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The American Notion of Freedom: Freedom as a Central Element of American History and  
Its Reflection in Literature

Americké pojetí svobody: Svoboda jako ústřední prvek americké historie a její odraz  
v literatuře

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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## **Abstrakt**

Tato práce se zabývá americkým pojetím svobody a jejím výkladem v jednotlivých obdobích americké historie. Pojetí svobody je zde popisováno na základě historického kontextu daných období a její význam demonstrován na konkrétních ukázkách literárních děl a dokumentů příslušné doby. Práce analyzuje období od roku 1776, tedy období vzniku Spojených států amerických, až do padesátých let 20. století. Pro tuto práci bylo konkrétně vybráno šest období charakteristických významnými historickými událostmi, ale také vznikem společenských hnutí, či nových filozofických a literárních směrů. V práci jsou chronologicky popisována období od příchodu prvních evropských osadníků na severoamerický kontinent, v návaznosti se pak zaměřuje na nová hnutí a filozofie 19. století, konkrétně transcendentalismus a abolicionismus, dále pak postupuje k anarchismu a pragmatismu. Práce je posléze zakončena obdobím generace bítníků.

Cílem práce je prokázat, že v průběhu americké historie byla svoboda vždy nejdůležitější hodnotou, a to hodnotou, která zformovala americkou mentalitu tak, jak ji známe dnes. Záměrem je demonstrovat, že tato mentalita vychází z původního amerického pojetí svobody, jakožto božského daru a nezcizitelného práva, kterým byl lid obdařen. Podstata takovéto svobody se v tomto americkém pojetí zdá být zakořeněna, avšak její širší výklad se průběžně měnil dle aktuálních okolností daných období. Dalším cílem této práce je tedy popsat rozdíly v jednotlivých pojetích svobody v těchto obdobích, zejména pak přesvědčení a impulsy, na základě kterých se tato pojetí vyvíjela, či měnila. V neposlední řadě má tato práce připomenout, že i přesto že byla svoboda považována za přirozené právo, pro mnohé zůstával pocit svobody pouze nesplněným přáním.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the American notion of freedom and its interpretations within individual periods of American history. In the thesis, freedom is described upon the basis of historical context, and its importance is demonstrated through specific examples of the periods' literary works and documents. The work analyzes periods from 1776; the year of the U.S. establishment, and continues up to the first half of the twentieth century. For the purpose of the thesis, six particular periods characteristic of significant historical events, or, of social, literary, and philosophical movements, were chosen. Chronologically, the thesis begins with the 17<sup>th</sup> century's arrival of the first European settlers to the North American continent, followed by the founding of the United States more than a century later. The thesis then gradually focuses on movements and philosophies emerging during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely, transcendentalism and abolitionism, and further continues with introducing the freedom-related ideals of American anarchists and pragmatists. The work then closes with the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Beat generation.

The objective of the thesis is to prove, that during American history, freedom had always been the most important value; a value which shaped the American mentality into how we know it today. The aim is to demonstrate that this mentality largely derives from the very first American notion of freedom which regarded freedom as a gift from the Creator, and, as an unalienable right. In American history, the core of such a notion seems to be deeply rooted, although the interpretations of freedom had often varied according to the changing circumstances of individual periods. The thesis thus further aims to describe the differences between these interpretations, and focuses on the particular beliefs and impulses from which these interpretations originated. Last but foremost, the thesis stresses that even though freedom had been considered a natural human right, for many people it remained beyond reach.

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## **Introduction**

It will be seen that within U.S. history, there was not only one general interpretation of freedom. With a little of exaggeration, it can be said that there were as many notions of freedom as there were individual needs. Nevertheless, freedom, in any of its forms, was considered a natural and unalienable right of all American citizens. Paradoxically, in some cases, this right was only theoretical. The thesis explores some of these varied notions of freedom during certain historical periods of the United States, including the colonial beginnings preceding the country's foundation.

It was the want of political freedom that became the cornerstone of the country's independence, although, the continent was connected with freedom seekers more than a century before the establishment of the United States. The first chapter particularly focuses on the British settlers who left their homeland seeking greater freedom in North America. Here they left mainly because they sought freedom in religious matters, but also, an opportunity to own their own piece of land. As the British colonies grew and learned to run their administration without Britain's help, the complete independence from the Crown became a logical solution as the colonies wanted to avoid any unwanted interference into their matters. The situation of this period is described in the thesis based on the works of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson.

The second chapter describes the period of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The specific focus of this chapter is spiritual freedom, and the sovereignty of individuals promoted by transcendentalist authors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In particular, this chapter analyzes their opposition to conformity and institutional authorities, and beliefs that each individual should be led by his/her own conscience and capabilities. The chapter closes with the work of Margaret Fuller, who, following Emerson's ideals of self-reliance, insisted that the right of self-reliance should be extended to women whose rights at that time did not equal those of men. To some extent, Fuller compared the situation of women to that of slaves; therefore, she sought for the acknowledgment of equal rights for both.

The institution of slavery is further analyzed in the third chapter, which is predominantly dedicated to abolitionist movements and their anti-slavery efforts. In this chapter, slavery is described as contradicting the core of the American notion of freedom derived from the lines of the Declaration of Independence; that is, that all citizens are equal and freedom is their unalienable right. The existence and tolerance of slavery then logically

was the greatest violation of this assertion. This chapter describes the approaches to slavery of those who rejected this institution, and who helped to raise awareness of its evils.

The following chapter returns to slavery, this time by the point of view of American anarchists. As defenders of human rights, Josiah Warren and Lysander Spooner belonged among those who opposed the institution. In fact, they opposed any institution or authority disrespecting human rights, especially the rights of individuals. Anarchists saw all institutional violations of rights as a result of government's incompetence, therefore, aimed for the decentralization of governmental authority. They accused the government of creating unequal living and working conditions, which then created social gaps between people. Anarchists believed, that if all individuals were given the same opportunities, and were allowed to share similar experiences, those gaps would vanish, and the sovereignty of individuals would not be disrupted.

In the fifth chapter, we will see that experience is further treated as a means of human development. This chapter works with the pragmatist notion of freedom articulated by John Dewey who claimed that freedom can be achieved only through continual human growth. Freedom is then no longer treated as having a divine character. Dewey's notion was that the want of freedom derives from a need of change in certain living conditions. The want of freedom is thus viewed as having none other than practical character.

The last chapter will demonstrate that the quality of living conditions is largely influenced by society's standards. However, not all people find a purpose in appropriating their lives to standards which often do not correspond with their needs and desires. As will be seen, Beat generation authors rejected conformity and sought freedom outside those standardized norms, disregarding many American ideals of that time. The act of escape from these ideals then was what brought them the sense of freedom which 1950s society failed to provide.

## **1. Political Freedom**

The beginnings of the desire of greater freedom date back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when the first settlers from Europe headed to America in order to establish themselves in a new land with the vision of “liberties” they lacked in their homelands. The reason for their departure was mainly the persecution they faced in their home countries. Namely, it was both the political and religious persecution which made the Pilgrims, the first English settlers, flee from England as they wished to separate their affairs from the English state church. Nevertheless, America was not their first choice as the “Separatists” originally sought happiness in the Netherlands where the religious and political environment was still relatively tolerant. Despite this environment, the so-called “Pilgrim Fathers” feared the loss of their cultural identity which was one of the reasons for establishing a colony in America where they could live according to their own beliefs and customs. The Plymouth Colony, established in 1620, became the second English settlement in America following Jamestown established in 1607.

As mentioned above, most settlers in British North America were seeking the control of their own lives, the autonomy to act as their individual beliefs led them to do. What would provide them with such living, apart from the religious freedom, was the ownership of land, which in Europe was unavailable. For the settlers, land conferred autonomy, and property equaled liberty. Even though the colonies gradually learnt to be fully self-controlled and self-reliant, which was partially a result of Britain’s long-term neglect, they were still legally subject to the Crown. Their self-built autonomy was therefore often violated by the Crown’s interference which was one of the motivations leading to the want of complete political freedom.

The motivations that later led to American separation from the British Empire centered mainly on rejection of the validity of more effective royal government which still remained rather despotic, however enlightened. The American resistance was based on a desire to blunt the power of any governmental institutions to infringe the autonomy or immunity of individuals with regard to their beliefs, purposes, actions, religion, person, and property. To be specific, what mainly belonged among the motivations for American secession from the British Empire were the rejection of the idea of an Established Church, a determination to keep trade and commerce free from government regulation, and a desire to protect property from appropriation by government authorities. Their key aim for gaining independence was therefore the rejection of the prerogative of royal officials, and, ultimately, that of their own independent government to interfere with the autonomy of individuals in any of the areas listed above.

## 1.1. Thomas Paine

One of the major figures advocating American independence was Thomas Paine, whose works were heard as a powerful voice directing people towards the need for an “ultimate” freedom. Having been born and spending the majority of his life in England, he held strong opinions on different forms of government. Although it may seem that he mostly opposed the monarchy, he rather despised the idea of any form of government where the rights of some people were denied for the benefit of others. He was faithful to the idea that before God, all men are equal, and therefore deserve to possess the same rights no matter their origin or wealth. Following this principle, he tried to persuade readers that the people of the colonies must long for their own rights independent of the interests of Britain.

Paine’s political pamphlets are known for their strong rhetoric and precisely structured arguments stressing the importance of their cause as can be seen in his major work, *Common Sense*. As the title suggests, it was written to point out that the separation from Great Britain was a logical solution to long-term oppression, and that remaining subject to the Crown would only have caused harm to the flourishing colonies. It was first published in 1776, at the beginning of the War of Independence, when there still were voices calling for reconciliation with Britain in fear of a greater armed conflict. It may have been for this reason that Paine uses a very persuasive style to encourage people to fight for their freedom and lists factual arguments in favor of the incipient revolution.

In the introduction, Paine urges readers not to be blinded by what seems to be “right” because they know nothing else but the “old customs.” In other words, he stresses the fact that people should not voluntarily remain “enslaved” by Britain’s rule and patiently wait for a change for the better as the change will never come without their own action. He further insists that the people of the country should no longer allow the usurpation from Britain’s side and stand up for their own rights, which had long been suppressed by the King’s unjust administration:

Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time make more converts than reason. As a long and violent abuse of power, is generally the Means of calling the right of it in question (and in Matters too which might never have been thought of, had not the Sufferers been aggravated into the inquiry) and as the King of England hath undertaken in his own Right, to support the Parliament in what he calls Theirs, and as the good people of this country are grievously oppressed by the combination, they have an undoubted privilege to inquire into the pretensions of both, and equally to reject the usurpation of either.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” *The essential Thomas Paine with an introduction by Sidney Hook* (New York: New American Library, 1969) 23. All the subsequent quotations of this work will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

The above introductory lines reflect that Paine was well aware that he needed to present satisfactory arguments to persuade those who may still have been rather hesitant, or just not thoroughly convinced, that the revolution would be a necessary step towards a better future.

One of the Paine's arguments against furthering the union with Britain is his explanation of the principle on which the two co-existed. He basically explains that everything that Britain seems to be doing for America is not being done for the well-being or security of the colonies, but purely out of Britain's calculated self-interest:

Alas! We have been long led away by ancient prejudices and made large sacrifices to superstition. We have boasted the protection of Great Britain, without considering, that her motive was *interest* not *attachment*; and that she did not protect us from *our enemies* on *our account*; but from *her enemies* on *her own account*, from those who had no quarrel with us on any *other account*, and who will always be our enemies on the *same account*. (38)

As another example, he writes about America's flourishing trade, which would be much stronger without European interventions and, more importantly, that if it were not for Britain, America would avoid many conflicts, which was not possible when still dependent on her:

I have heard it asserted by some, that America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. [...] for I answer roundly, that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power taken any notice on her. The commerce by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe. [...] Let Britain waive her pretensions to the Continent, or the Continent throw off the dependence, and we should be at peace with France and Spain, were they at war with Britain. (38)

Their independence therefore was not just a matter of economic prosperity but it was also a matter of survival as Americans were required to stand on Britain's side in her quarrels with other nations. This fact is rather ironic because they were the same people whose predecessors once escaped the Kingdom to gain more freedom and security. These people were now forced to support the "usurper" in what were for Americans avoidable battles while getting no "reward" in return.

This flashback of Paine's to "recent" history was to remind his fellow colonists of the reason they, or their forefathers, left their former homelands. He stresses the fact that even though the people left, they haven't reached the level of liberty they have been looking for as they are still under the control of their distant "master." This master, though, is not of any help to them, and Britain's inability to manage the colonies properly has only brought difficulties. More specifically, Paine goes against the notion of Britain's, and other European countries' being the

mother lands to America. He underlines his point with the fact that no mother would treat her child in such neglectful way, and that those who once left to find refuge from such a mother have a right to “stand on their own feet” and spurn her forever:

This new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from *every part* of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursue their descendants still.[...] I am not induced by motives, party, or resentment to espouse the doctrine of separation and independence; I am clearly, positively, and conscientiously persuaded that it is the true interest of this Continent to be so; that every thing short of *that* is mere patchwork, that it can afford no lasting felicity, - that it is leaving the sword to our children, and shrinking back at a time, when, a little more, a little farther, would have rendered this continent the glory of the earth. (39,43)

As seen in the above excerpt, Paine’s notion of liberty includes not only the rights of Englishmen, but also the rights of all Europeans who sought America as a shelter. Nevertheless, this particular excerpt contains a little hypocrisy. It is noticeable that Paine, on the one hand, condemned the neglect by the United Kingdom of the American colonies, while on the other, he actually denounced all forms of management attempted by George III to remedy the previous neglect. He strongly opposed the principles of monarchy such as the hereditary succession of power. To him, the “old” monarchy equaled despotism, but it cannot be said that he would oppose the “more acceptable” practice of monarchy when the Crown acts on the advice of “enlightened” specialists, led away from undue interference with the “laws of nature and society.” He then imagined a relatively passive government which would allow society and economy to develop, along a “*laissez faire*”<sup>2</sup> approach.

To better understand the model of government Paine longed for, it is important to pay attention to the distinction Paine makes between natural and civil rights. This distinction can, for instance, be seen in his work, *The Rights of Man*, where he defines natural rights as rights originating from human nature, which are inborn in every man, determining each individual’s equality. He there shares the view that what belongs among these natural imprescriptible rights are: “liberty, security, and the resistance of oppression,”<sup>3</sup> and there is no authority superior to those. His idea of government was of a government chosen on the basis of citizens’ consent and its sole purpose was to represent and protect those natural rights. The same rights would then authorize citizens to guarantee liberty by choosing new representatives in case of a lack of

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<sup>2</sup> “Laissez-faire: A Conservative Approach to the Industrial Revolution,” U.S. history.com <<https://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h844.html>> 19 October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Paine, “The Rights of Man,” *The essential Thomas Paine with an introduction by Sidney Hook* (New York: New American Library, 1969) 213.

competence of the previous ones. He believed that the “representation would become the keystone for democratic institutions”<sup>4</sup> and the revolution in this area the key to further liberty.

## 1.2. Thomas Jefferson

Among those who shared some of Paine’s views on liberty, and who actually put these views into practice, was the so-called Founding Father Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, like Paine, vehemently promoted the prospect of a new model of government. Further, similar to Paine, Jefferson reputedly drew inspiration from John Locke’s philosophy of the natural origin of human freedom and equality, which he successfully brought into both the political and social spheres of the thirteen colonies which later became the United States of America.

The Declaration of Independence, of which he was a principal author, serves as an illustrative example of the values of that time. It is important to notice, that before the actual declaration was adopted, there still were some colonies, and some people in most colonies, attempting reconciliation with Britain. Among other reasons, these attempts ended due to the political maladroitness of King George III and his advisors, who, for instance, did not reply to the petition for the redress of grievances sent by the First Continental Congress which afterwards took on the responsibilities of a national government.<sup>5</sup> Even though the declaration was adopted in 1776 when the War of Independence had just started, and the sovereignty of the colonies had not legally been approved by the Crown, it immediately became the first, and one of the most important documents in US history. Also, announcing independence from British rule not only showed the determination of the colonies in their battle for freedom, but also signified that “patriots” had finally started to take control of their sovereignty.

What preceded “Jefferson’s Declaration” was a resolution by Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia, whose speech in the Continental Congress on June 7, 1776 “resolved” the question of total separation, and became the model for the forthcoming Declaration of Independence:

“Resolved, That these United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Kates, “From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine's Rights of Man,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50.4 (1989): 584, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/2709798](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2709798)> 26 January 2019.

<sup>5</sup> “The Declaration of Independence: A History,” Archives.gov, 14 May 2018 <[www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history](http://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history)> 26 January 2019.

<sup>6</sup> John Boyd Thacher, review of “The Declaration of Independence: Its History” by John H. Hazelton, *The North American Review* 184.606 (1907): 92, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/25105754](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25105754)> 1 February 2019.

The Congress then appointed a committee to write the draft of the actual Declaration of Independence which was to list the reasons for separation from Britain. This committee, composed of five representatives including Jefferson of Virginia and John Adams of Massachusetts, became known as the Committee of Five. Jefferson was chosen to write the first draft which he, after consultations with other members, did. The process of drafting was finished after three weeks on the 2nd of July, 1776 when the document was presented to Congress. The final wording of the Declaration of Independence was finally approved on July 4, after which it was published.

When it comes to the significance of the document, Jefferson is undoubtedly the person given the most credit for its creation. Although, in terms of the originality of its content, it is evident that Jefferson directly follows the words expressed earlier by George Mason in the “Virginia Declaration of Rights” in which it is stated that:

“All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent and natural rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; among which are, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”<sup>7</sup>

It is mainly the above excerpt which so remarkably resembles the famous lines of the Declaration of Independence saying:

“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.”<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that Jefferson simply copied Mason’s words; these excerpts only demonstrate, that it is very likely that both authors drew their inspiration from the same source: John Locke’s philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Also, it was in all probability the Congregationalist John Adams who influenced the characterization of the “unalienable rights” when referencing those rights as rights with which Americans had been “endowed by their Creator.” The above excerpts therefore reflect that liberty, as one of the unalienable rights, was considered to be a special donation by God to

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<sup>7</sup> R. Carter Pittman, “The Virginia Declaration of Rights: Its Place in History.” Provided through the courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society, 28 October 1955

<[http://rcarterpittman.org/essays/documents/VDoRIts\\_Place\\_in\\_History.html](http://rcarterpittman.org/essays/documents/VDoRIts_Place_in_History.html)> 1 February 2019.

<sup>8</sup> “The Declaration of Independence,” reproduced in *The Journal of American History* 85.4 (1999): 1455. Published on behalf of Organization of American Historians, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/2568266](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2568266)> 1 February 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Lawrence Ganter, “Jefferson’s ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ and Some Forgotten Men,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16.3 (1936): 423, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/1925217](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1925217)> 2 February 2019.

Americans which gave rise to the early foundation for the assertion of a divine favoritism of the American Republic; an “American exceptionalism.”<sup>10</sup>

What is closely connected to Jefferson’s notion of liberty is the “pursuit of happiness.” There are various interpretations explaining its meaning which are often rather ambiguous, but all seemingly relevant. The first of these theories explains, that according to Jefferson, the pursuit of happiness can generally be considered as human well-being. He was known to sympathize with the philosophy of Epicureanism focusing mainly on the “pleasure”<sup>11</sup> of a given individual, but also, with the philosophy of Utilitarianism which concentrated on producing the “greatest happiness of the greatest number”<sup>12</sup> on overall collective well-being. Along the Epicurean lines, the pleasure is to be understood as a pleasure of the mind, or in other words, as a pleasure of being at liberty to do what is enriching and completely to one’s benefit. On the other hand, this “pleasure” should be accessible to all, not just to some privileged individuals. The influence of those rather contradictory philosophies on Jefferson is apparent on both the political and social levels but it may be rather difficult to distinguish which of those philosophies Jefferson drew more from at that time. When he became the president, it naturally comes to mind that he would have preferred the general well-being of his country over the “happiness” of the individual but it seems that Jefferson’s idea probably was that general well-being begins with the well-being of an individual who is then able to “do good” for others. The main point then is that individual and general well-being often depend on one another.

In terms of political thinking, we can see that Jefferson’s ideals, above, are projected into his vision of the function of the government and other important institutions. The government, as well as other institutions which are entrusted to ensure people’s well-being, should be formed by individual representatives who then satisfy the needs and interests of all citizens. This is to say, that Jefferson saw certain institutions and establishments as highly imperfect; he saw the discrimination and inconvenience some of them caused, which is why he introduced many important changes to provide all people with an equal share of rights.

To give a specific example, one of the laws Jefferson helped to enact against the old “establishments” was a law ensuring religious freedom. The principal concern of Bill no. 82, later called the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, was the prohibition of an Established Church avoiding this status to be given to any denomination in the US. This bill later formed the

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<sup>10</sup> Donald E. Pease, “American Exceptionalism,” Oxford Bibliographies.com, 28 June 2018  
<<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199827251/obo-9780199827251-0176.xml>> 19 October 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Durham: Acumen, 2010): 111.

<sup>12</sup> J.H. Burns, “Happiness and Utility: Jeremy Bentham’s Equation,” Utilitarianism.com  
<<https://www.utilitarianism.com/jeremy-bentham/greatest-happiness.pdf>> 19 October 2019.

basis for the clause on religious freedom and the prohibition of an established church in the First Amendment to the Federal Constitution in 1790-1791. It significantly changed the conditions in religious matters, as it formally allowed people to be of any denomination without being socially or economically discriminated against. As can be noticed in the second paragraph of the statute, the aims of the Statute were to root out the “usurpation on the rights of conscience”<sup>13</sup> and separate church and state affairs:

No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.<sup>14</sup>

The bill was adopted in 1786 but Jefferson did not cease to promote the freedom of religious opinions even after the legal enactment. Not all of his ideas were put into practice, but his beliefs remained solid and unchanged as seen in his private letters:

I never will, by any word or act, bow to the shrine of intolerance, or admit a right of inquiry into the religious opinions of others. On the contrary, we are bound, you, I, and every one, to make common cause, even with error itself, to maintain the common right of freedom of conscience. (72)

His private letters are a source of many important ideas he, partially with success, promoted and helped constitutionalize. One such important idea was the regulation, if not dissolution, of slavery, which Jefferson had promoted during his entire political career. This fact may seem to be rather controversial, due to the fact, that Jefferson himself was a slaveowner. His views on slavery though, differed from the general opinions of that time as he was obviously aware of its immorality or at least, that is the way he tried to present it through his letters:

There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. [...] Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? (66)

As a politician and a plantation owner, he was undoubtedly aware of the economic and social impact the complete abolition of slavery would bring, which may be one of the reasons why he was rather hesitant in taking some particular action against it.

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<sup>13</sup> John A. Ragosta, “Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom,” Monticello.org, 21 February 2018 <<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/virginia-statute-religious-freedom>> 15 February 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson, selections from his writings, edited, with an introduction by Philip S. Foner* (New York: International Publishers co., Inc., 1943): 72. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

As the governor of Virginia, he did not manage to enforce any significant bill supporting the anti-slavery issue in the state, but he welcomed the changes coming from other states which gradually moved towards the abolition of the importation of slaves. In a letter to Edward Rutledge from 1786, Jefferson wrote:

I congratulate you...on the law of your State for suspending the importation of slaves, and for the glory you have justly acquired by endeavoring to prevent it forever. This abomination must have an end. And there is superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it. (67)

The outlawing of slave importation in South Carolina was likely the inspiration for Jefferson to introduce a more complex law which would modify slavery in other states. In 1807, the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, a law Jefferson vehemently promoted, was finally enacted and the importation of new slaves into the United States was completely prohibited.

Considering the fact that slavery itself was not legally abolished until 1865, the ban on slave importation seems only a small step towards the freedom of African Americans. As noted above, Jefferson himself was a slave owner, which potentially makes his opinions sound rather hypocritical. The fact is, that on one side, he called for equal rights for all, and on the other, he let those rights be violated. For instance, Jefferson saw proper education as one of the major tools for well-being. In 1819, he founded the University of Virginia, which was to provide higher education in various fields according to students' individual interests. This institution though, was for a long time only for "privileged" white men with some prior education and financial means. African Americans did not meet either of these "requirements," and it was a known fact that their role at the university was only to act as servants to the professors and the students.

In Jefferson's defense, it is clear, especially from his private letters, that he did not share the common dehumanizing view of African Americans, nor any other minorities. He was aware that the minorities had unequal life conditions, and although he seemed to be doubtful, he was convinced that they should be given the same opportunities as white men so that they could try to reach that same "well-being" which was unattainable for them due to racial discrimination:

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them [the Negro people] by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but, whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. (70, 71)

Jefferson's belief was that if all people, no matter their race or background, are provided with education, they will be able to better themselves and learn how to provide for themselves without being dependent on anybody else. He then introduced a plan of general education accessible for all, which would in the future allow people obtain the same chances and opportunities to secure their well-being.

In correspondence with governor John Tyler, Jefferson wrote:

I have indeed two great measures at heart, without which no republic can maintain itself in strength, (1) That of general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom, (2) To divide every county into hundreds, of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it. (77)

This model of "central schooling" was directly drawn from Revolutionary France, where it was being advocated by Jefferson's friend Antoine Destutt de Tracy. Despite the fact that Jefferson earlier expressed his positive opinion on the abilities of African Americans, it is unlikely that the above provisions would include them, given the time and situation. Even though it is not very clear from his correspondence that he actually thought of any practical ways of including African Americans into this educational system, it is evident that he generally saw education and literacy as the basis of people's self-reliance and therefore as the "surest foundation for a democracy." (77)

This Jeffersonian notion of self-reliance, a term later coined by Ralph Waldo Emerson, is a notion of a person who has total control over all his affairs, be they related to the aforementioned natural rights, or to other rights ensuring people's liberty. What he stresses as an essential right, apart from the "endowed" ones, is the right of property. Property rights in the Jeffersonian sense underline the second theory of the "pursuit of happiness," which describes the economic aspect of "well-being." It is commonly agreed that when writing the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson made use of the philosophy of John Locke and substituted for Locke's "life, liberty and property" his own phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>15</sup> The right of property is, for Jefferson, a right which not only guarantees everybody has an opportunity to own land to live on, but also provides opportunities to people who are unemployed or do not own any land of their own:

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<sup>15</sup> Ganter, 429.

Whenever there are in a country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate the natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on. If for the encouragement of industry we allow it to be appropriated, we must take care that other employment be provided for those excluded from the appropriation. If we do not, the fundamental right to labor the earth returns to the unemployed. [...] It is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. (56,57)

According to the above excerpt, it may almost seem as if Jefferson thought of creating a new class of tenant farmers but that is not what he was aiming for. As written in the beginning of this chapter, it was the lack of personal autonomy resulting from tenant status which made most of the Europeans take the risk of coming to America. Jefferson was well aware of the fact that not all people were so fortunate to possess a piece of land, and also of the fact, that there still was “available” land needing to be cultivated. The idea then was that the uncultivated land would be provided to those people who were unemployed or who for some reason did not possess property of their own so that they could all earn an income and therefore ensure financial stability.

However thoughtful this idea of his sounds, it again significantly contradicted the reality of Jefferson’s time and even his personal life. The right to property seen as guaranteeing personal liberty, co-existed with slavery, which shows that the property right hardly applied to all people without difference, especially when the slaves themselves were considered and treated as being property. In principle, Jefferson’s ideas seem to be well-intentioned, but the truth is that they were rather inapplicable and he himself did not do much to change this situation.

Admittedly, Jefferson was constrained by the historical location and circumstances in which he lived. These may in part excuse him for his hypocrisy, but not so much for the inefficiency in either the matter of slavery, or the general situation of African-Americans. On the other hand, the importance of his efforts in the political formation of the nation before and after gaining independence cannot be denied. Jefferson undoubtedly was a person who significantly helped to shape the American notion of freedom as it is known today, and a person who remains strongly associated with the creation and popularization of one of the most significant American documents of all times.

## 2. Transcendentalism

In contrast with the previous chapter focused mainly on the political freedom of the newly established United States as a whole, this chapter will focus on the spiritual freedom of individuals during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, America was still a relatively young country developing its own political, literary and also philosophical traditions. Those traditions emerged gradually, when some of them grew as a reaction to the still present tendencies to follow European models. This was one of the reasons and opportunities to form an American cultural identity which would be distinguishable and independent from that of Europe. Despite not forming an official group, the transcendentalists shared some common ideas focusing on the importance of an individual's own thought and the reliance on the individual's faculties. For many of the transcendentalists, spiritual independence was one of the core beliefs, not only in reference to American-European relations, but in the sense of understanding the power and uniqueness of each individual's "nature" and the use of its potential.

Many elements of transcendentalist philosophy originated among the liberal Congregationalists of New England who got separated from the orthodox notion of Calvinism. They focused more on the "importance of human striving" and their vision of God's unity opposed the Calvinist vision of the "Holy Trinity." Most of the so-called Unitarians held a view that "Jesus was in some way inferior to God the Father but still greater than human beings, but many of them saw Jesus as thoroughly human, although endowed with special authority. This idea later developed into a belief that human beings partake of Divinity and may achieve a growing likeness to the Supreme Being."<sup>16</sup>

### 2.1. Ralph Waldo Emerson

The transcendentalists of the early nineteenth century, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson, adopted the idea of human striving and special "godlike" authority but divert from the religious notion of transcendentalism by ascribing this authority to man. In their notion, there is no other supreme being than man himself with his own original thoughts and insights. In Emerson's view, to be a "true" man one must be completely independent and self-reliant in terms of his thoughts and actions, and only such self-reliant individuals can form a principled and even-handed society.

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<sup>16</sup> Russell Goodman, "Transcendentalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/transcendentalism/>> 30 April 2019.

Emerson imagined people to be driven by their self-trust, listening to their inner voice instead of conforming to established authorities. This belief of Emerson's apparently derives from the antinomian approach of earlier Calvinist dissenters who did not accept the principles of "moral law" believing that obedience to the law should be "motivated by virtue of a new, internalized principle flowing from a true belief, not out of any external compulsion."<sup>17</sup> The virtuous behavior of a person should therefore flow from one's own conscience rather than to be driven by a certain "guideline".

In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson writes:

The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind.<sup>18</sup>

According to the above excerpt, one should avoid conformity, rely on his own instincts and accept the human soul as the only authority. In this particular work, Emerson tries to explain that people should not act as if they were subjects to some outer supreme authority, but that there is an authorial power existing within each of us. Furthermore, to be able to master this power, and achieve self-reliance, one must first become almost "godlike in mastering of his own talent" (49) as Emerson states:

It demands something godlike in him who cast off the common motives of humanity and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others! (48)

It can be seen that self-reliance is the very core of Emerson's notion of freedom. He largely focuses on the spiritual freedom of an individual as he sees the inner "soul" as the principal driving force for human thoughts and actions. He sees the soul as the highest authority; each individual thus has his/her own unique authority within themselves. In his early essay "The Over-Soul," Emerson even seems to present the power of the soul as an integrated entity uniting all individuals together. Nevertheless, Emerson does not seem to continue to rely on this concept as he rarely refers to it in his later works.

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<sup>17</sup> David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) 36.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson and Tony Tanner, "Self-Reliance" reproduced in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (London: J.M. Dent, 1995) 26. All the subsequent quotations of this work are from this edition and are placed in parentheses in the text.

This particular work though, is for the purpose of this chapter still important as it clearly explains Emerson's notion of the soul and its qualities. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson writes:

The Supreme Critic on all the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue; and which evermore tends and aims to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. [...] We live in parts, in particles. Within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. [...] We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.<sup>19</sup>

In this work, Emerson does not only describe his view of the power of human thought in general terms, he also uses this belief to express his negative attitude towards, for him, "artificial" authorities, and towards the copying of certain models without using one's own faculties. One such example of this attitude can be found in both "Self-Reliance" and "The Over-Soul" where he evidently doubts the authority of religion. He does not refute anybody's faith or religious beliefs in general, though he disagrees with the authority religious institutions attempt to impose upon people. What he sees as a problem is the fact that people had historically seen Jesus, and religion as a whole, as the ultimate authority, and that they rely purely on what they are being told in church instead of finding faith within themselves.

As noted earlier, the only authority one should rely on is the soul, and any other so-called authority is not a real and natural one. In Emerson's words:

The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul. The position men have given to Jesus now for many centuries of history is a position of authority. It characterizes themselves. It cannot alter the eternal facts. Great is the soul, and plain. It is no flatter, it is no follower; it never appeals from itself. It always believes in itself.<sup>20</sup>

What is important for Emerson is the freedom of thought which enables people to have opinions and beliefs based on their own original perception deriving from their soul. This

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<sup>19</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson and Tony Tanner, "The Over-Soul" in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (London: J.M. Dent, 1995) 131.

<sup>20</sup> Emerson, "The Over-Soul," 144.

freedom though, is not possible to achieve when the authority is given to an institution or to another person.

Emerson saw the concept of all institutions as corrupted, as they disabled the individual's growth. The opinion he held of the government was no different. For him, it was “aspiring of no real good”<sup>21</sup> in any field, be it humanity, arts or science. He believed that the true force should not lay in the hands of any institution but in the hands of individuals driven by their natural consciousness. The unique sensibility of individual consciousness was for Emerson the internal “nature” of each person which constructed and projected the external nature giving it its unique features. Emerson then, in his own words, saw nature as a “chamber lined with mirrors.”<sup>22</sup>

He further describes “this” nature as “the incarnation of a thought,”<sup>23</sup> seeing it as the principal vehicle of human thought and action. This notion of nature, is for the purpose of this thesis especially important. As written in the introduction of this chapter, even sixty years after independence, there still were tendencies to draw inspiration from European culture which Emerson wanted to change. His vision was that of an American cultural identity created by men driven utterly by their individual consciousness unscathed by any extraneous influence. In his speech, later titled “The American Scholar,” given to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College, Emerson said:

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself.<sup>24</sup>

In this speech, he introduced a vision for the future creation of American thought, and the concept of the “Man Thinking”(92) representing the scholar’s potential. By the word “scholar,” Emerson does not only refer to the academics, but rather to any reasonably knowledgeable people independent of academic credentials. This speech thus served as an appeal to all those “scholars” not to imitate, but to create their own ideas. The core of such creation is again “self-trust,” which the scholar must rely upon:

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<sup>21</sup> Edgar Lee Masters, *The Living Thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Fawcett world library, 1958) 82.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. I. 1843-1871 (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010) 155.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Lee Masters, “Nature” reproduced in *The Living Thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Fawcett world library, 1958) 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837) reproduced in *Ralph Waldo Emerson* ed. by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Harvard University Press, 2015): 107, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c84ct8.11>> 18 April 2020. All the subsequent quotations of this work are from this edition and are placed in parentheses in the text.

In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be, - free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, “without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution.” [...] We will walk on our feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own mind. [...] A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men. (102, 108)

Emerson, convinced of the power of the individual, believed that such individualism was the key step towards the development of a truly American culture.

The above excerpts of Emerson's works illustrate the transcendentalist aims to change the American way of thinking in order to achieve some, for them, necessary changes in society through each individual's actions. These changes mainly aimed to alter the overall situation in the United States by focusing on American “problems,” including the individual’s subject-position, which might be seen to conflict with her/his values, morals, and beliefs. Emerson then aimed at the unity and sovereignty of an individual which can only be achieved “by rethinking and resolute changes of the individual’s relationship to religious beliefs and traditions, as well as to property, society and government.”<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2. Henry David Thoreau

A common ground for many transcendentalists was an aversion towards a government’s allowing slavery, and also their disagreement with the imperialist war with Mexico. As they did believe in the power of individuals, they believed that every individual must take action against the government, which would lead to the freedom of those to whom it had been denied. One of those transcendentalists who took particular action himself was Henry David Thoreau who refused to pay taxes in order not to conform to and support such a government.

In his work “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau refuses allegiance to that government and explains his reasoning for not paying tax as a revolt against an unjust institution which does not deserve to be obeyed:

How does it become a man to behave toward this American government to-day? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also. [...] When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Procházka, Justin Quinn, ed., *Lectures on American Literature*, third edition (Prague: Karolinum, 2011) 81.

<sup>26</sup> Henry David Thoreau and Owen Paul Thomas, “Civil Disobedience” reproduced in *Walden and Civil Disobedience: authoritative texts, background, reviews and essays in criticism*, 4<sup>th</sup> print (New York: Norton, 1966) 227. All the subsequent quotations of this work will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

However, this refusal of his was largely theoretical, since, as a result of his life-style, he owned almost no taxes. In fact, this theory on which he based his resistance to governmental authority was drawn in large measure from Emerson's work "Politics" rather than solely from his own personal experience. Nevertheless, Thoreau urged other people to the same resistance, as he was aware that it was not enough just to hold an opinion and not take any action for the change. Being imprisoned himself, if only for one night, Thoreau claimed that under such a government, "a prison is the true place for a just man to be" (233), for the just man rather breaks the unjust law than obey it and support injustice for somebody else.

Another argument Thoreau uses against the government is that he blames it for disrespecting individuals' conscience and therefore rejecting the importance of one of the essential human faculties. The government is thus in this work seen as dehumanizing its citizens, treating them merely as objects of its rule:

A government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. [...] Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.  
(225)

As Thoreau writes in the final passage, he is convinced that the rights of each individual must be recognized fully, to achieve a just environment where freedom and justice exist for everybody. In such an environment, there is no place for slavery, and the government should treat all its citizens with equal respect. As his final passage says, Thoreau believed, that "there will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly." (243)

### **2.3. Margaret Fuller**

Among those who promoted transcendentalist ideas was also Margaret Fuller, who as a female activist, offered a different insight on the common ideals seen in both Emerson and Thoreau. Fuller, as well as other transcendentalist authors, shared the negative opinion of slavery, but mainly shared the idea of the individual's self-dependence to be the essential attribute for the enlightenment of humankind. Fuller's aim, though, was that this self-dependence and larger freedom be extended to women, who had long been treated as inferior to men, and their rights as incomparable to those of men.

Fuller cannot be characterized as purely a transcendentalist, or purely an abolitionist author, even though her works contain many ideas on both. The anti-slavery struggle

expressed in her work though, can undoubtedly be seen as one of the progenitors of the women's rights movement.<sup>27</sup> In her work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller calls for broader educational and employment opportunities for women, and stresses that what disables women's growth is men's patriarchy and dominance. Women, in her view, should therefore not be considered solely as wives or mothers, but should be given the same opportunities so that they can be equal partners to men. Fuller expresses this opinion by stating that "man should esteem himself the brother and friend, but nowise the lord and tutor of woman," and that "what woman needs is not to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, and as a soul to live freely."<sup>28</sup>

In this work, Fuller further compares the situation of women to the situation of slaves and urges men to change the situation of both. Fuller's reason for such a comparison is the inequality, and lack of rights, of both women and slaves, compared to those of free men. She claims that those who have compassion for slaves should also have compassion for women, as freedom should be acknowledged as an essential natural right of all, with no exceptions of race or gender:

Yet, then and only then, will mankind be ripe for this, when inward and outward freedom for woman as much as for man shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession. As the friend of the negro assumes that one man cannot by right hold another in bondage, so should the friend of woman assume that man cannot, by right, lay even well-meant restrictions on woman.<sup>29</sup>

What can then be seen in the works of the above-mentioned transcendentalists, is that their opinions derive from their strong faith in human capabilities. They believed, that if each individual is allowed personal freedom, all individuals can naturally grow and can together form a more open society. Unfortunately, the transcendentalist notion of freedom and equality was in their lifetime rather a utopian dream as the freedom they imagined long after remained withheld from many.

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<sup>27</sup> Frances E. Kearns, "Margaret Fuller and the Abolitionist Movement," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25.1 (1964):120, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2708090>> 23 June 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845): 27, Internet Archive.org <<https://archive.org/details/womaninnineteent1845full/page/n8>> 23 June 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Fuller, 26.

### **3. Abolitionism**

As it should be noticed in the previous chapters, political, religious, and spiritual freedom were considered to be the core of the U.S. ideology which largely shaped the nation's mentality and the American sense of exceptionalism. Freedom was acknowledged as a natural right; a "gift" from God, distributed equally to all citizens. Paradoxically, while the prospect of complete freedom built the nation and its mentality, the reality was that there was a legally tolerated "practice" which was the complete opposite of this idea of freedom-for-all. This practice was the existence of slavery and the persistent arguments used for its justification. Fortunately, the arguments for slavery faced the critique and counterarguments of the abolitionists who tried to prove slavery immoral and illegal. This chapter aims to outline the dark part of U.S. history and the various approaches abolitionists took to defend the rights of people who had been deprived of them.

Even though abolitionists have been grouped under one general name, they did not officially form one particular group. They were individuals of different professions and backgrounds promoting abolitionist ideas according to their own experience and sentiments. They did, of course, fight for the same cause but their viewpoints and arguments often differed. We can generally say that early on, an abolitionist was one who called for the immediate, uncompensated, and punitive ending of slavery, by the federal government or by the slaves themselves. Nevertheless, such people belonged to an opposed minority for a very long time.

#### **3.1. Historical outline**

It is important to say that slavery was definitely not an originally American conception as it had existed in Africa long before, as well as in Europe and the Caribbean. It was with the colonization of the North American continent by European settlers that the slave trade and slave labor gradually acquired features of an institution and became an integral part of the American economy. The first slave importation dates back to 1619 when the first slaves were imported from Africa, being traded for supplies.<sup>30</sup> The practice in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was that the people, predominantly Africans, imported to the North American colonies worked for the colonists for a certain period and then were freed. Their status was subordinate but still did not reach the dehumanizing dimensions of the following decades. Race was also not yet a defining factor in the distinction between a slave and a free person.

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<sup>30</sup> Claudine L. Ferrell, *The Abolitionist Movement* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001) 3.

This changed dramatically by the turn between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century when the competition in the slave trade increased, and the Africans became more available to the “needs” of the colonists. The increased importation of slaves quickly led to the establishment of race-based and hereditary slavery declared by slave codes, which, being enforced by law, made slaves a “chattel of a master who held total dominance.”<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2. Early Abolitionism

With the massive spread of slavery in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the first voices were heard against this practice and the cruel treatment slaves were facing. Those voices belonged to Quakers, formally called the Religious Society of Friends, who, due to their beliefs, saw slavery as immoral and sinful. Quakers believed that the “the light of God is in every single person and that each human being is of unique worth.”<sup>32</sup> They therefore based their beliefs on acknowledging human equality and opposed slavery for violating this crucial value.

Due to their religious dissent, Quakers themselves had been oppressed. In England, they had been oppressed by the Church of England while in North America, they were oppressed by American Puritans. They then knew social stigma very well.<sup>33</sup> Despite this experience, and their values, there were many slave-holders among Quakers which certainly belittled their credibility. It was therefore necessary to eliminate slave-owning within their own community before urging others to do so. Although slave-owning Quakers were largely criticized by fellow members, those who criticized them were often expelled from the community. Quakers therefore faced the dilemma of “whether to withdraw from slave-related activities, or from Quakerism, because they could no longer be Quakers if they continued to own slaves.”<sup>34</sup>

It can be seen that the Quakers’ abolitionist opinions are predominantly based on their religious beliefs. Not all abolitionists though connected slavery primarily with religion, or saw slavery as a sin. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, abolitionists started to focus on the social impacts of slavery and not only on the religious aspects. In this period, more individual

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<sup>31</sup> Ferrell, 4.

<sup>32</sup> “Quakers,” BBC.com.uk, 3 July 2009

<[https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers\\_1.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers_1.shtml)> 1 February 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Abolitionism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 16. All the subsequent quotations of this work will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>34</sup> “Eliminating Slavery Amongst Quakers,” Quakers in the World.org

<<http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/58/Eliminating-Slavery-amongst-Quakers>> 1 February 2020.

anti-slavery groups and organizations were emerging. All with the same aim of abolishing slavery, but all with different visions and expectations.

### **3.3 New Abolitionist Societies**

Abolitionist activism increased after the American Revolution when activists, now including statesmen, started to form societies “that lobbied for antislavery action in both government and society” (23). The first organization founded in 1775 was named the “Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage,” which, after a reorganization in 1784 changed its name to “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society” with Benjamin Franklin being its first president. The Society’s effort was to outlaw slavery, arguing that “slavery blemished the American character and gave lie to the nation’s Revolutionary War promises” (23). Nevertheless, the early abolitionist societies were formed only by white men, not admitting black members. The realization of the process of slave emancipation also remained somewhat a sticking point between the individual abolitionist and anti-slavery advocates.

As written earlier, the individual groupings all aimed to abolish or limit slavery, but they all also promoted different solutions. Not all of the proponents of slave/African-American rights, were thus open to a complete emancipation. In both, the South and the North, there were tendencies to improve the conditions of slaves by their gradual emancipation, but their integration into “white” society was still out of question. The only question then was how to deal with those emancipated slaves for whom society failed, or was reluctant to provide, conditions for a life in a safe and fair environment.

One such solution to solve the problem of increasing numbers of free blacks was the founding of Liberia where the emancipated slaves were supposed to be resettled. This deportation of freed slaves was done primarily by the relatively few Southern opponents of slavery, who, rather than complete and immediate abolition, favored a very gradual dissolution. The outcome of this “solution” was rather unlucky as the resettled people, “having retained the culture they brought from the U.S., mostly did not integrate with the native societies. There was neither as massive deliberate exodus of African-Americans to Liberia as expected, and the resettlement plan was gradually given up.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Founding of Liberia 1847,” U.S. Department of State.gov/archive 2001-2009  
<<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/dwe/16337.htm>> 15 February, 2020.

### 3.3.1. The Manumission Society

The plans for solving the growing numbers of free blacks also were not always intended to cover all freed people on the federal level. Those plans were designed to improve the situation of freed, or runaway blacks on the local levels, mainly in particular places where their numbers significantly increased. One such place was New York, where, twenty-five years after the Revolution, this number had tripled.<sup>36</sup> Despite being formally “free,” African-Americans in cities had to deal with problems associated with their lack of education, and the lack of qualification which disabled them from full integration into “white” society. What is more, African-Americans were often made to live in isolation in makeshift tenements while suffering in poverty. Such conditions gave rise to increased criminality and other “improper” behavior. Those conditions were supposed to be improved by the New York Manumission Society, founded in 1785, which originally “formed for two purposes; to agitate for passage of anti-slavery legislation, and to protect manumitted slaves from kidnappers and other forms of exploit.”<sup>37</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Manumission Society, at least to some extent, tried to improve the situation of free people of color by founding the African Free School providing education for emancipated slaves, as well as for the children of slaves. There were also attempts to safeguard the rights of free blacks by protecting them from the exploitation of employers involved in the slave trade by boycotting them. However, some of the Society’s members such as John Jay, owned slaves themselves, despite all abolitionist beliefs. Moreover, the early good-willed efforts of the Society quickly turned to efforts of “improving,” and restraining the “negro behavior” which was seen as inappropriate.<sup>38</sup> Although many white anti-slavery and abolitionist activists were genuinely desirous of a rapid end to slavery, they were not comfortable with the idea of full civil/political equality for freed blacks or with racial integration. They still were rather reluctant regarding the idea that Afro-Americans and whites could live alongside one another in one united society, having equal rights and conditions. This situation was more or less consistent throughout all the Northern “abolitionist” states.

Essentially, there was more abolitionist effort within the Northern states than in the South. There were minor anti-slavery groups in the Southern states, but most of the population in those states remained pro-slavery, mainly because it was the base of the

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<sup>36</sup> John L. Rury, “Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks, 1785-1810,” *Phylon* 46.3 (1985): 232, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/274831](http://www.jstor.org/stable/274831)> 15 February, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Rury, 233.

<sup>38</sup> Rury, 235.

states' economy. This did not mean that the North would not take into their calculations the economic outcome of slave emancipation, or that there would be significantly less racial prejudice. Northern states were simply less affected by slavery in both personal and economic spheres, although the impact of complete emancipation in the North was a matter of great concern.

This concern was apparent at the very early formation of the abolitionist groups which from the beginning saw abolition of slavery as a gradual process. By the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, “five Northern states adopted gradual abolition schemes” (24). As a first state to do so, “Pennsylvania passed an ‘Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery’ in 1780, followed by Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and as last, New Jersey in 1804” (24). This gradual abolition was opposed by the more “radical” abolitionists, mainly by Quakers, who desired immediate abolition but did not meet with much success. It was mainly because slaves were considered property, and for their masters, emancipation would mean a loss of this “property”.

The right of property was a strong reason for both Northerners and Southerners to find a compromise in the slavery matter as “many of the reformers agreed, that the property rights must be balanced against human rights” (24). Even though slavery was banned in all Northern states by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, slavery in the South remained. The only route to freedom for the enslaved people in the South, other than the oft-attempted escape, was thus via “private emancipations” (26), which was based predominantly on the good will of their masters, or in equally rare cases, on their purchase, for purposes of manumission and deportation, by Southern anti-slavery societies.

### **3.3.2. Anti-Abolitionist Efforts / Slave Rebellion**

Opposing the anti-slavery efforts from the North, the South saw the formation of numerous anti-abolitionist groups trying to stop those efforts from spreading. Those groups justified the institution of slavery as an inseparable part of the Southern economy, and also, as an institution necessary for the defense of whites against the “ferocious” blacks. The situation of both slaves and free people of color in the South radically worsened after various slave uprisings in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The news of slave rebellions from the South spread hysteria across the whole country as the “anti-abolitionists” used the revolts as evidence of negro violence, and a stimulus for strengthening the black codes.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> John W. Cromwell, “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *The Journal of Negro History* 5.2 (1920): 230, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/2713592](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713592)> 17 February 2020.

