on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, to mark these new waves of immigration, and certainly no one suggested building a similar memorial in Charleston, South Carolina, or other ports involved in the Middle Passage. [103](#) As a symbol of both liberty and European immigration, the Statue of Liberty has to this day remained perhaps America’s leading icon of white freedom.

## A Global Symbol

Probably only a minority of Americans today realize that the great monument in New York harbor is not the only Statue of Liberty in the world. There are in fact hundreds of replicas of the famous statue stationed throughout the United States and the world. Paris, the birthplace of the statue, has three, including the famous replica at the Pont de Grenelle in the middle of the Seine just downriver from the Eiffel Tower. Those arguing that the real Statue of Liberty is Black have at times pointed to the actual Black version in the Caribbean island of St. Martin. Statue of Liberty replicas frequently decorate commercial enterprises, most notably the New York–New York Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, but more often serve as civic and public monuments. The Statue of Liberty, in some ways like the idea of freedom itself, is both an intensely American icon and a global symbol. [104](#)

One of the most interesting of these replicas was the *Goddess of Democracy*, which Chinese activists erected in Tiananmen Square during the democracy movement of the late twentieth century. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the liberalization of the Chinese economy during the 1980s prompted a movement for political liberal democracy and the end of Communist Party rule. In April 1989 Chinese students began a series of demonstrations demanding freedom of speech, freedom of the

press, and other reforms. The movement coalesced in Beijing's great Tiananmen Square, and from there spread throughout the nation. [105](#)

On May 27, 1989, in an effort to bolster support and create a rallying point for the pro-democracy movement, art students in Beijing began building a large statue they would call the *Goddess of Democracy*. Thirty-three feet high and made of papier-mâché, the statue bore a striking resemblance to the Statue of Liberty, even though its creators, in the interest of not appearing too pro-American, denied the [connection.](#)[106](#) On May 30 they erected it in Tiananmen Square, facing a large portrait of Mao Zedong. The *Goddess* proved an effective and memorable symbol, drawing large new crowds to the square and quickly attracting media attention from around the world. In a public statement its creators declared:

At this grim moment, what we need most is to remain calm and united in a single purpose. We need a powerful cementing force to strengthen our resolve: That is the Goddess of Democracy. Democracy.... You are the symbol of every student in the Square, of the hearts of millions of people.... Today, here in the People's Square, the people's Goddess stands tall and announces to the whole world: A consciousness of democracy has awakened among the Chinese people! The new era has begun! ... Chinese people, arise! Erect the statue of the Goddess of

Democracy in your millions of hearts! Long live the people! Long live freedom! Long live democracy! [107](#)

The *Goddess of Democracy* had a spectacular but very brief existence. Chinese authorities had waffled between attacking and trying to appease the students and their supporters, but ultimately decided to suppress the movement. In the first week of June the Chinese Army moved tanks into Tiananmen Square, killing thousands of demonstrators and smashing the movement for democracy. On the night of June 4 tanks knocked over the *Goddess of Democracy*, quickly reducing it to rubble as television reporters transmitted the images across the [world.](#)<sup>108</sup> It had stood in Tiananmen Square for only five days, and its fall symbolized the defeat of the pro-democracy movement in China. Supporters of the movement would build replicas of the *Goddess* in places as far apart as Hong Kong, San Francisco's Chinatown, and York Canada. [109](#)

The *Goddess of Democracy*, along with the destruction of the Berlin Wall, became one of the most prominent symbols of the global movement for liberal democracy and freedom in the late twentieth century. Like the Statue of Liberty itself, the *Goddess* also had an important racial dimension. The whiteness of the statue—not just the white color of the papier-mâché but more significantly the prominent European features of its face—

contrasted sharply with the typical Communist statuary in China, including in Tiananmen Square itself.

More generally, the pro-democracy movement in China began with a wave of racist attacks against African students. Prejudice against Africans was nothing new in China, where many saw African students as unduly privileged (a criticism made much less often of other foreign students). In December 1988, a series of attacks and demonstrations against Africans broke out in several cities, most notably in Nanjing but also Hangzhou, Wuhan, and [Beijing](#).<sup>110</sup> Resentment over African men dating Chinese women often provoked clashes, but many Chinese students also attacked the regime for importing and protecting the Africans. As Barry Sautman has noted, “Student ‘democrats’ did attach slogans about human rights and freedom to anti-Black exhortations and thus used the events to advance their own agenda by claiming that the regime failed to protect the rights of Chinese against the alleged depredations of Africans.”<sup>111</sup> In China, as in other parts of the world, desire for freedom and racial prejudice were strange but close bedfellows. The *Goddess of Democracy* symbolized not just liberty but white freedom as well.

An exhaustive and systematic analysis of the politics of Statue of Liberty replicas scattered throughout the world lies beyond the scope of this study.

The example of the *Goddess of Democracy* does nonetheless suggest that the link between the famous monument and the concept of white freedom is not limited to America or France. The Statue of Liberty has been replicated like perhaps no other monument since the Great Pyramids, and its repeated imitation testifies to the importance of freedom in the modern world. At the same time, the racialization of this icon highlights the global significance of racial difference and whiteness, and of the roles such concepts play in defining what it means to be free.

## Conclusion

Nothing compares to the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of freedom in the modern world. In many different contexts, from the French struggle for republicanism to American debates about immigration, it has stood for human liberty and prosperity. Standing in New York harbor, at the gateway to the United States from Europe, it has become the quintessential representation of American national identity while equally exemplifying America's transnational and global presence. The Statue of Liberty has been instrumental in affirming the belief that liberty is the essence of America's national life as well as its promise to all the peoples of the world.

In this chapter I have argued that this promise is shaped by race and racial difference. The Statue of Liberty throughout its history has

represented a white vision of freedom, one shaped by developments in France, the United States, and elsewhere. In France, Laboulaye's vision of the statue emphasized a rejection of revolutionary politics in favor of a moderate republicanism that largely excluded a racialized working class and embraced an imperial vision of the nation-state that created a massive new colonial empire structured by racial difference. In the United States the statue's roots in antislavery were largely hidden, and it became a symbol of European immigration when, and only when, the descendants of those immigrants had won acceptance as white Americans. In both countries the very idea of freedom had a racial component, one that helped shape its most monumental representation. In a sense, the Statue of Liberty's cold European facial features were no accident, expressing instead the racial aesthetics and politics of liberty in the modern world.

