

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis supervisor

Barbora Tomášková

B.A. thesis evaluation

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

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Ms. Tomášková's thesis explores the American notion of freedom and its interpretations by representative thinkers within various periods of American history. To that end, the centrality of the ideal of freedom through different constructions is explored and illustrated in successive historical contexts and cultural productions. Ms. Tomášková's work analyzes various conceptions of freedom within and among periods from 1776 through the 1950s: those of Old Revolutionaries (Lockeans, Anti-Despots, Unalienable Rights advocates), Transcendentalists, Abolitionists, Anarchists, Pragmatists, and Beats. The thesis aims to demonstrate a persistent American mentality whose core is to be located in a foundational idea of freedom as an unalienable individual and collective responsibility bestowed by the Creator on Americans. In American history, Ms. Tomášková contends, the core of such a notion is deeply rooted, although the interpretations of freedom based on it have often varied according to the changing circumstances of individual personages and periods. The thesis thus aims to describe, at least preliminarily, differences among these interpretations, and among the circumstances and climates of opinion in which they originated—always bearing in mind that, throughout U.S. history, ideas of freedom, whatever their nuances, have been regarded as, and have in fact been, aspirational, an asymptote approachable only to a greater or (all too often) lesser extent by actual inhabitants of the society.

Given that ambitious goal, Ms. Tomášková has succeeded, to a degree (in a B.A. thesis) of which I was skeptical at the outset of her project, in approximate attainment of it. And for the range and degree of synthetic capacities that she has demonstrated in that attainment, she merits acknowledgment and congratulation.

Ms. Tomášková has chosen very well six significant and representative subgroups of American thought, and has done an excellent job (again, within the parameters of a B.A. thesis) on each, pointing out the linking and distinguishing factors with competence and subtlety. She has, with considerable analytic maturity, taken into account both the institutional and economic ramifications of spiritual/intellectual convictions and the spiritual/intellectual influence of material preoccupations (particularly the very positive valence of property) in the American cultural system. In the process, she has drawn together, skillfully, helpfully, and meaningfully, considerations widely distributed (widely-spaced and wide-ranging) in chronology and content to construct a plausible sense of connection within the U.S. socio-cultural space.

With all of that stipulated, I have two quibbles, which, while not detracting from my very positive evaluation of the work, I think are worth the author's consideration going forward. They are:

- 1) I think a bit more might have been done with William James (in addition to John Dewey, who receives appropriate attention) as an intellectual offspring of Emerson in the pragmatist group.

2) I think something might have been done with the American utopians of the late nineteenth century—especially Edward Bellamy and Henry George.

But, since I was the supervisor of the thesis, responsibility for these omissions or underemphases falls much more on my shoulders (and on those of Time and Space) than on Ms. Tomášková's.

Finally, I want to thank Ms. Tomášková for her recognition of the value of my own American history lectures, now incorporated into the volume entitled *American Souls*, which she also cites.

Because of its quality and scope, if not its depth (for how much depth does there need to be in a B.A. thesis?), I believe that Ms. Tomášková's thesis merits an evaluation of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz.