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On American Crises in Granting Freedom

Introduction

A sociologist's view of the struggles for freedom in Poland and the United States of America points to a fundamental difference between the two nations, that of the level of cultural diversity stemming from the national and ethnic wealth of both countries. Poland's ethnic homogeneity and, in contrast, the great ethnic and cultural diversity of the United States impact upon how celebrations of freedom in both countries takes on different forms and evoke different feelings. For instance, the difference between Polish and American attitudes towards national symbols, such as the flag, emblem, or anthem is striking. Reflecting on the notion of freedom and how it is expressed in the USA is a complex and challenging task – primarily because the generally accepted vision of the United States as a country of unlimited possibilities for growth, self-expression and satisfaction of individual needs is complicated by its historically difficult past and equally difficult present. To that I would argue that three moments can be identified when the citizens of the United States experienced a breakdown in the universal access to freedom. Despite these extremely difficult moments, the USA is still considered as a country with a high level of civil liberties. How was this achieved?

The American Dream:

America as the land of the free

The standard perception of the sociocultural reality of the United States depicts freedom as the kind of privilege that “is not rationed”, the scope of its expression is impressively broad. However, limitations on the expression and enjoyment of civil liberties have been imposed in this country, just as they have in others.

Though the stereotypical, ‘Hollywood’ vision of the United States is based on this strong democratic-liberal foundation, a more direct confrontation with American reality often comes as a surprise. As is the case with any stereotype, this one also contains elements of truth. Additionally the vision of the United States, especially during the period of communist totalitarian rule, was colored by powerful contrasts in perception: what was not possible in Eastern Europe was often a common occurrence and ordinary practice in the United States, which was often unappreciated by American citizens. The range of repressions in Eastern and Central Europe included restricted access to pop culture, consumption of goods and services offered by global firms, and freedom of movement without permits or supervision, to name but a few of the restraints and denials.

The vision of America as a world where “the sky is the limit” and where biographies of people who went “from rags to riches” are not uncommon has appealed to many throughout the years. Such a vision was a key motivating factor for migration to the US throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to this day. It is, though, also a projection based on an widely operating assumption about wide access to individual freedoms and liberties and it should be remembered that, especially after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the reality of civil liberties in America is in fact a constant tug-of-war between granting freedom and restricting it. A sense of threat impacts the dynamics of social behaviors, which is expressed in changes to the degree of accepted uncertainty. As Yi-Fu Tuan points out: “To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable.” [54] Therefore, freedom equates with being exposed

to potential threats from the outside world: experiencing these potential threats is the price of experiencing freedom. Conversely, achieving security and control – hence, predictability – excludes the experience of freedom.

The notion that “freedom is granted to the citizens” associates the distribution of freedom with the distribution of power and domination. Zygmunt Bauman believed that “[Freedom] remains a judiciously allocated resource, always considered in a distributional context – as one end of a relationship, the second end of which is heteronomy. Freedom is here generated by such a relationship, being at the same time the paramount condition of its perpetuation. Freedom is privilege and power.” [27] This reasoning suggests that freedom is a resource whose allocation is a privilege attesting to the high socio-economic standing of the distributors. As a result, in terms of human relationships, freedom becomes a peculiar good that is desirable but which must be forgone in the name of the system in which we all live. Certain people control the freedom of other people; the latter being those who do not fit the general nature of the decision-makers. Such a distribution of freedom is an undeniable fact, as is plainly visible in both American history and the present day.

From the standpoint of a citizen from another country, especially one ruled by an authoritative system where restrictions are applied to every freedom, even the smallest elements of everyday life, the view of “America” must be incredibly attractive. This perspective is one deeply held by many Poles, the result of which is the (largely) positive image of Americans held by Polish society today (after Italians and Czechs, Americans are the third most favorably viewed nationality by Poles) [“Stosunek”]. Aside from the commercial and economic opportunities, it is also the freedom of the speech, thoughts and actions that have continued to attract Poles towards the United States. However, confrontation with American reality chips away at the flawless image of this paradise-country.

The American past

The notion that freedom is rationed and that it is rationed as a type of resource even in the United States may be controversial, however, a number of moments

in US history unambiguously points to this reality. To that extent at least, American history is no different than that of any other continents or countries. But this notwithstanding, three American examples are noteworthy.

