

Freedom, and Africa

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In 1979, in then-Rhodesian churches, halls, prisons, political rallies, funerals—anywhere in which the hope of freedom burned bright—a slow and powerful song of supplication could be heard:

*“If you believe and I believe and we together pray,
The Holy Spirit must come down,
And Africa will be free.”*

First a symbol of protest against Ian Smith’s white-led rule over what is now Zimbabwe, the song was quickly adopted among the oppressed black Africans in apartheid South Africa also—a place where the ugliest forms of racial segregation would endure for fourteen more years until 1994, when Nelson Mandela became the nation’s first democratically elected president. Interestingly, the last word of this short refrain was occasionally altered, the lyrics reading rather, “...and Africa will be *saved*.”

The dominant feeling for many years before and since, is that for Africa to be saved, Africa must become free.

Has this prayer been answered? Is Africa free?

Given Africa’s dichotomous history of slavery and liberation, there is perhaps no generally acceptable answer to this question. Our question contains a four-letter word—*free*—the analysis of which perhaps has filled more volumes of philosophical inquiry than any other (though I would guess ‘good’ is a close runner-up). Freedom is a concept with which every person is *acquainted*, yet, like many deep philosophical concepts (goodness, truth, knowledge, etc.), freedom is extraordinarily difficult to *describe*. Attempts to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for freedom have, generally speaking, failed, prey to the philosopher’s ingenuity with far-fetched counterexamples (“Suppose a demon implants a device in your brain...”).

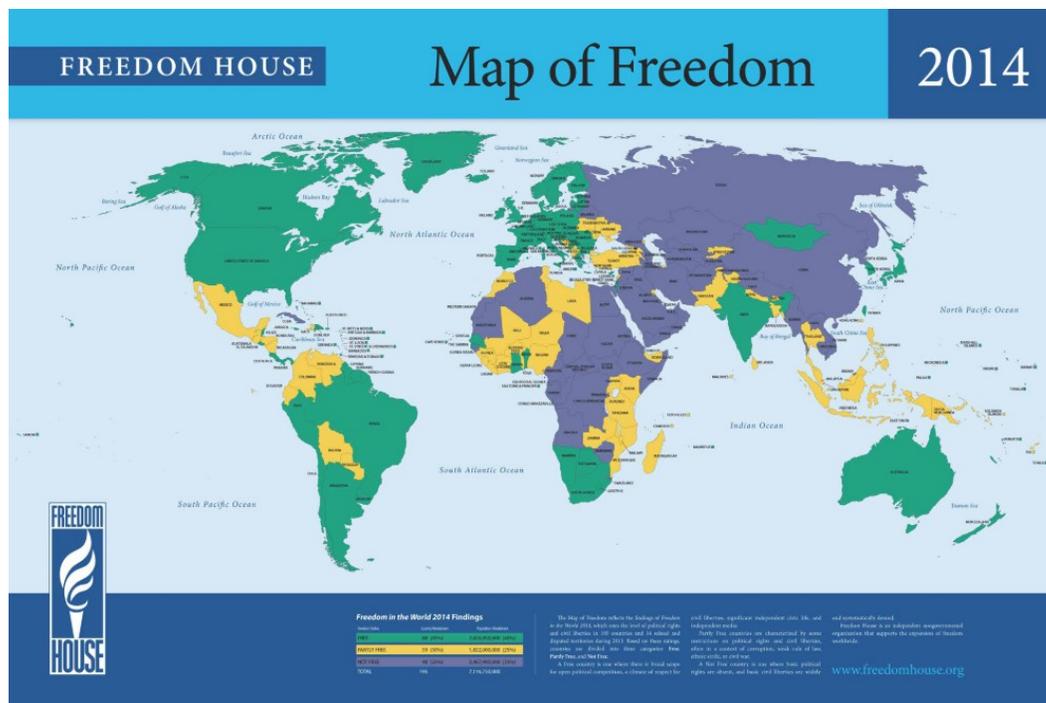
Nevertheless, we can give an intuitive account of freedom. Writing more than three hundred years ago, and many miles from Africa, the British philosopher John Locke articulated his influential view:

“So far as a man has power to think or not to think, to move or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a man free... wherever restraint comes to check that power, or compulsion takes away that indifferency of ability to act, or to forbear acting, there liberty, and our notion of it, presently ceases.”

Clearly, such a definition will serve most purposes, and it is worth careful consideration. But beyond this abstract characterization—in the real world, as it were—what does freedom look like?

Picturing freedom

[Freedom House](#)'s annual report *Freedom in the World* has for forty years provided expert evaluations of the state of freedom in most every country. Though there are richly detailed reports to support their findings, at the most general level the index has just three classifications: a country is *free*, *not free*, or *partly free*. This simple classification system produces a striking map of the world since countries are color-coded accordingly; but it gives the initial impression that the question “*Is Africa Free?*” is a terribly misguided one to ask.



Freedom House, *Map of Freedom 2014*

The other geographical continents are much simpler to decode. North America definitely looks very free (it is, on the map's current color-scheme, very green), as is South America, Europe, and Australia. The top-right quadrant is overwhelmed by an unseemly purple, indicating that much of Asia is classified as not free (Russia and China to blame here). In fact, *Africa alone* really spoils this color-by-continent picture (playing Jackson Pollock to the other continents' Piet Mondrian), since Africa contains a terribly patchy mix of freedom and the lack thereof. So, as a matter of empirical fact—and setting aside the



Of the fifty-six nations which comprise the grand continent of Africa, thirty-three feature in the LDC list. But—most tellingly—of these thirty-three African LDC’s, a paltry three countries (Benin, Mali, and São Tomé and Príncipe) are free, according to the 2012 *Freedom in the World* report.

