

From Physical Chains to Moral Constraints: Redefining American Liberty at 250 Years

How free do you think we are as living in America now?

Let's think back to the eras of slavery and segregation. To Black people during those times, natural rights were not guaranteed at all. Non-Black Americans often viewed themselves as property rather than human beings. They had to endure dehumanizing treatments, such as unpaid manual labor, systemic abuse, disenfranchisement, and strict racial segregation. There were even "human zoos" which displayed non-white races, including Black, Asian, and Indigenous peoples, where brutal measures were taken against those who tried to escape. Compared to such atrocities, however, people of all races coexist in society and enjoy vastly greater physical and economic freedom these days.

However, are we fully reaping the freedom we achieved? I mean, is your day truly left entirely up to your own choice? Not only students, but adults also complain they are not free. All of us should follow assigned timetables at school and in the workplaces to sustain our lives. In Korea, students often say, "As students, we're treated like criminals—locked in classrooms that feel like prison cells, our names listed on attendance sheets like inmate rosters, wearing uniforms like prison clothes, serving our sentence through endless studying while waiting for the day we're finally set free, which is graduation." This sentiment vividly illustrates how students in present days feel constrained by rigid social structures. There is a workers' version, too.

Ironically, we still live in this structured society. Imagine if all these forms of oppression and rules were to disappear overnight. Would people truly feel happy and

relieved? Why do people in modern society give up freedom and live this way, even though they recognize these discomforts?

Freedom itself is such a complex concept. Philosophers distinguish between "negative freedom," meaning doing as one pleases without any external interference and "positive freedom," which involves living autonomously through rational judgement, moral self-restraint and respect for others. While many instinctively incline toward the former, society quickly collapses when freedom lacks the moral boundaries of the latter. No matter how much freedom is legally permitted, the moment someone thoughtlessly utters a discriminatory statement, the freedom of the listeners will be shattered, and from that point on, they are forced to live their lives constantly wary of how others perceive them. The absolute freedom white oppressors enjoyed during the era of slavery came at the cost of stripping Black Americans of their humanity, causing brutal conflicts.

Thus, genuine freedom cannot mean unrestrained liberty. It requires social responsibility and mutual consideration. This is why modern people surrender their freedom to a certain extent, following what English philosopher Thomas Hobbes called "social contract." Under this unwritten agreement, people are willing to accept institutional rules and trade part of their liberty in exchange for safety, order and protection from the society.

America has long struggled to achieve and protect this freedom. The word "freedom" remains deeply tied to the identity of the United States, symbolized worldwide by the Statue of Liberty. Yet, America is also defined by its extensive and strong law enforcement.

Immediately after achieving independence in the name of liberty, the United States established its Constitution and Bill of Rights, and has continuously amended them whenever critical social issues harming the wellness of people arose over time. Its strong police forces maintain the order smoothly. However, despite this vast legal network, the country still experiences a high incidence of violent crime compared to other developed nations. This serves as a reminder that without any laws regulating one's behavior, the nation would be disastrous without guaranteed safety for the citizens.

This dynamic becomes even clearer when contrasted with current social issues in Korea regarding juvenile offenders. Under Korean law, individuals under the age of fourteen are classified as legal minors protected from severe criminal punishments to give young people second chances. Fourteen, however, is no longer a young age in the digital era. Exposure to social media allows young students to fully understand the consequences of their actions. Exploiting this legal immunity, some juveniles commit serious offenses and walk away without any meaningful accountability. They violate the freedom of others while demanding protection for their own. Consequently, educators, parents and even police force feel powerless, while public trust in legal justice deteriorates. This societal frustration explains the immense popularity of the Korean Netflix series *Teach You A Lesson*. The show tackles the breakdown of educational authority and student rights in schools, offering decisive retribution against juvenile delinquents. This contrast leads many Koreans to admire the American judicial system's firm commitment to punish people for violating others' freedom regardless of their age.

The beginning of the United States' History is based on liberty. The people were oppressed in the colonial era, and continuously fought due to race or religious differences.

Compared to the era, we are having much more freedom, but the people are not able to receive full freedom and are oppressed in another way. Nevertheless, the people follow the laws that restrict their behavior because they essentially secure the people's safety. People are enthusiastic when they see some people who break others' rights get an adequate penalty. This shows what we actually want is not a simple freedom but the certainty that freedom is guaranteed. Therefore, responsibility is both rights and what we have to be responsible for.

Then, how are we going to achieve and improve our freedom in the next 250 years? How is freedom going to be after 250 years from now in the US? As America celebrates its 250th anniversary of independence this year, we are reminded that freedom is not merely a static prize won in the past, but an ongoing duty. The past 250 years were a journey to break physical chains and secure negative freedom from external forces. However, the next 250 years will depend on how we practice positive freedom. We will have to make rational choices, respect the boundaries of one another, and take responsibility for our collective future. True freedom is not doing whatever we want without restraint; it is having the self-control to choose what is right. In the era of invisible chains, the ultimate key for our true liberation lies within our own mind.