I contend, therefore, that the Statue of Liberty is the world's greatest representation of white freedom. In the rest of this study I will consider the roots of this ideological phenomenon and how it has developed and changed in the course of modern and contemporary history. The whiteness of the Statue of Liberty is the most prominent expression of an underlying theme in the history of human freedom, which the following chapters will explore from the eighteenth century to the present day.

## PART 2

### CHAPTER 3

*Black Slavery, White Freedom*

#### FREEDOM AND RACE IN THE ERA OF LIBERAL REVOLUTION

Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT*, 1762

What to the slave is the Fourth of July?

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, JULY 5, 1852

On September 30, 1791, Mozart's final opera, *The Magic Flute*, premiered at the Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden in Vienna. Inspired by Mozart's belief in the ideals of Freemasonry, championing brotherhood, enlightenment, and liberty, *The Magic Flute* portrays the triumph of light over darkness, the victory of the benevolent leader Sarastro over the evil Queen of the Night. The great opera, which was an immediate success and has remained popular ever since, is a prime example of Enlightenment popular culture, with its veiled attack on Austrian empress Maria Theresa and on despotism in general. Interestingly, this attack has an important racial dimension, and not just in the broader opposition between beneficent light and evil darkness. Pamina, the heroine of the opera and daughter of the

Queen of the Night, is kidnapped by Sarastro's Moorish slave Monostatos, who tries to rape her. Sarastro disavows him as a result, leading Monostatos to ally with the Queen of the Night after she promises Pamina to him. Sarastro's defeat of the Queen of the Night and of Monostatos thus represents the triumph of Enlightenment freedom over royal oppression and also the reassertion of white racial and sexual purity.<sup>1</sup>

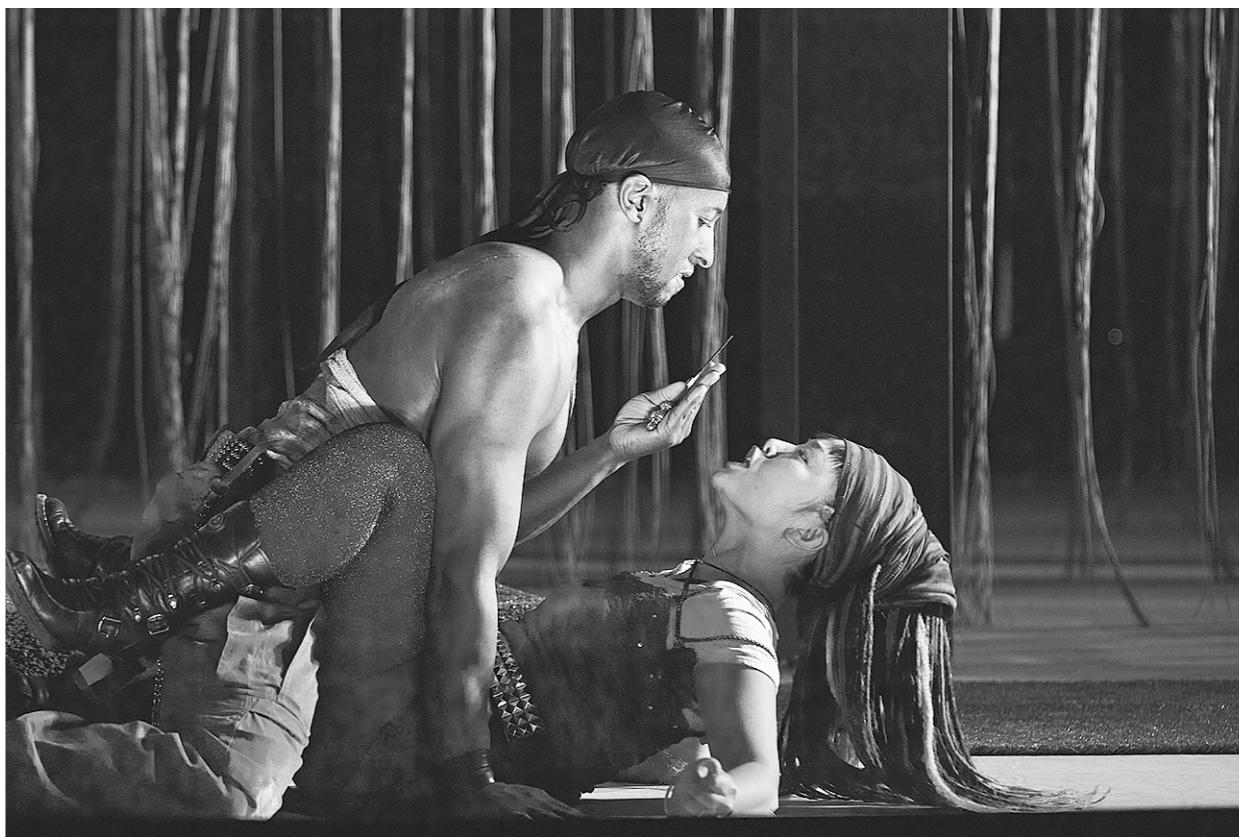
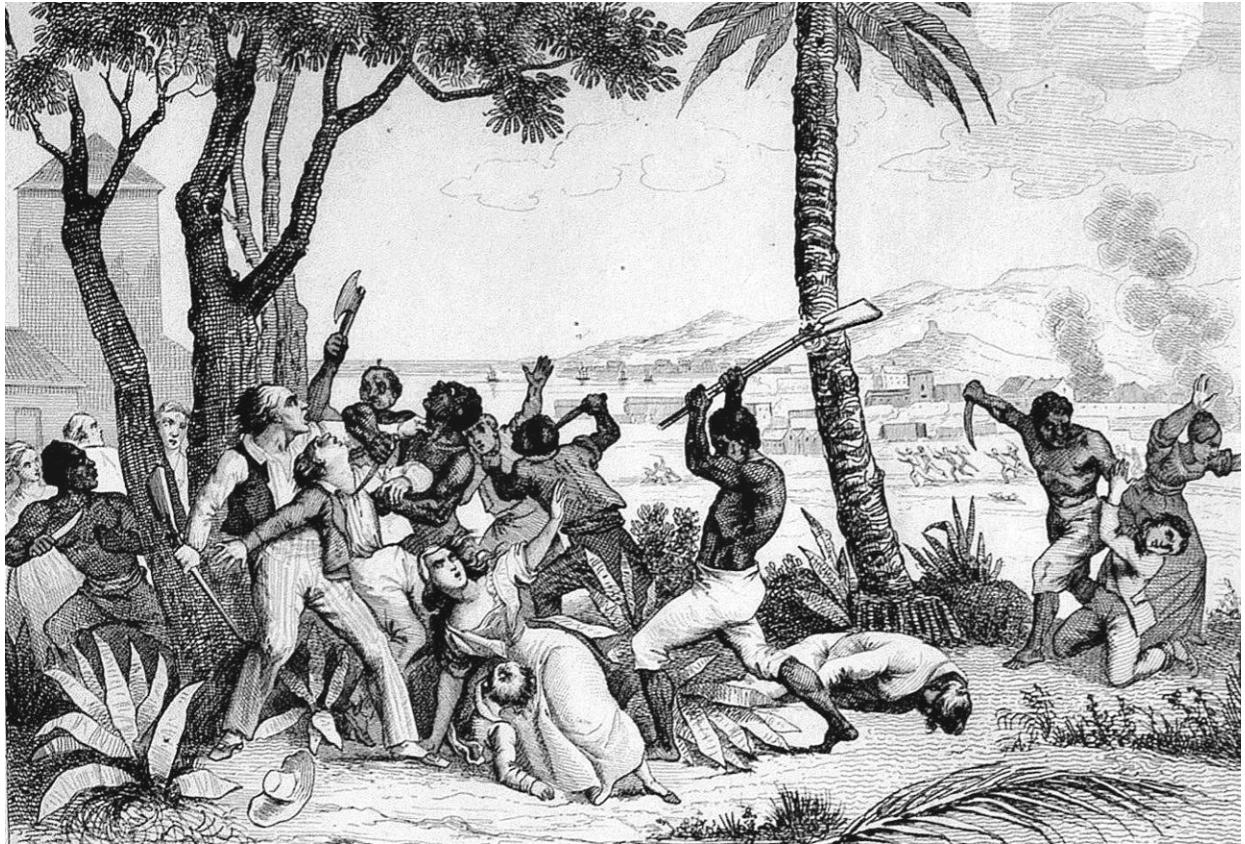


FIGURE 15. "Monostatos, *The Magic Flute*." Photo by Richard Moran, [www.richardmoran.co.uk](http://www.richardmoran.co.uk). ©

2007 Richard Moran. <http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/2007/01/magic-flute1.htm>.

While Mozart's singers performed this opera of racialized enlightenment

in Vienna, a very different drama of race and freedom was playing out on the other side of the Atlantic. On the night of August 22, 1791, a month before the premiere of *The Magic Flute*, Black slaves in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue staged a massive uprising, which would soon become a full-fledged revolution against slavery and French rule and ultimately succeed in ending bondage and creating the free and independent nation of Haiti. While the slave revolt was inspired by the calls for liberty emanating from the French Revolution and its impact on the Caribbean, at the same time the rebel slaves often portrayed themselves as loyal to the nation's embattled King Louis XVI. [2](#) By the time *The Magic Flute* opened, a slave army of several thousands attacked the leading port and economic center of Cap Français, killing two thousand whites and burning down much of the city before being repelled. They would return in 1793 to capture and destroy the center of French power in Saint-



Domingue.3 Was there a sense in which the Queen of the Night was not Austria's Maria Theresa but the French king Louis XVI? Denied in Vienna, the fury of Monostatos and his followers would triumph in the revolutionary Caribbean.

FIGURE 16. Haitian Revolution. “Burning of the Plaine du Cap—Massacre of whites by the Blacks”

(1833). FRANCE MILITAIRE: Histoire des Armes Françaises de Terre et de Mer.

In no era of modern history does the issue of freedom loom larger than during the age of revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. The centrality of liberty in the ideas of Enlightenment intellectuals, and its role

in the mass insurrections of the American and French Revolutions, made the struggle for freedom a dominant theme of the age and moreover laid the foundations for the ideal of political liberty in the modern world. Texts like the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen to this day constitute the essential statements of the centrality of freedom to Western civilization.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the era has often symbolized the contradictory nature of modern freedom, especially in the context of racial thinking and oppression. The century of the Enlightenment also saw the height of the Atlantic slave trade, and the American colonies' revolution for freedom from England preserved and reinforced Black slavery in the newly independent nation. <sup>5</sup> In recent years, historians of the era have emphasized the racialized character of freedom struggles at the origins of modern ideas of political liberty.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I plan to give an overview of the relationship between Black slavery and white freedom during what I choose to call the era of liberal revolution. At the same time, I wish to challenge the idea that this relationship constituted a contradiction. As in the book as a whole, I argue in this chapter that race and racial difference played a seminal role in the creation of modern concepts of liberty, that the dominant concepts of freedom that emerged from this era bore the unmistakable stamp of

whiteness and white racial ideology. The era also, of course, witnessed widespread resistance to this concept of liberty in the Atlantic world, above all in the great revolution of Saint-Domingue, perhaps the greatest slave revolt in world history. Yet the fact that rebel slaves and others were able to elaborate more racially egalitarian concepts and practices of freedom does not gainsay the dominance of white freedom in this crucial era. For the age of revolution, all too often the face of freedom was white.

This chapter will focus on four seminal events during the age of revolution: the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the revolution in Saint-Domingue. It will explore the ways in which the revolutionary idea of freedom was frequently cast in racialized terms. In particular, it will consider the relationship between freedom and African slavery.<sup>7</sup> The Atlantic slave trade was one of the great political and moral concerns (not to mention tragedies) of the age, and the relationship between slavery and ideas of race casts a revealing light on the intellectual and political struggles for freedom during this period. Many proponents of freedom strongly opposed slavery and the slave trade, and yet when the era came to an end both remained largely intact. More generally, in all four episodes the question of the racial character of freedom emerged time and again. The age of revolution, therefore, was perhaps the key era in the birth

of white freedom.

## The Enlightenment

### *Race, Slavery, and Freedom*

The philosophy and political heritage of the Enlightenment remains at the heart of what we mean by Western civilization. Despite many challenges from both within and without, the philosophies that came together in Europe and America during the eighteenth century, emphasizing rationality, progress, and the struggle for freedom, continue to shape the ideals and fates of nations throughout the world.<sup>8</sup> In particular, ideas of freedom and popular sovereignty developed by Enlightenment thinkers fueled the great revolutions in America, France, and Saint-Domingue. As a result, the influence of the Enlightenment is inseparable from modern ideas of [freedom.](#)<sup>9</sup>

It is also inseparable from the less savory aspects of Western civilization. The Romantics who succeeded the Enlightenment in the early nineteenth century criticized it for an overreliance on rationality at the expense of emotion, and many subsequent critiques have returned to this theme.<sup>10</sup> In their famous study *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during World War II, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that the Enlightenment tradition was fundamentally unstable and contradictory,

implicating its influence in the rise of fascism and [totalitarianism.<sup>11</sup>](#) More recently scholars like Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze have challenged the idea that the Enlightenment was progressive, noting instead the frequency of racist stereotypes in key Enlightenment texts. [12](#) In general, many scholars have attacked Enlightenment universalism as normalizing the experiences of Western white men while suppressing those of women and peoples of [color that did not fit into that paradigm.<sup>13</sup>](#)

I hope in this chapter to contribute to this debate by considering not just Enlightenment ideas about race but more specifically their relationship to the movement's concepts of freedom. Without a doubt, the ideal of freedom lay at the heart of the Enlightenment project. Writers and thinkers like Diderot, Voltaire, Kant, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau wrote extensively about the nature of human liberty and how to achieve it in the modern world. Their different ideas became the heart of liberal political philosophy, which itself made the question of liberty the central political issue of the [age.<sup>14</sup>](#) Enlightenment philosophers also wrote extensively about race and racial difference, drawing upon the movement's heritage from the Scientific Revolution to explore the natures of and relationships between different peoples past and present. The movement thus combined liberal political philosophy with racial (and frequently racist) ethnography. The

two themes come together in Enlightenment considerations of slavery, which most saw as the antithesis of liberty. As we shall see, the often strident opposition of Enlightenment philosophers to slavery did not necessarily translate into a belief in or desire for racial equality. Instead, the intersection of these themes frequently produced a racially coded vision of freedom.

### Enlightenment Freedom

No man has by nature been granted the right to command others. Liberty is a gift from heaven,  
and every member of the same species has the right to enjoy it as soon as he  
is possession of  
reason.

—DIDEROT, *ENCYCLOPÉDIE*<sup>15</sup>

The Enlightenment ideal of liberty had several key themes. One was the idea that freedom was grounded in natural law, that it was the inheritance of mankind that no ruler had the right to take away. For writers such as Locke, Montesquieu, Diderot, and especially Rousseau, the major question was how to preserve this intrinsic state of freedom in an era of increasingly powerful and complex states. They protested against restrictions on liberty, while at the same time recognizing that individual freedom was not absolute, that the freedom of all could be guaranteed only by a structure of

laws, representative government, and respect for the rights of property. [16](#)

Often Enlightenment philosophers seemed to focus on negative ideals of liberty, the issue of freedom *from* oppression. Their opposition to religious intolerance and the power of ecclesiastical authorities is well known, as is their opposition to authoritarian royal power: not for nothing did Diderot proclaim, “Man will only be free when the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” This opposition arose from the Enlightenment thinkers’ fierce advocacy of intellectual liberty, of the rights of all men to express themselves freely in speech and writing. Only when people could debate ideas honestly without fear of retribution could mankind use its natural gifts of reason to construct a rational and just society. [17](#)

Probably the greatest single Enlightenment statement about freedom is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*. Opening with the magnificent passage I have quoted at the beginning of this chapter, *The Social Contract* constitutes an extended meditation on the nature of freedom in the modern world as well as setting forth guidelines about how to achieve a free society. Like many other writers of his time, Rousseau believed that in a natural state the individual was free, but over historical time he (the individual) had given up freedom in exchange for the safety of belonging to a collective society. The key problem therefore was how to

restore the native freedom of mankind in the modern world. For Rousseau, the answer lay in the social contract, the creation of a society based upon the mutual agreement and sovereignty of the governed. Only such a society, grounded in the general will of the population, could make modern man [free.](#)<sup>18</sup>

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau dwelt at length on the issue of slavery. Bondage in his view represented the antithesis of natural liberty, and men consented to it to ensure their safety in collective society. To live in a country ruled by a regime not based upon popular sovereignty was to be a slave; that is the essential meaning of the phrase “man is born free and he is everywhere in chains.” Slavery in this sense is a metaphor for despotism and oppression of all kinds; Europeans who lack political freedom are in effect slaves. For Rousseau, becoming free meant not only adapting the natural state of liberty to the modern world, it also meant ceasing to be a slave. Moreover, slavery was the antithesis of humanity: slaves were not truly human, were not free men because they were neither free nor men: “Every man born in slavery is born for slavery: nothing is more certain. Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire to escape from them; they love their servitude as the companions of Ulysses loved their brutishness. If, then, there are slaves by nature, it is because there have been

slaves contrary to nature. The first slaves were made by force; their [cowardice kept them in bondage.”](#)<sup>19</sup>

Several historians have commented on the importance of slavery as a metaphor for the thinkers of the Enlightenment. As David Brion Davis has noted, “For eighteenth-century thinkers who contemplated the subject, slavery stood as the central metaphor for all the forces that debased the human spirit.” [20](#) Time and time again, Enlightenment writers assailed the denial of basic human rights, the oppressive acts of church and state, and the general lack of freedom as the enslavement of modern man. The historical context of all this is fascinating, for the slave metaphor mixed a concern with absolute monarchy and religious intolerance on the one hand, together with the problem of the Atlantic slave trade and American Black slavery on the other. [21](#)

By the late eighteenth century the burgeoning plantation economies of the Caribbean as well as South and North America had made African slavery a central presence in the life of the contemporary Atlantic world. Historians have fiercely debated the role of slavery in the economic history of Europe and America ever since Eric Williams published his landmark study *Capitalism and Slavery*, in which he argued that the profits of the slave trade helped finance Britain’s Industrial [Revolution.](#)<sup>22</sup> More recently

scholars like Edward Baptiste and Sven Beckert have shown how slavery in America played a pivotal role in the rise of the American economy. [23](#)

Historians of Europe have also considered the importance of profits from the slave trade in economic growth. Cities such as Liverpool and Bristol in England, Bordeaux and Nantes in France, profited tremendously from the slave trade, and their wealthy merchants built impressive town houses that bore witness to the riches it [generated.](#)[24](#) Historian Louis Sala-Molins has estimated that at least a third of all commercial activity in eighteenth-century France was related to the slave [trade.](#)[25](#) The economic prosperity of western Europe that made Enlightenment society and culture possible rested to an important extent on the backs of African slaves.

Given this, it makes sense that Enlightenment philosophers should so often turn to slavery as a metaphor for oppression. At times writers like Voltaire and especially Condorcet did address and attack the evils of African slavery: the famous passage in *Candide* where the eponymous hero comes across a miserable slave who mournfully informs him that “it is at this expense that you eat sugar in Europe” is one prominent example. [26](#) For the most part, however, when Enlightenment writers talked about the evils of slavery they did so only in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense. The symbolic enslavement of Europeans by religious and royal oppression

rather than the actual enslavement of Africans in the Americas was far and away their primary concern. For example, as Sala-Molins has trenchantly observed, nowhere in *The Social Contract* does Rousseau mention the French Code Noir of 1685, in which the royal government formally codified slavery in its Caribbean colonies.<sup>27</sup> Voltaire was similarly much more interested in slavery as metaphor than in the actual plight of African slaves. In his 1736 play *Alzire, or the Americans*, set in sixteenth-century Peru, Voltaire condemns royal oppression and corruption but has little to say about Black slavery in that colony.<sup>28</sup> This tendency to privilege the metaphorical over the actual experience of slavery spread far beyond the elite circles of Enlightenment writers. As Susan Buck-Morss has noted, the fact that the Dutch in the early modern era profited tremendously from the slave trade did not stop them from bitterly complaining about their enslavement by the Spanish Monarchy and portraying their fight for independence as a struggle against slavery.<sup>29</sup> Simon Schama's landmark study *An Embarrassment of Riches* tends to replicate this dichotomy, largely ignoring the "embarrassing" fact that much of Dutch prosperity came from investments in African bondage.<sup>30</sup>

How can one explain this contrast between the Enlightenment's often militant opposition to slavery as a political metaphor and the lack of

concern with the actual slaves during the eighteenth century? One reason could be that some of the movement's leading figures directly profited from the slave trade. John Locke, whose *Second Treatise on Government* remains a classic statement of political liberalism, was a major investor in the African slave trade through the Royal African Company.<sup>31</sup> Others, such as David Hume and Voltaire, held investments that benefited from slavery even if they weren't directly tied to the slave trade. Such examples merely reaffirm the broad importance of slavery to European economies in the eighteenth century.

More significant is the relationship between Enlightenment attitudes to slavery and to race. As Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze has demonstrated, Enlightenment writers devoted significant attention to the study of race and racial difference, often in the context of ethnographic research and analysis. Immanuel Kant, for example, wrote extensively about the different races of mankind as an ethnographer. As noted earlier, this study of race arose out of the Enlightenment's heritage from the Scientific Revolution, in particular the desire to apply the same level of systematic classification to humanity that scientists had developed for the natural world. Increased European exploration of the broader world had also generated a variety of travel narratives and other first-person accounts that fueled the interest in the

comparative study of different peoples. The Enlightenment thus occupied a seminal position in the birth of scientific racism.<sup>32</sup>

The comparative study of races generally ranked peoples from high to low in a hierarchical continuum. In 1684, French doctor François Bernier published one of the first modern books on racial theory, entitled *A New Division of the Earth, According to the Different Races of Men Who Inhabit It*. He argued that the world's population was divided into four or five races, each with its own physical and mental characteristics. <sup>33</sup> Several Enlightenment scholars followed Bernier's lead, considering how different peoples (usually Europeans, Asians, Africans, and "Americans," or Native Americans) resembled and differed from each other in physical appearance and levels of intellect. Invariably, such rankings placed white Europeans at the top of the hierarchy, emphasizing their intelligence and physical beauty, while Africans were usually placed at the bottom of the scale when evaluated with these characteristics. In comparing different races, Immanuel Kant had this to say about Africans: "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr [David] Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of Blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still

not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality.” [34](#) While Enlightenment writers strove to go beyond a simple binary analysis of racial difference by their use of scientific observation and analysis, in many cases they tended to replicate the traditional division between civilized peoples and barbarians. Civilization and reason were therefore largely a province of the white races of Europe. As Eze has argued, “the Enlightenment’s declaration of itself as ‘the Age of Reason’ was predicated upon precisely the assumption that reason could historically only come to maturity in modern Europe.” [35](#)

This point is crucial, because for many Enlightenment thinkers freedom and self-government were closely linked to the capability for reason and rational thought. The great importance placed upon education, both intellectual and moral, by the movement illustrates this fact. Only the enlightened could be truly free, so that if reason was racialized so then was liberty. Consequently, even though many Enlightenment writers condemned slavery and argued for the more egalitarian treatment of Blacks and other peoples of color, few supported the immediate emancipation of the slaves or imagined that they could rule themselves.

The marquis de Condorcet illustrates the Enlightenment’s ambivalence about racial equality. Condorcet was one of the Enlightenment’s most

impassioned opponents of African slavery. His *Reflections on Black Slavery* (1781) systematically demolished pro-slavery arguments, and as a member of the Société des Amis des Noirs he campaigned for abolition. He opposed immediate abolition, however, not only because he feared the economic consequences for the Caribbean but also because he judged the slaves not ready for freedom: “the slaves in the European colonies have become incapable of carrying out normal human functions.... Thus there are natural rights of which very young children are deprived as are madmen and idiots.”<sup>36</sup> Ultimately Condorcet foresaw freedom coming to Blacks when they merged with and disappeared into the white population through miscegenation; as Louis Sala-Molins has caustically observed, “granting them political rights only when they cease to be Negroes.”<sup>37</sup> In this reading of Condorcet, and to an important extent of the Enlightenment in general, freedom belongs to the white races.

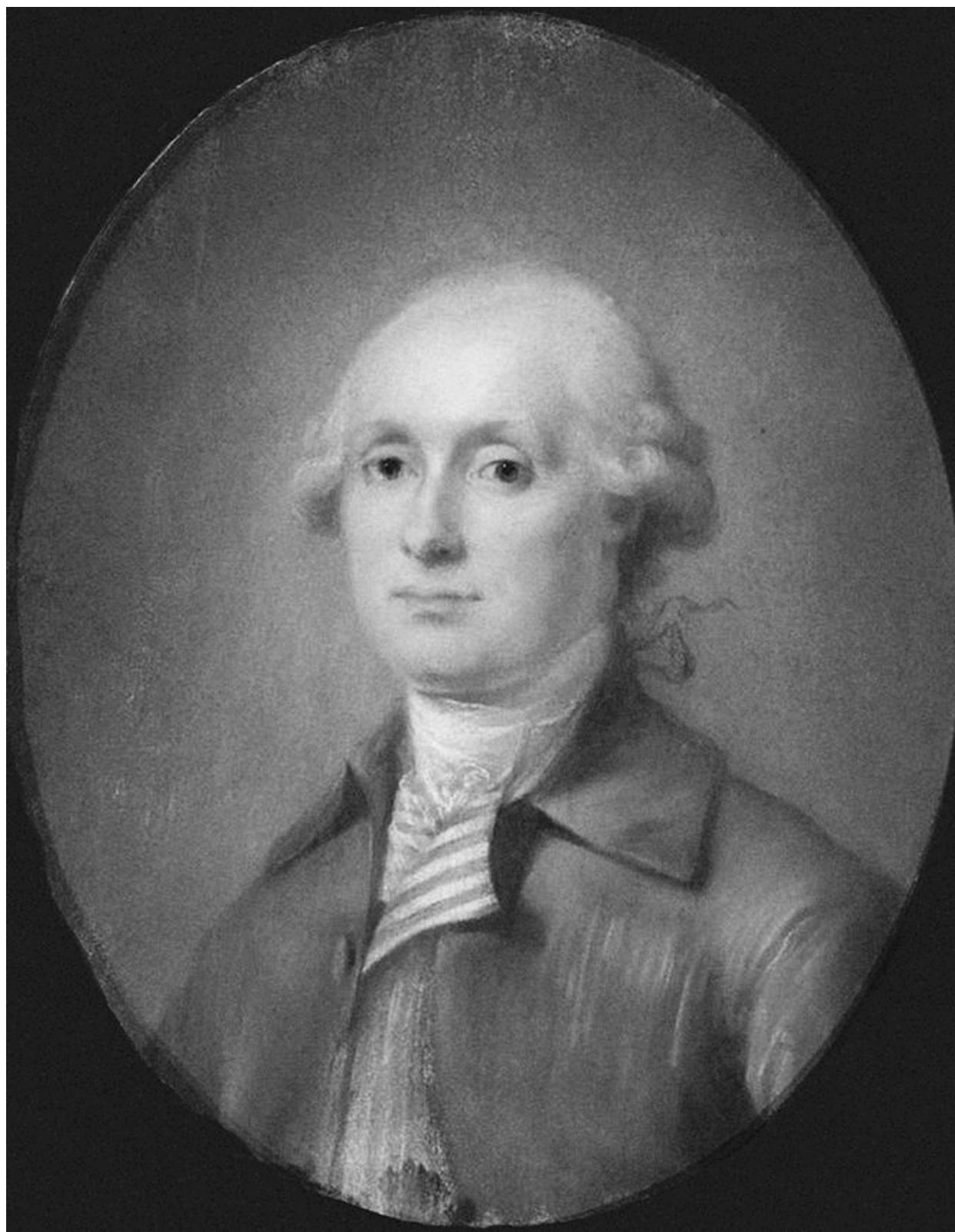


FIGURE 17. Portrait of Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94). Heritage

Image Partnership Ltd./Alamy Stock Photo.

It is fitting to close this section on the Enlightenment, and transition to the next section of the chapter, with a brief discussion of Thomas Jefferson. One of America's most eminent Enlightenment intellectuals and eventually the third president of the United States, Jefferson both harshly criticized slavery and owned slaves. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* Jefferson discussed at length the evil effects of human bondage, on the slave owners as well as the slaves themselves. Yet he at the same time echoed the perspective of Kant, Hume, and others on the intellectual inferiority of Blacks. Jefferson did support emancipation, at least in theory, but only by expelling Blacks from America's white society and giving them a land of their own. An [America without Blacks would thus be a land of the free.](#)<sup>38</sup>