The example that is the temporally closest to the present were the human zoos of early twentieth century: exhibits created in zoos, where people of ‘exotic origin’, treated more like animals than humans, were put on display. In Europe, this was initiated by Carl Hagenbeck, the founder of the ‘new type’ of zoos (where animals were allowed to ‘range free’ rather than live cages, to make their habitat look more natural). Hagenbeck was also an animal ‘importer’. He organized expeditions to various parts of the world to capture animals for zoo exhibits. When this type of business stopped being profitable, Hagenbeck took an interest in people. For zoos wishing to diversify their attractions, he imported people: Inuits, inhabitants of Africa or Indians of South and Central America [Blanchard et al.]. These individuals were treated as live showpieces, displayed on a set arranged so as to present the ‘real’ living conditions of their home countries. This kind of exhibit also appealed to Americans who, for instance, in 1906 visited the New York’s Bronx Zoo to see Ota Benga – a pygmy from Congo – displayed alongside an orangutan [Parsons; Mamzer].¹ This example exemplifies a situation where people of non-white skin color, very different from the white, male European portion of the society that dominated (and continues to dominate) US public life, were pushed down the social ladder: they were stripped of their freedoms in the name of advancing the needs and desires of dominant social groups. It is noteworthy that the same process occurred in Europe (from where it first originated): people from Congo were on display in Brussels as recently as 1958 [Sánchez-Gómez].

Another difficult moment in the rationing, or limiting, of freedom in the United States of America was the period of slavery and, after its abolition,

¹ Every day, Ota Benga replayed hunting scenes or archery shows for an audience who was particularly interested in his appearance, including his filed teeth. Ota Benga doubled the zoo’s visitor numbers. Freed from the zoo in 1906, for the next decade Ota Benga tried unsuccessfully to fit in to American society. In 1916, he committed suicide.

racial segregation, which denied freedom to people different from the white majority up until as recently as the 1960s (precisely, until 1964 when the regulations of the Civil Rights Act entered into force). This period of devaluing individuals of color overlapped with the popularity of human zoos and both ways of treating people who were different from the majority pose a question about their access to freedom. While a swath of research studies have discussed the slavery in the US in a very rational and unemotional way, presenting various compilations and sociological explanations, the psychological descriptions of how the people who were discriminated against felt are decidedly more scant. Giving an account of a social experiment in his reportage, John Howard Griffin described the feelings experienced by a person who is discriminated against. Griffin, who in 1959 underwent a series of complex procedures to change his skin color from white to black, embarked on a cognitive journey across southern states of the so-called Bible Belt: Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. He was confronted with an America that was divided, racist and rationed freedom in a selective manner. Griffin's encounters are touching because even though they were shared by a great many, the individual and personal account reveals how cumbersome and challenging life in America was if a citizen was on the wrong side of the society, how much freedom was considered as a right for some, and as an incredible privilege for others.

Finally, let us examine the third, most historically distant, crisis of freedom for America's inhabitants: The case of European settlers who arrived in the United States and pushed the indigenous people – American Indians – out of their lands. The result of such European expansion was that native Americans were driven to the socioeconomic and cultural margins. A similar situation occurred in Canada. Will Kymlicka, in formulating his approach to so-called First Nations, offered a range of observations regarding the rehabilitation of the existing situation. Kymlicka is an unquestionable authority in the area of reflection on the politics of multiculturalism and an advocate for the leveling of deficits in the cultural capital of ethnic minorities (especially, in his native Canada) by creating government-sanctioned programs promoting the politics of multiculturalism.

He supports the fair treatment of minority groups by applying the frameworks of liberalism. In his view, the two basic types of minorities are immigrant (or multinational) groups and ethnic minorities (for instance, the Maori in New Zealand or Australian Aborigines). Kymlicka proposes the following criteria for recognizing a group as an ethnic minority: 1. Its presence in the territory of a given state before the emergence of that state (or at the moment of its emergence as an administrative structure), 2. Self-government of these ethnic groups and a history of sovereign rule, 3. Common culture, 4. Common language, and 5. Management of a community by founding institutions. The application of these criteria allowed Kymlicka to distinguish the aforementioned groups, referred to as the First Nations and multi-ethnic groups of a different origin. According to him, the First Nations deserve access to special rights due to their immense and unique role in the formation of a given nation's identity as a whole. Ethnic groups of a different kind, joining a given majority 'on their own initiative', must adjust to the majority and they should have fewer rights. They also shoulder the responsibility to integrate with the dominant cultural group. Although compared to the First Nations, they deserve fewer rights, they deserve them nonetheless.

In his 1996 work *Multicultural Citizenship*, Kymlicka argues that the principle of granting various rights to various groups based on their identities is coherent with the assumptions of liberalism and corresponds with the value inherent in civil rights. Kymlicka raises the issue of equality of ethnic minorities in his research primarily because he deeply believes that social majorities take advantage of, if not overtly exploit, minority groups. The First Nations have been particularly exploited (to the point of physical extermination). The philosopher's strong opposition to this state of affairs inspired him to engage in intellectual work aimed at the creation and promotion of multicultural politics designed in such a way as to effectively make reparations for the damage suffered by the First Nations due to the colonizing and exploitative activities undertaken by the dominant non-native cultures. The issues of the relationship between the identity of an individual and a group, the cultural identification and diversification, the displacement (in the sense of a minority's

relocation) and the attachment to a place are quite visible here. The need to make amends, financial or otherwise, for the negative consequences resulting from the activities of European colonial oppressors against the indigenous people applies to the same degree to the United States, Canada and Australia. In all these places, expansion came at the cost of denying the native peoples their freedom, for which we are all ashamed today.