Furthermore, after the Southampton Insurrection, led by Nat Turner in 1831, racial prejudice deepened to such an extent, that not only slaves were in danger of being lynched as a “precaution,” but also free people of color came under suspicion of plotting these rebellions and were therefore persecuted. At the state level, as in Virginia for instance, there were attempts to relocate free people of color out of the state. The restrictions further ranged from limiting private emancipations and regulating migration and ownership rights, to prohibition of the teaching of slaves and the prohibition of “writing and printing anything intending to incite the Negroes to insurrections.”<sup>40</sup>

Apart from powerful public speeches, abolitionists used printed media as the most useful means of spreading abolitionist matter throughout the country. Originally, they mainly wrote pamphlets which they often distributed via post so that the pamphlets reached different areas and a wider range of readers. In the 1820s, pamphlets were replaced by newly printed abolitionist newspapers such as *The Emancipator* or Benjamin Lundy’s *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* which became “the most influential abolitionist media of that time”(44).

### **3.4. “Black Abolitionism”**

It is important to discuss, that the early abolitionist activists were predominantly free white men. The freedom of slaves was thus being defended by people with little personal experience with the real struggle of either slaves, or free people of color. Those who had been personally affected by both slavery and racism had no voice until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the first black abolitionist communities slowly started to form. In light of the recent violent slave uprisings in America and the Caribbean, the first black abolitionist communities formed as its “nonviolent counterparts challenging the American creed of liberty and justice for all”(34) granted by the US Constitution.

Despite being prevented from reaching the political sphere, black abolitionist activism developed on communal levels. Free blacks formed various religious, and educational groups aiming for equal civil rights, or as in the case of Allen’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, aimed for institutional freedom from the white Methodists holding control over their denomination”(35). Black abolitionists were now also very active on the publication scale, “having produced more than 1,800 printed documents by 1830” (34).

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<sup>40</sup> Cromwell, 230.

### 3.5. The American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS)

The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833 by William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Weld, Arthur Tappan, and Lewis Tappan, on the model of Garrison's radical abolitionist prototype New England Anti-Slavery Society (1831), was the most prominent abolitionist society of the period, which now included both white and black members. This society was founded to promote immediate abolition on a national level, cooperating with local auxiliary groupings, which by 1840, contained up to 200,000 members.<sup>41</sup> Unlike the previous abolitionist societies, AASS fought for immediate abolition of slavery and emancipation of slaves without compensating former slave-holders, or repatriating former slaves elsewhere. The society regularly sent petitions to the Congress in order to urge the immediate abolition of slavery throughout the whole nation. As a response, the Congress, at the insistence of powerful Southern members, imposed a "Gag rule" which meant that "the Congress postponed consideration, printing, and referral of all such petitions that regarded slavery."<sup>42</sup>

The major belief of this society was that slavery was an ungodly institution violating the Declaration of Independence, which formally declared all men equal. The Constitution was more problematic: While many abolitionists believed that the Constitution was, in its overall intentions and professions, an anti-slavery document, the more radical followers of abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison claimed the U.S. Constitution institutionalized slavery and demanded the formation of a new government completely prohibiting slavery. Garrison further believed that if the South would not agree on forming a "nation with outlawed slavery, the North should secede from the United States and found its own country."<sup>43</sup> Those radical opinions of Garrison's later led to a split with the more moderate members of the Society who accepted the U.S. Constitution as a legal document despite its ambiguous interpretation. However, the Society's work continued up to 1870, even when divided into new parties with different perspectives.

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<sup>41</sup> "The American Anti-Slavery Society," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 28 July 2016 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Anti-Slavery-Society>> 23 February 2020.

<sup>42</sup> "Gag rule," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 22 March 2018 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/gag-rule>> 23 February 2020.

<sup>43</sup> "The American Anti-Slavery Society," Ohio History Central.org <[https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/American\\_Anti-Slavery\\_Society](https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/American_Anti-Slavery_Society)> 23 February 2020.

### 3.5.1. African-American Members

As noted above, the early organizations opposed to slavery did not accept black members; by accepting them, the AASS broke the long-standing prohibition. Moreover, the AASS had African-American members who soon became stalwarts of the organization. Among the most prominent belonged escaped slave William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, another fugitive slave who became one of the most influential abolitionist speakers. Douglass was one of the delegates sent to speak at public meetings to promote the abolitionist agenda across the Northern States. Unlike the other members, Douglass presented his own experience, and to a certain extent, stood as a role-model of the “exemplary” integration of a former slave into society. Apart from his political activism, he also excelled as a writer. His work, such as the autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, stands at the head of major works of abolitionist literature. As opposed to the common beliefs of his time, Douglas proved that intelligence and skills are not a matter of race or gender, and became one of those who paved the way for movements with similar conviction.

### 3.6. Women Abolitionists

When it comes to the importance of the roles which members of the abolitionist movement held, it is apparent that the seemingly most important agenda was predominantly handled by men. This was mainly due to the fact that women’s civil rights were far from equal to men’s. Their position in society was therefore highly limited. Despite this gender discrimination, female abolitionists played a crucial role within the movement. As they did not even have the right to vote, they could not be as politically active as men, but their role in production and distribution of abolitionist materials soon became essential means for spreading abolitionist thought.

Nevertheless, some women abolitionists such as Harriet Tubman had to keep their activities secret to avoid legal sanctions. As a former slave, Tubman helped numbers of fugitive slaves to escape slavery by “smuggling” them to safety, firstly to the North, and later to Canada. The network of the “Underground Railroad,”<sup>44</sup> consisted of houses of fellow abolitionists, among whom was, for instance, Frederick Douglass himself, who came through the same experience as Tubman herself.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “The Underground Railroad,” National Geographic Society, 21 June 2019  
<<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/underground-railroad/>> 7 March 2020.

<sup>45</sup> “Harriet Tubman Biography,” The Biography.com, 16 January 2020  
<<https://www.biography.com/activist/harriet-tubman>> 7 March 2020.

Personal encounters with slavery were also the reason for action for other women abolitionists such as Angelina and Sarah Grimké, born Southerners who left to the North in order to avoid life in a pro-slavery environment. By them, slavery was seen as violating Christian ideals. This perception was then the basis of their activism. Apart from the Grimkés, religion was an important determiner for many of the women abolitionists who later targeted their activism at the civil rights of both slaves and women. The deprivations of these rights then was what the women abolitionists saw to be parallel. This parallel gradually became the core of the women's rhetoric used by all major abolitionists from Abby Kelley Foster to Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton is generally listed among abolitionists, her work for the abolitionist movement does not reach such significance as her work for the women's rights movement which soon became her priority. Stanton, alongside her husband Henry Brewster Stanton, an AASS member, actively participated in abolitionist activities. However, her scope gradually narrowed to the promotion of women's rights and suffrage as she was not content with the discrimination of women which was present even within the abolitionist society. In 1840, when she attended the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London, "she was outraged at the denial of official recognition to women delegates because of their sex."<sup>46</sup> For Stanton, this was the impulse for her transition from an abolitionist to a women's rights activist.

Coming from a family of lawyers, and studying law herself, Stanton often used legal terminology and persuasive arguments in her support of women's rights. In *The Declaration of Sentiments* of the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, which is somewhat a "female alternative" to the Declaration of Independence, Stanton "reiterates, that both genders were endowed with the same unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,"<sup>47</sup> but that, in practice, women are not granted those rights. In this document, Stanton further lists the particular areas in which women are discriminated against by men, be it inequality in education, representation in government, or the lack of property rights due to their gender. Apparently, those rights were the same rights which had been denied to both slaves, and free people of color due to their race.

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<sup>46</sup> "Elizabeth Cady Stanton," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 8 November 2019 <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Cady-Stanton>> 7 March, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Carrie L. Cokely, "The Declaration of Sentiments 1848," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 27 December 2017 <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Declaration-of-Sentiments>> 7 March, 2020.

### 3.7. Abolitionist Literature

As it can be seen, all anti-slavery activists, both women and men, focused on different problems within the Abolitionist frame. The complexity of the situation divided abolitionists into various groupings with different scopes, although the legal abolition of slavery remained as the common aim. Most abolitionist writings were mainly political pamphlets, petitions, or autobiographical works. The most influential work of abolitionist literature is, however, a piece of fiction, although inspired and based upon real events. The following lines will focus on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which presents the complex picture of 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery in America describing the impact of problematic laws, and the effects slavery had on both slaves and free people who were involved.

#### 3.7.1. Harriet Beecher Stowe / *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

As written above, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a novel with fictive characters, although all characters and their story lines are based on true testimonies of people Stowe met during her participation in the Underground Railroad. Apart from her own experience, Stowe also drew inspiration from the real statements of slaveholders to create a complete picture of slavery seen from both affected sides. It is assumed that the particular details Stowe used in her novel were drawn from the work of Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is*, which is a collection of slaveholders' statements, legal documents, and newspaper advertisements.<sup>48</sup> The legal documents were later used by Stowe as supporting evidence in her defense of the novel's credibility.

What we see in the novel is that it largely focuses on various sub-themes rather than focusing on one central theme. Naturally, the main plot is centered around the character of Uncle Tom and his hardship, but the sub-themes which present the dilemmas of those who are either involved in slavery, or are enslaved themselves, are central to the novel's complexity. It offers insights into the tragic destinies of slaves, but also presents the conflicting opinions of slave-holding families. The following paragraphs aim to explore some of the novel's moral dilemmas which reflected the real situation of American antebellum society.

One of the central themes of the novel is the situation following the enactment of an enhanced Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, strengthening the capacity of slavery to reach into free Northern states. This law stated that any Northern citizen who had knowledge of any escaped slave present in her/his vicinity was obligated, under penalty of imprisonment, to

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<sup>48</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 16.

share that knowledge with slave-catchers dispatched by Southern slaveowners, and, under similar compulsion, actually to assist the slavecatchers in the apprehension of fugitive “property.” The law impelled many black refugees who had not already fled to Canada to do so; and it enraged Northern opinion.<sup>49</sup> As seen in the characters of Eliza and Harry, escaping from enslavement was often the only chance of reaching freedom, and what is more, the only chance not to be separated from one’s own family. Many enslaved people therefore took the risk and chose to escape even for the price of being caught by “slave hunters,” returned, and cruelly punished.

In Stowe’s work, the North is not depicted as the “better counterpart” of the South. Contrarily, the Northerners’ approach towards Southerners is depicted as rather hypocritical and biased. In the dialogues between Augustine St. Claire and his cousin Ophelia, we see that she despises slavery, and is shocked by the “disorder” of her cousin’s household. Living in the North, she is detached from the institution, and did not personally get to know the true character and qualities of the enslaved people. On one hand, she stands against slavery, but on the other, she thinks the less of slaves’ intelligence and manners. In contrast, St. Claire, as a slave-owner, seems to be less racially prejudiced than his Northern relative. The character of Ophelia then distinctly represents the common Northern opinion of the Southerners, and in a sense, represents the Northerners’ holier-than-thou attitude springing from what seems to be the lack of their own personal attachment and different life experience. In the following excerpt, St. Claire tries to explain to Ophelia, that Northerners are no better, for he believes that the fact that slavery settled in the South is mainly an “accidental matter,” not necessarily a matter of higher or lower moral credit of the two “parties”:

What poor, mean trash this whole business of human virtue is! A mere matter, for the most part, of latitude and longitude, and geographical position, acting with natural temperament. The greater part is nothing but an accident! Your father, for example, settles in Vermont, in a town where all are, in fact, free and equal; becomes a regular church member and deacon, and in due time joins Abolition society, and think us all little better than heathens. Yet he is, for all the world, in constitution and habit, a duplicate of my father. I can see it leaking out in fifty different ways,- just the same strong, overbearing, dominant spirit. You know very well how impossible it is to persuade some of the folks in your village that Squire Sinclair does not feel above them. The fact is, though he has fallen on democratic times, and embraced a democratic theory, he is to the heart an aristocrat, as much as my father, who ruled over five or six hundred slaves.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> David Lee Robbins, *The Metaphor Will Hold: Emerson, Nominalism, Fictionalism, Nihilism, and Matinal Modernism* (Prague: Karolinum, forthcoming 2020) 64.

<sup>50</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin with and introduction by Alfred Kazin* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981) 226.

The excerpt cannot be read purely as a Southerner's justification of slavery. It is mainly to point out that the Northerners were in essence the same people as Southerners but the different location and circumstances placed the Southerners in the position of appearing to self-righteous Northerners unethical, or morally inferior.