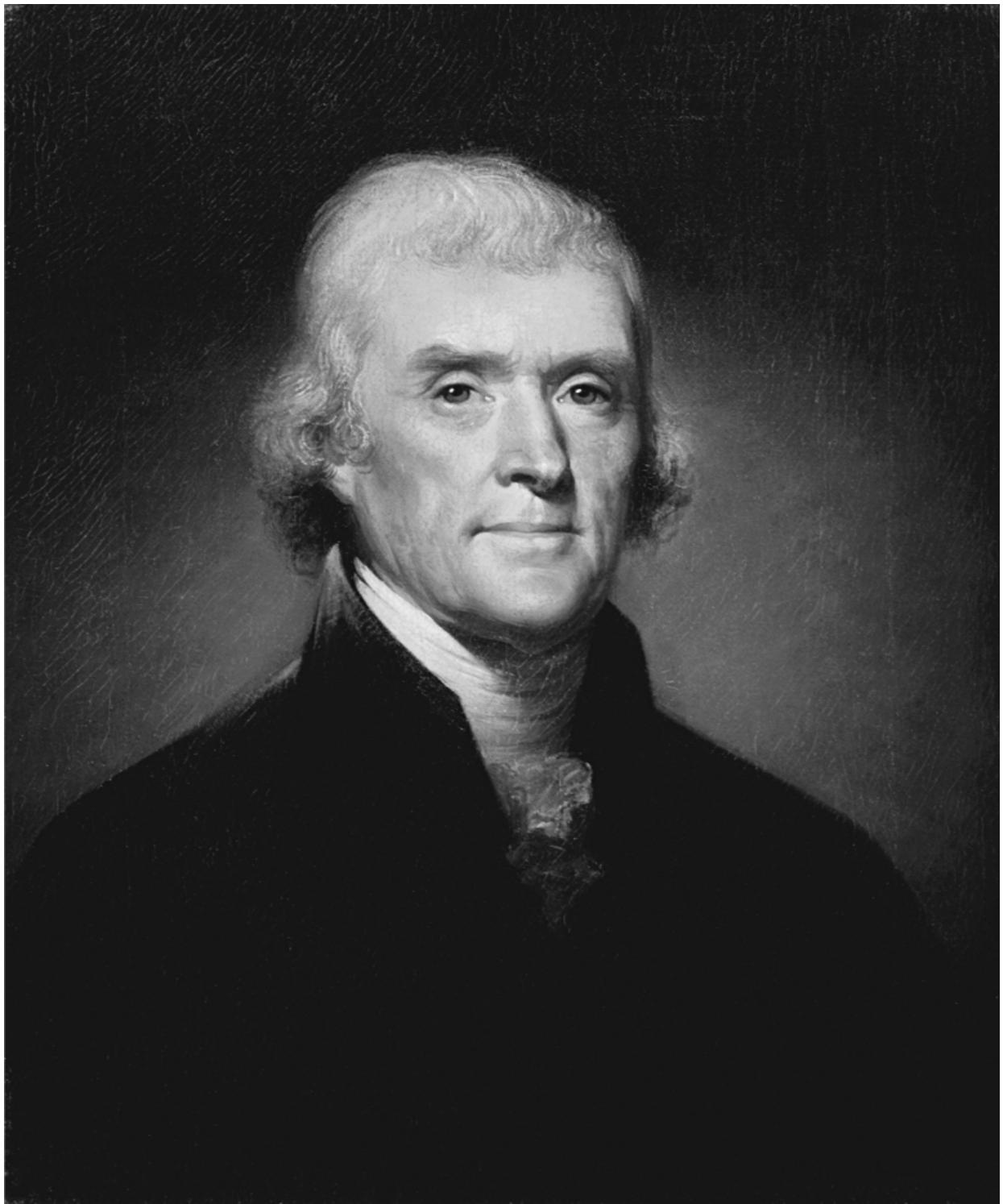


FIGURE 18. Rembrandt Peale, *Thomas Jefferson*, official portrait (1800).  
<http://www.whitehouseresearch.org/assetbank-whha/action/viewHome>.

For many Enlightenment thinkers, therefore, freedom was shaped by race. They viewed slavery as the polar opposite of freedom, and many opposed it strenuously, but in general they emphasized the metaphorical enslavement of Europeans over the actual enslavement of Africans. In a sense, freedom was the privilege of white men, and therefore reducing them to the level of Blacks by “enslaving” them was morally and politically unacceptable. The omnipresence of African slavery in the eighteenth-century world horrified many Enlightenment intellectuals, but it also shaped their ideas of freedom. In this sense, therefore, slavery and reason were not so much paradoxical as complementary and mutually reinforcing. The next section of this chapter will further clarify how that could be so.

### A War for Liberty and Slavery

#### *Race and the American Revolution*

When Britain’s American colonies declared their independence from the mother country in 1776, using Enlightenment principles to shape their political goals in general and the Declaration of Independence in particular, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment were thrilled. Denis Diderot saluted the birth of the United States of America, congratulating the revolutionaries for having buried their chains and rejected their enslavement by the British.<sup>39</sup> He did not mention that the colonists busily engaged in breaking

imperial chains of bondage themselves owned hundreds of thousands of Black slaves, some twenty percent of the population of the new nation. Liberty for white Americans would mean continued, even expanded, slavery for Black Americans.

As Edmund S. Morgan argued in *American Slavery, American Freedom*, the fact that the revolutionaries who founded the new nation based on Enlightenment principles of freedom also championed, or at least tolerated, slavery is the central paradox of American history.<sup>40</sup> The ways in which American historians, and the American public as a whole, have dealt with this paradox have changed over time, moving from ignoring it entirely to regarding it as a regrettable but exceptional fact of history, to more recently seeing it as essential to the founding of the American republic. In recent years a number of American historians have written books that don't just look at the history of slavery in the American revolution but use it to explore and reinterpret America's early national history in general, so that it is hardly possible today for professional historians to consider the American Revolution without placing the question of slavery at its center.<sup>41</sup> What does

it mean to say that the foundation of the American republic as a slave republic also witnessed not only massive numbers of escape attempts by slaves but even slave revolts, directed against the revolutionaries fighting

for that republic? [42](#) Or, as Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen put it in *Slave Nation*,

“How then should we view the Founding Fathers?” By extension, how should we view the American Revolution, and American history in general?