The American present

The clash of viewpoints on the struggle for freedom in the USA has taken various forms, producing the dynamic development of philosophical reflection regarding the subject of freedom, protest and resistance. In this way, the ideas of Henry David Thoreau, who promoted civil and critical disobedience, as well as a selective attitude to government actions, became the cornerstone of how a modern society keeps authority and politicians in check [Thoreau]. Civil disobedience, which Thoreau practiced by refraining from paying taxes that would support slavery in the USA, laid the groundwork for Americans to freely express themselves and their views. Thoreau's propositions remain the foundation of many social resistance movements and are an inspiration for those contesting the oppressive domination of a system over an individual. Hence, civil disobedience is an expression of citizens practicing their freedom.

The oft-used metaphor to describe the USA as a melting pot was coined as a result of the cultural diversity of the United States, which was a product of the country's migration traditions that go back to the 17th century. Since the emergence of the United States of America, the country has had to cope with the diversity of the people forming the country: the incoming Europeans brought their own values, social order and traditions. New citizens arriving to the USA have always considered it as a dream country, an embodiment of freedom and liberties. The migrants leaving the old world behind sought new opportunities and a break from what oppressed them in their country of origin. Life in America was often difficult but the country offered new possibilities, which were unavailable in Europe, especially social mobility. From the standpoint of the newcomers, the motto formulated by Thomas Jefferson "*E Pluribus Unum*" ("Out

of many, one") [Szahaj] was not only a promise but also a requirement for building a community. The cultural diversity of the country, as well as expressing one's values and celebrating freedom, allowed for the creation of a heterogeneous society, which saw value and potential in dissimilarities.

Perhaps this is why Americans today use national symbols to celebrate liberally interpreted patriotism in a remarkably tolerant way (unlike Poles). The flag, emblem and anthem of the USA are omnipresent in the everyday life of the nation. They are available to each citizen and are meant to symbolize the rights and freedom granted to all social groups regardless of their education, origin or economic status. Using them in pop culture or even daily contexts is neither controversial nor offensive to anyone. They are not shrouded in an air of sainthood; on the contrary, by granting them the status of a common good, they are commonly respected. Furthermore, it seems that the way various citizens (of different ethnicities, religions, languages and communities) use these symbols is also respected. The flag belongs to all citizens and everyone can hang it up in their home at any point. Indeed, the flag can be found practically everywhere: starting from lingerie and bathing suits, to bumper stickers, to the flagpole of the White House. Americans do not perceive this popularity as a lack of respect but quite the opposite – as an expression of one's engagement in the nation's society and identifying with what is American. In the context of the Polish, nationally interpreted patriotism, such an incredibly liberal approach to national symbols is unacceptable, triggers outrage and controversy.

Summary

For many people around the world, the United States of America synonymous with freedom and the acceptance of the diversity of social categories. Since the early years of its nationhood, the United States has been founded on the potential offered by the emigrants arriving on its shores. The liberal-democratic assumption of "*E Pluribus Unum*" is at the heart of this country's unique nature. The divisions within American society, which are numerous and often polarizing, are treated here as the norm and not a dysfunction, and have always been a valuable element of the country.

In the context of experiencing freedom, one of the most basic dimensions is the possibility to choose, create and modify the space where one lives. This applies both to physical and psychological space. As Yi-Fu Tuan observes: “Freedom implies space; it means having the power and enough room in which to act. Being free has several levels of meaning. Fundamental is the ability to transcend the present condition, and this transcendence is most simply manifested as the elementary power to move. In the act of moving, space and its attributes are directly experienced.” [52] It is hard to refute this way of thinking about the freedom-space relationship. Thoreau, the aforementioned trailblazer of civil disobedience (i.e., actions that are inscribed in the practice of freedom) discussed these notions in his book of essays *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*. He points out that walking (and walking in the forest particularly) is a type of activity which allows an individual to think and reflect, and which unleashes creative ideas. By that, he argued that the free physical experience of the space played a role in creative thinking and experiencing freedom. Perhaps it is the boundless physical space accessible to Americans that is the psychological source of their sense of freedom, despite their obvious participation in societal structures, which both there and in any other place on Earth pose restrictions on individuals, making the Freudian claim that culture is a source of pain, distinctly relevant [Freud].

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ABSTRACT

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On American Crises in Granting Freedom

The United States of America has experienced serious crises in recognizing the freedom of its citizens. One can point to at least three critical areas. Firstly, some people whose ethnical origin was other than North American were treated as an exotic species and displayed in the so-called human zoos. The other areas involve the legality of slavery and racial segregation, and the exploitative treatment of the indigenous people, American Indians. Despite these major crises related to freedom, the United States of America enjoys a reputation as a country with democratic civil liberties whose extent remains a challenge to foreign observers.

Keywords: freedom, United States of America, crisis, slavery, human zoo, American Indians