Stowe further expands on this theme of morality and conscience, portraying a cause of moral conflict emerging not only between two territories, but also between the members of one family. The conflict is present within a slaveholding family where, regarding the fact all members are personally involved, it is seen that each of them has different moral values. In the novel, this theme of conflicting ethics is apparent within the family of the Shelbys, who disagree on the matter of selling their slaves. When Arthur Shelby decides to sell two of them, he is met with strong disagreement from his wife who earlier made a promise to Eliza that they would never separate her son from her. Shelby's son George is also reluctant to see his friend Tom leave, but as all affairs are in the hands of the family's patriarch, there is nothing George and Emily can do to prevent this "business". The reader knows that Arthur Shelby sells the slaves in order to settle the family's debts, but the fact that he "sacrifices" helpless human beings for money, despite his wife and son's close attachment to them, implies that he does not share the values and moral responsibility of the rest of his family.

Those conflicts of the slaveholding characters, and the brutality some of them engage in, underline the central theme of Stowe's work which is the immorality of slavery given by the violation of Christian principles. The work is generally considered a Christian novel for "it frames the struggle of enslaved people for emancipation within the universal spiritual struggle for Christian salvation."<sup>51</sup> It can be seen that those characters, disagreeing with the enslavement and deprivation of slaves' rights, regard this institution as contrary to Christianity, and therefore behave according to its principles. On the other side, the characters tolerating or supporting slavery, are portrayed to behave only according to their prejudice, or economic and political interests, just like the characters of Simon Legree, Arthur Shelby, or Senator Bird.

The theme of Christian morals further serves to enhance the image of the Afro-Americans, as we see it in the character of Uncle Tom. His solid faith and good manners persuade the reader of the loyalty and purity of his character. On the contrary, his last tyrannical master Legree is the complete opposite, representing the evil trying to break

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<sup>51</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin, "Doing It Herself: Uncle Tom's Cabin and Woman's Role in the Slavery Crisis," *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 85.

Tom's faith, but with no success. Tom's violent murder then puts in contrast the humanity of a slave, as opposed to the bestiality of a white master. This contrast thus portrays slaves, Afro-Americans, as human beings, not as the savage, faithless objects to which they had been unjustly degraded by white man.

### **3.7.2. Reception**

Not surprisingly, the reception of the novel was very positive within Abolitionist circles, and among Northern readers in general. Equally predictably, reactions from pro-slavery circles were highly critical, accusing Stowe of misrepresenting facts and exaggeration. On this account, Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* to prove the veracity of the novel's foundation, but the reactions from both circles remained unchanged. Despite the criticism, the novel became a symbolic flagship of the Abolitionist movement in their combat for the complete abolition of slavery, although it took thirteen more years to succeed.

### **3.8. American Civil War**

Even though the individual abolitionist societies gradually emerged from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was only seventy years later that the abolitionist issue finally entered the mainstream politics of the United States. This milestone came with the founding of the "anti-slavery" Republican Party in 1854, whose political program directly focused on stopping the extension of slavery into the Western territories, limiting it in those states where it was already present, or eliminating it entirely. The Southern states were averse to the political rise of the party as they feared the institution of slavery would not survive. This aversion strengthened when Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860. The election was an impulse for seven, and later four more, Southern states to secede from the Union to preserve slavery in the newly-formed Confederate States. The secession and the slavery question then consequently led to the outbreak of the Civil War. Although Lincoln had declared, that if necessary, he would preserve slavery to save the Union, none of the seceded states returned to allegiance.<sup>52</sup> After two years of war, Lincoln declared all slaves living in the Confederate States free by the Emancipation Proclamation, effective January 1, 1863.

This Proclamation, though, still did not completely solve the issue. Abolitionists had hoped for formal abolition of the whole institution with no exceptions; what they got was abolition of slavery in territories mainly outside the effective control of the U.S.

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<sup>52</sup> "Emancipation Proclamation," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 12 September 2019 <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Emancipation-Proclamation>> 7 March 2020.

government, and preservation of slavery in all territories within federal control.<sup>53</sup> The formal abolition then came in 1865 with the end of the war, by ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Abolitionist societies thus after a century of their activism finally achieved the main goal of their existence, albeit not directly through their own efforts. The formal abolition was a matter of political will and action, which luckily turned to the abolitionists' side. Notwithstanding, it was the abolitionist activism that raised awareness of the slavery issues, and that pushed the people involved towards moral responsibility.

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<sup>53</sup> David Lee Robbins, *American Souls* (manuscript in preparation, 2020), Chapter 8: "Black Strivings," p.41, note 198.

## 4. Anarchism

As was shown in the previous chapter, freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was still a privilege rather than a recognized natural right. This fact was one of those impulses that gave rise to various movements which protested against the settled order, and which tried to enforce equal rights and opportunities, be it in the social or economic spheres. Social and economic conditions were often closely connected, so the violation of one automatically meant the violation of the other. The result of those unequal living conditions was, essentially, a gap between the privileged and those who had limited, or no, rights. This chapter will focus on the ideals of the “individual anarchists” Josiah Warren and Lysander Spooner, who saw the situation as a result of the government’s incompetence and whose efforts were to discredit the government’s authority and to redistribute equally this authority between individuals.

What unites all anarchists, Warren and Spooner included, is the opposition to governmental authority and the abuse of its power, which they saw as the greatest evil of society.<sup>54</sup> They both were “advocates of radical decentralization of this authority,”<sup>55</sup> and as was written in the introduction, their aim was to pass this decentralized power to individuals in order to secure their liberties. The following paragraphs will delineate the particular approaches Warren and Spooner took to support their beliefs.

### 4.1. Josiah Warren

Josiah Warren is often regarded as being the first American anarchist, even though he never referred to himself as being one.<sup>56</sup> The approach Warren took to question governmental and any collective authority mainly took the form of social experiments by which he tried to apply his theories in practice. The keystone of Warren’s opinion, and the basis for his most experiments, was related to unfair conditions of employed individuals, whom he thought were not receiving sufficient wages in relation to the amount of labor they performed. This opinion was also the basis of one of the Warren’s most notable experiments with the “labor-for-labor” store in Cincinnati.

“The Cincinnati Time Store” was run on “the principle of equal exchange of labor, measured by the time occupied, and exchanged hour for hour with other kinds of labor.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Richard T. Ely, review of “Josiah Warren: The First American Anarchist,” a sociological study by William Bailie. *The American Political Science Review* 2.1 (1907): 126, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1944598>> 10 April 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Josiah Warren and Crispin Sartwell, *The Practical Anarchist: Writings of Josiah Warren* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) 100, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh4zfvd.6>> 17 April 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Sartwell, 99.

<sup>57</sup> Jeff Riggensbach, “Josiah Warren: The First American Anarchist,” transcribed from the *Libertarian Tradition* podcast, Mises Institute.org, 25 February 2011 <<https://mises.org/library/josiah-warren-first-american-anarchist>> 10 April 2020.

Making no extra profit, “the storekeeper exchanged his time for an equal amount of the time of those who bought goods of him.”<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the store closed after 3 years, even though Warren regarded this experiment as a successful demonstration of equitable commerce in practice.

After 1830, Warren further experimented with establishing communities based on principles of individual sovereignty. In establishing these utopian communities, Warren was influenced by his encounter with Robert Owen and his socialist community of New Harmony in Indiana. In the beginning, Warren took part in the community’s proceedings, although he soon realized that the principles of such a community elevate the “collective good” over the rights of individuals which conflicted with his beliefs. Warren reflected on his experience from New Harmony by stating that the “united interests of the community were directly at war with the individualities of persons and circumstances and the instinct of self-preservation.”<sup>59</sup> He therefore decided to establish communities of his own, this time based on principles preserving individuals’ sovereignty rather than on the principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”<sup>60</sup>

Warren claimed, that to secure the individual’s sovereignty, no society can be formed under restraining rules of a central authority. By this authority, he mainly meant the government, but also other institutions to whose rules people had to conform. In 1833, Warren began to write and print the first anarchist periodical, *The Peaceful Revolutionist*. In this paper, Warren formulated his opinion on the contemporary state of society by stating that:

Our surrounding institutions, customs, and public opinion calls for conformity: they require us to act in masses like herds of cattle: they do not recognize the fact that we think and feel individually and ought to be at liberty to act individually. But this liberty cannot be enjoyed in combinations, masses, and connections in which one cannot move without affecting another.<sup>61</sup>

He believed that the compromise of the individual’s sovereignty to an institution, or to a custom, was society’s greatest problem.<sup>62</sup> He therefore insisted that society must be remodeled, and the authoritative power redistributed to individuals so that they do not have to compromise their natural right, their liberty.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Josiah Warren, *Peaceful Revolutionist* reproduced in *The Practical Anarchist: Writings of Josiah Warren*, ed., Crispin Sartwell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) 105, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh4zfvd.6>> 17 April 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Ann Caldwell Butler, “Josiah Warren and the Sovereignty of the Individual,” *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 4.4 (1980): 434, Mises Institute.org <<https://mises.org/library/josiah-warren-and-sovereignty-individual>> 10 April 2020.

## 4.2. Lysander Spooner

In reference to the previous chapter, it is important to mention that both Warren and Spooner were among the defenders of abolitionism. However, the anarchists,' and especially Spooner's, approach to the abolitionist matter did not so much emphasize the moral aspect of slavery as it did the legal aspect of slavery, its challenging the validity of the US Constitution. Spooner's argument in favor of abolition was such, that slavery should never have been tolerated, and should not be tolerated any longer as it was never legally established and incorporated into the Constitution. Therefore, slavery never legally existed, because it violated the federal Constitution.

In his work *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery*, Spooner explains that while slavery was recognized as an institution within individual states, it was never legally rooted or even properly defined in any of the state constitutions. Moreover, Spooner claims that even if slavery in those states was considered to be legal, it would have automatically become illegal with the adoption of the US federal Constitution which is superior to all of the early constitutions at a state level, and which itself does not recognize or legalize slavery at all. Spooner writes that:

If all "the people of the United States" were made citizens of the United States, by the United States constitution, at its adoption, it was then forever too late for the state governments to reduce any of them to slavery. They were thenceforth citizens of a higher government, under a constitution that was "the supreme law of the land." Any thing in the constitution or laws of the states to the contrary notwithstanding. If the state governments could enslave citizens of the United States, the state constitutions, and not the constitution of the United States, would be the "supreme law of the land"—for no higher act of supremacy could be exercised by one government over another, than that of taking the citizens of the latter out of the protection of their government, and reducing them to slavery.<sup>63</sup>

Because slavery had never been recognized by the major legal document which is, or should be, the superior law to everybody, Spooner attacks the government for allowing the existence of slavery and blames it for denying people's natural rights.

It is clear what Spooner meant by those natural rights, as he rather ironically reminded the government of the Declaration of Independence, the document allowing the establishment of the very first independent U.S. government. He brought attention to the core of the Declaration, which says that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are all natural and unalienable rights of all men, declaring those rights to be a self-evident truth.

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<sup>63</sup> Lysander Spooner, *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery* (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1860): 56, Lysander Spooner.org <<http://www.lysanderspooner.org/works>> 28 July 2019.

Spooner claimed, that by the words of the Declaration, these rights should have underlain all the laws and constitutions being granted to all people in the U.S., regardless of race or any social factors. What then was the self-evident truth for Spooner, was the fact that the government violates those rights by granting them to some, while others have been “unequivocally and authoritatively denied”<sup>64</sup> of them.

Even though the matter of slavery belongs among Spooner’s strongest arguments against the government, he addresses other important social and economic issues which are closely connected. All these issues are, according to Spooner, mere results of the government’s “despotic” practices, and again, the violation of the Constitution. In his work *No Treason*, he explains the conditions upon which the government was formed, which are at the same time the reasons for the government’s incapability to conduct a just administration. What Spooner sees as a constitutional violation is the government’s notion of “consent” upon which the government can be formed. As opposed to the notion described in the Constitution which promotes the general welfare, and secures liberty to all people, Spooner views the government to be established only upon a consent of the majority. The majority therefore does not represent all people, but only those, who act in their own interests. The minority is then dependent on the actions of the majority which results in unequal opportunities and gaps between social classes.

In supporting his argument, Spooner compares the principles of the current government with the principles of the Founding Fathers who being “in minority” decided to form a government independent of the Crown. He writes, that:

“If our fathers, in 1776, had acknowledged the principle that a majority had the right to rule the minority, we should never have become a nation; for they were in a small minority, as compared with those who claimed the right to rule over them.”<sup>65</sup>

Spooner tries to show, that if the majority acts against the minority, there can never be equality within society. Each individual should therefore have the right to support or not support whomever he pleases, having the same life conditions and opportunities as those supporting somebody else. Spooner claims, that only a government established upon each individual’s consent is a “natural and practicable” one, and stresses, that “the Constitution

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<sup>64</sup> Spooner, Chapter V., 38.