[43](#)

Gerald Horne’s *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* provides one of the most systematic analyses of slavery and the American Revolution. Horne places the revolution in the context of British colonial rule in the greater Caribbean, arguing that many American settlers had come to the North American mainland as refugees from the endemic slave revolts in islands like Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica. He notes how for decades before the 1770s the American colonies had grown ever more committed to African slavery while in Britain abolitionist sentiment became more and more pronounced. This culminated with the 1772 Somerset decision (see below), which stoked colonial fears that London might abolish slavery throughout the empire. Three years later the American Revolution began, in large part as a reaction against the colonists’ fears that Britain would arm the slaves against them. As Horne has put it,

Suppressing African resistance became a crucial component of forging settler unity—and the solidifying identity that was “whiteness,” which cut prodigiously across religious, ethnic, class, and gender lines. The

forging of settler unity and the congealing identity that was “whiteness” also consolidated the developing connection between settlers’ fear of alleged British enslavement, their own possession of Africans as chattel, and the fear that the relationship between master and slave could be [reversed to their crushing detriment.](#)<sup>44</sup>

In keeping with the basic theme of this book, I argue that the paradox of American slaveholders fighting for liberty is not a paradox at all if one considers the racial dimensions of the American idea of freedom during the revolutionary period (and after). Denying freedom to Black slaves was not a contradiction, because freedom was reserved for whites. The same principle helps explain how the American Revolution could further the conquest of Native American lands and the dispossession of America’s indigenous peoples, who as nonwhites did not have the wherewithal to build and profit from a modern free society. [45](#) Key to the history of the American Revolution

was the fact that freedom for whites meant slavery for Blacks and defeat and genocide for Native Americans. Only an ideology of freedom grounded in racial superiority could make this possible.

At the same time, white freedom during the American Revolution created a powerful counternarrative of freedom for all. Blacks quickly seized upon the irony of white slave owners condemning enslavement by

the British to press their own demands for liberty. The tens of thousands of slaves who fled to British lines in response to royal offers of manumission, or the slaves who fought for Britain against their own masters, testified to the importance of an alternate narrative of freedom. This alternate narrative will reappear time and time again in this study, challenging the idea of white freedom to be more truly inclusive and universal.

The American Revolution was one of the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment, and the patriots who founded the new republic consciously looked to the movement for intellectual and political inspiration. The Declaration of Independence, most notably, drew inspiration from Enlightenment ideas of civil liberties and popular sovereignty.<sup>46</sup> The American patriots also drew heavily on another Enlightenment theme, the slave metaphor, in important respects taking the contradictory nature of that narrative to new heights. Supporters of American independence complained constantly about being enslaved by the British, and those who held slaves themselves were among the first to do so. In 1768 John Otis, the largest slave owner in Philadelphia, wrote what would become “The Liberty Song,” including lyrics like “In freedom we’re born and in freedom we’ll live, not as *slaves* but as *freemen* our money we’ll give” (emphases in the original).<sup>47</sup> George Washington, the father of American independence and a

slave owner, warned that “the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with Blood, or inhabited by Slaves.” [48](#) When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of *Independence*, arguing that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with the right to liberty, he owned more than one hundred slaves.

For many patriots, slavery meant essentially political oppression, the denial of political rights and representation to a people by a tyrannical government. Like the writers of the Enlightenment, American patriots protested against the denial of civil liberties by royal authorities and argued that they were illegitimate because they were not based in popular sovereignty. The Declaration of Independence provides a comprehensive list of the colonists’ grievances against the king, accusing him of denying them their rights as free-born Englishmen. The idea that British subjects were traditionally more free than others was a powerful one in colonial America, and frequently it was linked to the importance of property. Imperial Britain of course had proudly proclaimed its freedom while it took the lead in the Atlantic slave trade, so in claiming their rights as Englishmen it made sense for the rebel colonists to include the right to slave property. Moreover, many colonists argued that having slaves gave them the economic independence necessary for free men; to take away their property

was to take away their freedom. In an era (and a country) where slavery was so central, to deprive them of their property was in effect to reduce them to the status of slaves. As Edmund Burke observed, the horrors of enslavement were very real to those who lived surrounded by slaves. [49](#)

This rather bizarre spectacle of slave owners complaining about being enslaved did not go unchallenged at the time, either at home or abroad. As the great British writer Samuel Johnson noted, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” [50](#) Although most colonists supported or at least accepted slavery, colonial America had a substantial abolitionist movement, and many of them also challenged the paradox of a war for freedom and slavery. As the Baptist minister John Allen thundered in 1774:

Blush ye pretended votaries for freedom! Ye trifling patriots! Who are making a vain parade of being advocates for liberties of mankind, who are thus making a mockery of your profession by trampling on the sacred natural rights and privileges of Africans; for while you are fasting, praying, nonimporting, nonexporting, remonstrating, resolving, and pleading for a restoration of your charter rights, you at the same time are continuing this lawless, cruel, inhuman, and abominable practice of [enslaving your fellow creatures.](#)[51](#)

Most significantly, the paradox of white slave owners protesting their own enslavement was not lost upon African Americans themselves, who quickly seized upon the language of freedom and slavery to press for their own emancipation. Some slaves literally sued for their own freedom, consciously deploying the language against slavery as a violation of universal natural rights deployed by the patriots against the British. Others submitted petitions to state legislatures respectfully expressing the hope that the fight against slavery would extend to them too. In 1773 a group of slaves submitted a petition to the Massachusetts State Legislature explicitly making the connection between the patriots' struggle against slavery and their own liberation:

The efforts made by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction. We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty, in view in your next session. The divine spirit of *freedom* seems to fire every breast on this continent. [52](#)

The concerns of America's rebel colonists about slavery went far beyond

the metaphorical use of the concept to champion their own liberty. Like elites in most slave societies, whites in colonial America, especially in the plantation South, lived in constant fear of slave revolts. [53](#) The prospect of people who lived in close and peaceful proximity to white colonists suddenly rising up one night to slaughter their masters in their beds is a recurring theme of slave and colonial societies, and a dreadful one to contemplate. While such fears were usually exaggerated, they did not lack a basis in fact. On Sunday, September 9, 1739, a group of slaves in South Carolina took to the roads and killed more than forty white men, women, and children before being overcome and mostly slaughtered by armed whites. Stono's Rebellion, the largest slave revolt in colonial America, triggered both new repressive measures against slaves and some calls for ending slavery as a menace to the white [population.](#)[54](#) Similarly, on December 7, 1774, a group of slaves in St. Andrew Parish, Georgia, attacked and killed or wounded several white slave owners and their families. [55](#) When white colonial subjects during the revolutionary era imagined that British rule undermined slavery as an institution, they considered this as a threat not just to their property but ultimately to their very lives.

In 1769 the Virginia merchant Charles Stewart moved to London with