<sup>65</sup> Lysander Spooner, *No Treason* (1867-1870), No. I., Lysander Spooner.org <<http://www.lysanderspooner.org/works>> 13 August 2019.

of the United States authorizes no government, except one depending wholly on voluntary support.”<sup>66</sup>

The focus on the individual noticeably resembles the transcendentalist notion of individualism, with the difference that the anarchist individualism does not focus on the individual’s spirituality. Nevertheless, Spooner’s approach towards the government is evidently very similar to that of Henry David Thoreau whose attitude has often been viewed as anarchist. Both Spooner and Thoreau aimed for the limitation of government’s interference into individual personal freedom. What distinguishes them is the fact that whereas Thoreau’s ideas seem to be rather philosophical, Spooner actively tried to put his ideas into practice. He offered various elaborate suggestions of reforms which would result in the restriction of the government’s power, and the reinforcement of individuals’ freedom in both economic and social matters.

One of Spooner’s major aims was a banking and currency reform leading to free competition enabling people to borrow and make their own money without the government’s interference. The situation was, that the government maintained a financial monopoly as it controlled and issued all the money. Most of the people with little or no capital could not borrow money, and even for those with larger capital the extension of it was rather difficult. Free competition, establishment of private banks, and the possibility of self-employment, as Spooner thought, would enable all people to make and use their own money as they wished, so that everybody would provide for themselves without being dependent on the government. The system he suggested would also support the circulation of money; the money therefore would not any longer be only in the hands of the “privileged”.

The basis of his banking system was largely structured around one of the most valuable and stable commodities of that time, which was land. He believed that if everybody was provided with a piece of land for their own use, people could easily make free contracts with each other and their opportunities would become equal. Also, the right of private property and self-employment would enable people to run their own business and therefore make money for themselves, not for the government.

Spooner again saw these unequal opportunities, especially the fact people could not borrow money for establishing their businesses, as a violation of one of the constitutional

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<sup>66</sup> *No Treason*, No. VI. “The Constitution of No Authority” < <http://www.lysanderspooner.org/works> > 13 August 2019.

provisions, which was the right of free contract. He was convinced that this exact violation was one of the main causes of poverty. In his work *Poverty: Its Illegal Causes and Legal Cure*, Spooner further describes what he believed were the real causes for poverty. One of such causes, Spooner saw, was the inability of men to borrow money, and the inability to establish themselves in a business of their own.<sup>67</sup> According to Spooner, self-employment, the right of private property, and the right of free contract would not only gradually help the economic situation, but mainly erase the gap between the rich and poor.

What Spooner promoted was social and economic justice equal for everybody. This could only be feasible when all people shared the same or similar experience through which they would build social bonds with each other. The logic of his argument was, that the rich and poor can never build such bonds as they do not share any similar experience, simply because their opportunities are not the same. Spooner claims that:

The two classes lack sufficient personal acquaintance, and sufficient similarity of experiences with each other, to awaken their sympathies, and thus soften or avert the collision of their feelings, interests, and rights. The rich will thus often defraud, oppress, amid insult the poor, and the poor defraud and commit violence upon the rich, with less compunction than the same individuals would have defrauded, injured, or insulted one of their own number. And every man, who will defraud others at all, will more willingly defraud a stranger than an acquaintance.<sup>68</sup>

The suggested reforms then, as Spooner viewed them, were not only to improve the economic but also the social situation.

However practical and logical Spooner's ideas were they still seem to be rather idealized. His vision of the government as an institution formed only upon the voluntary support of each person does not seem to be possible as it is unlikely that such a government would ever be formed, and the idea that people could live without any kind of legal authority or law above them is also disputable. It is likely that the complete limitation of the government's competence as both Spooner and Warren saw it, would lead to much greater anarchy than they promoted. On the other hand, Spooner makes a very rational and important point when he stresses the necessity of ensuring equal human and citizen rights and opportunities which the government undoubtedly failed to secure. The anarchist notion of freedom by Spooner and Warren then portrays a fair economic and social environment where people are allowed to share similar experiences without excessive government interference and the privileging of certain people at the expense of others.

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<sup>67</sup> Lysander Spooner, *Poverty: Its Illegal Causes and Legal Cure* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1846): 52, Chapter IV., Lysander Spooner.org <<http://www.lysanderspooner.org/works>> 6 September 2019.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 46.

## 5. Pragmatism

It can be noticed that in all of the previous chapters, freedom is predominantly considered a natural right, or a divine gift, of its “holders”. Leaving the divine notion behind, perceiving freedom solely as a natural right automatically raises an image of the need for freedom as being a part of each person by nature, or in other words, as being an intrinsic characteristic of each person from their birth. This theory is what was challenged by the pragmatists who perceived the postulation of freedom not as an intrinsic value, but as the “*idée-force* which puts the holders in a creative and empowered working mood.”<sup>69</sup> Freedom for the pragmatists was thus something which needed to be achieved through human action, and the longing for freedom was viewed as having a purely practical character.

In the words of John Dewey, “Pragmatism is a doctrine that reality possesses practical character.”<sup>70</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, Dewey’s perception is to explain that freedom cannot be viewed as a “final product” but as a means of human growth and the desire for freedom as a consequence of certain life conditions. In his works, Dewey expands on the idea that the ability to adapt to given conditions and the effort to change those conditions are the essential qualities for human development. He claims that any changes can only be achieved through learning from experience and the later implementation of such experience into action. Those who are not allowed, or unwilling of this learning cannot further grow and their life therefore does not develop.

In the pragmatists’ lines, the reasons standing behind the desirability of this development are always driven through practicality, be it for the development of personal, social or financial conditions. As it can be seen in the following excerpt, the pragmatic approach completely excludes intrinsic, inborn motivations:

There are no eternal verities or intrinsic values. There are only situational “truths”/authenticities, practical, operational, and instrumental, to guide action in particular situations. These “truths” consist of successive “approximations” designed to facilitate and energize vital, survival-positive adaptation to perpetually changing conditions (of consciousness).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> David Lee Robbins, *The Metaphor Will Hold: Emerson, Nominalism, Fictionalism, Nihilism, and Matinal Modernism* (Prague: Karolinum, forthcoming 2020) 34.

<sup>70</sup> John Dewey, “Does Reality Possess Practical Character” in Russell B. Goodman, ed., *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 81.

<sup>71</sup> David Lee Robbins, 8.

The above lines introduce the concept of “situational truth” which raises the question of what the truth for Dewey or the other pragmatists actually was.

According to Dewey, “truth means the accomplished introduction of certain new differences into conditions.”<sup>72</sup> These “new differences” may be seen as representing the original impulses inciting the desire for change, including the desire for freedom. It must still be kept in mind though, that all motivations are practical and may not be the same for all people. Each person has her/his own interests, and those interests are obviously highly individualistic. As the next excerpt demonstrates, Dewey was of the idea that people do not wish to change the whole environment, but only that particular part of the environment for which they have their own practical reasons:

“We are never interested in changing the whole environment; there is much that we take for granted and accept just as it already is. Upon this background our activities focus at certain points in an endeavor to introduce needed changes.”<sup>73</sup>

It is noticeable that this “pragmatic individualism” resembles the individualist approach of Transcendentalist authors, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson’s ideas clearly were one of the sources of inspiration for the works of the pragmatists. What the authors do have in common with Emerson is the focus on the individual’s consciousness and the use of the individual’s potential. Emerson’s idea, in reference to the notion of freedom, was that “we create freedom by imaginatively creating a conceptual space for it.”<sup>74</sup> He then shared the same view of freedom’s being an action-inciting force, a power which makes people grow through experience.

Emerson’s notion of freedom and the power of experience was in comparison with the pragmatic more spiritual and largely focused on the creative potential of human “nature.” The pragmatic approach rather explores the very existential, practical elements of life. Dewey claims that experience, and mainly the ability to learn from previous experience, is what makes people adapt to and handle upcoming situations in accordance with current purposes. This ability, or “plasticity” as he calls it, is an ability which is essential for the development of any dispositions, and also for the formation of habits which he believed “give control over the environment” (96). In *Education as Growth* Dewey presents the exact explanation of this “plasticity” by writing that:

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<sup>72</sup> Dewey, 89.

<sup>73</sup> John Dewey, "Education as Growth" in Russell B. Goodman, ed., *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 97. All the subsequent quotations of this work will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>74</sup> David Lee Robbins, 34.

It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to develop dispositions. (95)

Experience along pragmatist lines then does not only represent a necessary means of development, but is perceived as a condition without which any development cannot be achieved.

Dewey's idea was that development, or human growth, which comes from experience, is not possible without prior dependence. Interestingly enough, dependence for him had a positive connotation. This view is interesting mainly in contrast with the previous chapters where it is independence that is the ultimate condition for human growth. Dewey, on the other hand, views dependence to be such a condition:

It sounds absurd to hear dependence spoken of as something positive, still more absurd as a power. Yet if helplessness were all there were in dependence, no development could ever take place. A merely impotent being has to be carried, forever, by others. The fact that dependence is accompanied by growth in ability, not by an ever increasing lapse into parasitism, suggests that it is already something constructive. Being merely sheltered by others would not promote growth. (94)

Apparently, he likens dependence to immaturity, claiming that "immaturity means the possibility of growth" (93). This theory can be explained by children's immaturity and their natural continuous growth into independent adults. The idea is, that all people are at some point of their lives being taken care of and later naturally transition to a point when they become able to take care of themselves; they do develop. Whoever remains, or is held, fully dependent on others cannot experience this development.

Despite his positive perception of the role of dependence in the process of growth, Dewey saw its limits just as well as he saw the limits of complete independence. In relation to the topic of this thesis, it can be seen that Dewey's notion of freedom differs from the previous chapters in that it does not primarily focus on personal independence as such. Dewey was, on the contrary, aware of the potential dangers which complete independence can bring. One such danger he mentioned was a rising aloofness's negatively influencing social relations. He claimed that there was a danger that "increased personal independence may decrease the social capacity of an individual in that it makes him more self-reliant while becoming insensitive in his relations to others" (95). It can be seen that this view of independence contrasts with the generally positive views of the previous chapters, as it describes its negative side.

Furthermore, there is an interesting contrast of the view of Dewey and the view of Lysander Spooner described in the preceding chapter. They both focused on the importance of an individual's experience and the role of independence in the process of experiencing; but their views differ significantly in terms of its final outcome. As remarked above, Dewey claimed that increased independence rather separates people from each other whereas Spooner believed that increased independence would allow all people to share the same experience, which would then lead to the narrowing of the gaps between social classes. It is not to say that one of those views is correct and the other is not. This comparison only emphasizes that independence, as a part of freedom, can be viewed from opposite, not always positive angles.

From a social point of view, pragmatists explore freedom in regard to its practical aspects, seeing it as a process of development motivated solely by different individual needs. Freedom then, is not seen as a set of natural rights or an object of an inborn desire. The pragmatists simply do not focus on any general, unifying sense of freedom. The focus is on the individual's experiencing of different "freedoms" in which it is the experience which functions as the means of liberation and further growth.

## 6. Beat Generation

If anything generally characterizes the works and lives of Beat generation authors, it would undoubtedly be the shocking non-conformity through which they fought against the establishment of 1950s America. In this period, American society faced the impacts of the country's new ambitions, whether political, military or cultural, which led to certain different ways of protesting by those who found these ambitions unacceptable. Principally, there were voices against the new post-war materialist ideals of society and the norms they set. Also, the prospect of America's getting involved in future military conflicts was a major reason for the reluctance to this vector of the country's politics. Altogether, the on-going conflicts and the strictly set conventions caused some people to become alienated and weary of such a system, which was the case of the Beat authors.

To better understand the context of the views of the Beat generation, one need only consult the accounts of social critics and historians who have described U.S. society in the 1950s as "one-dimensional in which organization men produced a mass culture consumed by the 'lonely crowd.'"<sup>75</sup> The authors connected with the movement also called this society and its stereotypes a "machine civilization,"<sup>76</sup> and purposely went "against the flow" to differentiate themselves from the crowd – which is to say that the lifestyle and the way beat authors chose for their self-realization would be found highly controversial by many people today, let alone in the 1950s. This controversy certainly was a good way to attract attention to their works. Although they mainly lived such controversial lives in order to liberate themselves from society's expectations, and, existentially, to find a purpose of life.

On their spiritual quest, Beat generation authors often drew inspiration from eastern philosophies and religions. Namely, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac both inclined to Zen Buddhism despite having been born and raised, respectively, in Jewish and Catholic families. This inclination to an eastern philosophy was already one of the beliefs which distinguished the authors from the American mainstream. The reason they both pursued this alternative philosophy was that it worked for them as "a way of reconnection to the lost sense of spiritual nourishment their traditions and culture failed to provide."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *The Harvard Theological Review* 84.2 (1991): 221, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1509800>> 2 November 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Rich Weidman, *The Beat Generation FAQ: All That's Left to Know About the Angelheaded Hipsters* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2015) Accessed from Google books.cz <[https://books.google.cz/books?id=AtGGDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=MACHINE%20CIVILIZATION&f=false](https://books.google.cz/books?id=AtGGDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=MACHINE%20CIVILIZATION&f=false)> 30 March 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Sean Negus, "The Intersection of Buddhism and the Beat Generation," Empty Mirror Books.com, 20 October 2017 <<https://www.emptymirrorbooks.com/beat/buddhism-and-the-beat-generation>> 31 March 2020.

The authors believed that life should be lived and perceived through unique personal experience, or, as will later be demonstrated through Kerouac's work, lived as though life was an exploratory journey.

It can be seen that the life-through-experience approach of Beat authors clearly resembles the earlier approach of some of the Transcendentalists. For Ginsberg and Kerouac, just as well as for Emerson or Thoreau, spiritual freedom was a cornerstone of their life and work. Furthermore, these four all focused on individualism, which is apparent in each of their works. Nevertheless, the transcendentalists' approach rather celebrates the unique nature of each person and incites their potential, while Beats seem to be such individualists mainly to revolt against norms within which they did not find their place.

To liberate themselves from these norms, Beat authors chose alternative ways of life and artistic expression. They mainly built on spontaneity, and expressions of crude, intense experiences, often incited by drug use. It is known that one of the major sources for their work was jazz music and the culture it represented. Through the power of its rhythmic syncopation, jazz music became the "musical accompaniment of the works of Kerouac and Ginsberg."<sup>78</sup> The influence of jazz is apparent especially in the "unhackneyed rhythm" of the works being written in a spontaneous literary style. The authors who were avoiding "regularity" in life, avoided regular metrical and grammatical patterns, as well, in their writing. Their writing is therefore often characterized as a "stream of consciousness stimulated by visual, physical, and associative impressions."<sup>79</sup> Their impressions of jazz music then stood as the main inspiration for the literary expression of their own.

Although the musical element played an important role in the Beats' compositions, they most likely inclined to jazz culture for one further reason. This reason was the "unbridled" image of jazz musicians which was created mainly by racial prejudice earlier during the 1920s. As the music was predominantly linked with Afro-American communities, it was often described as a musical expression of the Afro-American character. However, these descriptions and opinions were mostly negative and racist. The music was coined as "rhythmically aggressive, lacking modern sophistication, and also, as retarding the true art."<sup>80</sup> The music and musicians were thus, by the mildest critics, considered as unfitting to

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<sup>78</sup> Rubén Jarazo, "Jazz and the Beat Generation," *Mundoclassico.com*, 14 July 2006 <<https://www.mundoclasico.com/articulo/8979/Jazz-and-the-Beat-Generation>> 9 April 2020.

<sup>79</sup> "Stream of Consciousness," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 28 February 2020 <<https://www.britannica.com/art/stream-of-consciousness>> 9 April 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Maureen Anderson, "The White Reception of Jazz in America," *African American Review* 38.1 (2004): 136, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1512237>> 19 March 2020.

the general “taste” of that time. Beats then soon started to identify with the role of the “unfitting,” and presented themselves as outcasts placed on the edge of society.

### 6.1. Allen Ginsberg / “Howl”

Ginsberg’s best known poem, “Howl,” published in 1956, was written as his personal testimony on American society, which he likened to a biblical Moloch associated with human sacrifice. In his own nonconformist way, Ginsberg portrays people he met during his life and describes them as those dragged along by this Moloch society and its oppressive conventions. In opposition to those who conformed to such society, Ginsberg glorifies the “outcasts,” and presents them as “the best minds of his generation.”<sup>81</sup> Naturally, the themes appearing in the poem were at the time highly controversial, and cast a shadow on the image 1950s America had tried to create.

Opening every line with the word “who,” Ginsberg describes the behavior and actions of the people he encountered. He portrays themes such as alcoholism, drug use, and sexual promiscuity as the result of the machine civilization’s order, but his depiction also aims to show that such behavior is a way of liberation from this Moloch’s binding norms. What the reader is presented with, is the celebration of those “who purgatoried their torsos night after night with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,”(17-19) or those “who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine,”(26-27) or of those, “who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication” (67-68).

Essentially, alcoholism and drug use were habits which were seemingly socially unacceptable, but still not uncommon. On the contrary, homosexuality, which the poem openly validates, was both socially unacceptable, and according to the traditional Christian ideals even considered sinful. Ginsberg further “perverts” those Christian ideals by treating the characters as if they possessed saint-like qualities, which can first be seen when he calls them “angelheaded hipsters”(3). He then glorifies his fellow Beats in the “Footnote to Howl” where he calls them holy, and attributes them with the status of “human angels.”<sup>82</sup> Ginsberg thus apparently challenges some of the mainstream ideals of society and the norms they were setting.

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<sup>81</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” *Selected Poems 1947-1995* (HarperPerennial,2001). Accessed from Poetry Foundation.org <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49303/howl>> 9 April 2020. All the subsequent quotations of this work will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>82</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Footnote to Howl,” *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* (Harper & Row, 1984). Accessed from Poetry Foundation.org <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54163/footnote-to-howl>> 9 April 2020.

## 6.2. Jack Kerouac / *On the Road*

Like Ginsberg's "Howl," Kerouac's *On the Road* reflects the Beats' resistance to American ideals, most importantly to the ideals of the "American dream,"<sup>83</sup> which Kerouac challenges on multiple levels. However, it can be seen that Kerouac does not reject traditional values as they were; he mainly seems to oppose the idea that those values formed a norm, or a model behavior everybody was supposed to follow to "fit in." The novel therefore disrupts stereotypical American notions of domestic space and material values by telling the story of Sal Paradise, who, being constantly on the road, searches for his own freedom outside this norm.

"This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do."<sup>84</sup> This statement by Sal Paradise seems best to reflect Kerouac's opinion of the state of American society described above. According to social expectations, Paradise (i.e., Kerouac) was supposed to be married, have a stable income, and of course, have material possessions. What the reader sees right from the beginning is that Paradise does not have either of those, but not necessarily because he would not wish for it. As he later admits, he does not purposely avoid it, he just rejects the idea of having no will of his own, blindly following what is said to be appropriate:

I believed in a good home, in sane and sound living, in good food, good times, work, faith and hope. I have always believed in these things. It was with some amazement that I realized I was one of the few people in the world who really believed in these things without going around making a dull middle class philosophy out of it. (280)

When he is left brokenhearted after a divorce, he sets out on the road trying to find fulfillment elsewhere. His journey thus starts as an escape from reality, and a search for the liberty of doing what he wants, not what is expected from him.

In terms of the American dream, the nomadic life of the narrator violates some core principles it represents. Firstly, one such principle Sal Paradise violates is the concept of marriage and a commitment to one woman. The recurring theme of the novel is Paradise and Dean Moriarty's promiscuity. This promiscuity is then seen as an attempt at sexual liberation which traditional commitment disallows. What can be noticed is the fact that the two characters have affairs in every place they go, whether their sexual partners or they

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<sup>83</sup> Tim Cresswell, "Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac's 'On the Road,'" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18.2 (1993): 249, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/622366>> 2 November 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Jack Kerouac and Howard Cunnell, *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008) 170. All the subsequent quotations of this work will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

themselves are married or not. What is more, they do not hesitate to leave those women and keep leaving them just as they leave the places they have “had enough of”. They therefore avoid involvement in any stable relationship which places the women in a position of being just a temporary diversion on the two men’s roads. This approach to women then reflects the male characters’ “lack of commitment to the traditional forms of sexual relationship,”<sup>85</sup> and more generally, a reluctance to any other types of “obligatory” commitments.

What further contradicts the ideals of the American dream is that travel and mobility stand in direct opposition to the traditional image of domestic space which connects home and family with a woman.<sup>86</sup> In the context of the novel, this connection means that the male characters have no prospect of building a home and putting down roots as they never stay with one woman in one place for too long. In contrast, we see that the male characters seem to value the relationship they have to each other more, as when they part they always later reunite. Unlike the female characters settled in one place, the male characters share the desire to explore and experience new places. They thus somewhat selfishly place their individual needs above familial values, and enjoy the freedom of new beginnings, leaving everything and everyone behind.

The “nothing behind me, everything ahead of me”(183) motto of the narrator demonstrates that the freedom he feels on the road becomes the sense of his life which he failed to find within the traditional social norms. The road represents his endless possibilities of going anywhere and doing anything he wants without his life’s becoming stereotypical. Sal Paradise, then, lives according to his own principles against the concept of what is considered “normal,” and believes that the purpose of man does not lay in trying to reach a position set by some general standards. As Kerouac once said:

In a sense, I’m mad while others are sane and normal, but in another sense, I speak from the depths of a vision of truth when I say that this continual jockeying for position is the enemy of life in itself. It may be life, ‘life is like that,’ it may be human and true, but it’s also the death-part of life, and our purpose after all is to live and be true.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Cresswell, 257.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*, 258.

<sup>87</sup> Jack Kerouac and Douglas Brinkley, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954* (Penguin Books, 2006). Accessed from Goodreads.com <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/482388-in-a-sense-i-m-mad-and-withdrawn-from-life-while>> 9 April 2020.

It is then evident that the philosophy of the book corresponds with the philosophy of the Beats, who in real life rebelled against the establishment by living their lives freely regardless of norms or limits.

### **6.3. Reception**

Its provocative themes and innovative style of writing caused Beat literature to be rejected by the majority of critics for a long time. In terms of the content, the common critical opinion described the works as highly obscene, which even brought about legal consequences for some of the authors. Another reason for the criticism was that their works themselves criticized the mainstream culture most of the critics conformed to. Their works were thus often viewed as depicting an untrue picture of the society, and also, as lacking any artistic value. Nevertheless, this underestimation by the critics did not prevent the popularity Beats gained among a younger, educated segment of the reading public. On the contrary, the opinions of the Beat generation became the inspiration for later movements, such as the Hippie movement, and other movements promoting pacifism and greater freedom as crucial values. From today's perspective, the Beat generation is acknowledged as a signature literary movement of 1950s America, and its authors as pioneers of alternative personal liberties inside a relatively free society.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout American history, freedom had been considered as one of the natural, unalienable rights of its holders, with which they were endowed by their Creator. This notion then served as a foundation for demands for this right in realms where it did not seem to be acknowledged. Freedom thus was not narrowed to one single meaning or situation. On the contrary, different definitions of freedom developed according to continuously changing beliefs and needs.

Originally, it was the prospect of greater freedom that led European settlers to America. For the settlers, America was seen as a promised land offering the opportunity of new beginnings. This prospect was thus the first step in the formation of the very American notion of freedom, later formulated in the Declaration of Independence. The pursuit of political freedom then became an inflection point in North American history.

The main concern of the thesis was to illustrate how the approach to freedom changed within the periods covered. We have seen that the achievement of political freedom was, in large part, the result of a “collective” will. The aim of achieving this freedom thus was a common interest of the whole country and its citizens. In contrast, what we have seen in all the other chapters, except for abolitionism which reflected on the fact that some people had no freedom at all, was that later longings for freedom derived from specific individual interests. The thesis then reflects on the fact that the freedom-related focus of the analyzed authors was predominantly oriented on the individuals’ needs, whether it was in spiritual, economic, or existential lines.

The thesis, for the most part, observed the works and theories of white male authors which led to a finding contradicting the notion of freedom’s being a right. In the historical periods covered, race and gender played an important role as factors influencing the amount of freedom people had. White men were the only people who had their rights more or less granted, whereas the rights of women were greatly limited and subordinated to those of men. However, the situation of white women was not as helpless as the situation of slaves, whether they were women or men. We have seen that slaves, African-Americans, could only dream about having any rights, and their situation did not significantly change even after the abolition of slavery.

This is not to say that the analyzed authors endorsed this unfair situation; to the contrary, most of them promoted equal rights for all. Still, white males, including these authors, already had the advantage of certain granted rights, and consequently were sometimes less active in practice for their extension than they might have been in theory.

Given these conditions, the notion of freedom in many cases diverted from its original definition, as what had originally been a right, to become a privilege. The existence of slavery itself, and the attempts to justify it, then left an indelible stain on the belief upon which the United States built its own existence: The belief that all men were created equal and that liberty belongs among their unalienable rights.

This thesis, however, did not aim to disparage this belief. It aimed to demonstrate that this belief had always been a keystone of all efforts to attain such comprehensive freedom, which people felt was absent. Even though reality has not always reflected this belief, it still became one of the most characteristic features of the American spirit.

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