As Dr. David Fowkes, one of the contributors to the report confirms, “the link between democracy and wealth is one of the oldest and most robust findings in comparative politics.” Though a few exceptions exist (India, Singapore and Kuwait) richer countries tend to be democratic, and poorer ones authoritarian, but countries are known to attempt democratization at all wealth levels. Crucially, wealth tracks both the *establishment* and *preservation* of democracy: almost without exception, increased wealth (measured in per-capita GNP) leads to democracy, and, where democracy already exists, increased wealth sustains it. Przeworski (et al.), writing in the *Journal of Democracy* evaluated the performance of democracies as their wealth improved, and found that “above \$6,000, democracies are impregnable and can be expected to live forever.” Deeper pockets, it seems, means deeper freedom.

Or, at least, deeper *democracy*. I do not pretend that such economic measures are *exhaustive* of the rich notion of freedom. In his paper, “Food and Freedom,” the philosopher and economist Amartya Sen observes that “the metrics of gross national product, real income, etc., may often be quite misleading about the extents of freedom that people do enjoy and can build their lives on.” Nonetheless, while such metrics have their limitations they also have considerable analytical

benefits, and there is extremely rich information available to us concerning democracy and economic prosperity—information which Sen uses with great dexterity. So, in his words, “while freedom is a complex notion, various aspects of it can be usefully studied in terms of statistical information.”

Moreover, we have good reason to think that democracy is the best articulation of political freedom; ideally, it is a political order according to which the will of people determines the nation’s future. Something stirred us when we saw the dust kicked up in Tahrir Square, a place now synonymous with a passionate rush for freedom. Following their African brethren in Tunisia, the people of Egypt sparked what may be the most *social* uprising in history; by Twitter feeds and satellite uplinks, the world joined them in their toast to freedom.

Indeed, what freedom could be richer than that which comes from the people themselves? The overwhelming sentiment associated with the Arab Spring was that liberation is most valuable when it enjoys popular support by those it liberates. In this respect, the Arab Spring stands in sharp contrast with the (rather less popular and much more complicated) deposal of Saddam Hussein by British and US forces. No one may suppose that Saddam was anything better than a tyrant who should be deposed; but it is discomfiting nonetheless that his deposal—like his brutal reign—was something inflicted upon the people of Iraq, rather than a direct expression of their free will.

Many factors precipitated the Egyptian uprising, but perhaps chief among them was dissatisfaction with the corrupt electoral process which had entrenched Mubarak’s reign. But, it turns out, you need more than election to make a democracy. As Paul Collier, professor of economics at Oxford observes, “in the absence of supporting institutions elections have proved to be more decorative than functional.” Consequently, historians of contemporary Africa commonly identify two liberations: the first, from colonial rule, mostly around 1960, and the second, from the various single-party regimes and military dictatorships that generally succeeded colonial rule, in the 1990s. In some terrible cases, the end of tyranny also meant the onset of anarchy, the biggest and most awful example being in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), which at the turn of the millennium became the site of the world’s bloodiest conflict since World War 2. Moreover, Fowkes notes, “by 1990, only Botswana could really be said to have met or exceeded the expectations of the First Liberation, and, strikingly, almost none of the 1960 experiments succeeded.” For many Africans, liberation has not brought the salvation that the song of supplication had promised.

But perhaps this negative analysis rests too heavily on a notion of freedom somehow inappropriate to the African context. When we ask, 'is Africa free?' should we perform our evaluation in the precisely the same way as we would if inquiring about Europe, or anywhere else? Justice Bhagawati, former Chief Justice of India, suggested otherwise: "To the large majority of people who are living in almost sub-human existence in conditions of abject poverty and for whom life is one long unbroken story of want and destitution, notions of individual freedom and liberation, though representing some of the most cherished values of a free society, would sound as empty words bandied about in the drawing rooms of the rich and the well-to-do." Political and civil rights are little use to those who lack the food, health, or education to enjoy them; or as Bertolt Brecht pithily declaimed, Grub first, then ethics." Just as there is a hierarchy of needs, there is perhaps a hierarchy of freedoms, some of which are more basic than others, and which must be satisfied before the latter may flourish.

Julius Nyerere, first President of Tanzania, used such reasoning to motivate *ujamaa*, his (rather poorly conceived) system of autarky by compulsory 'villagization'. His point was compelling:

"What freedom has our subsistence farmer? He scratches a bare living from the soil provided the rains do not fail; his children work at his side without schooling, medical care, or even good feeding. Certainly he has freedom to vote and to speak as he wishes. But these freedoms are much less real to him than his freedom to be exploited. Only as his poverty is reduced will his existing political freedom become properly meaningful and his right to human dignity become a fact of human dignity."

Nyerere's rhetoric would have had greater force had his coercive socio-political policies really improved the basic living conditions of the Tanzanian people; but, like so many African stories, the promises trumpeted at the time of liberation were very rarely fulfilled in the lives of those who most dearly needed them.

It is understandable why leaders like Nyerere would emphasize "local knowledge," embrace national self-sufficiency and resist external criticism from their former colonizers: after all, why believe the pontifications of the colonizer, when they have by their colonizing revealed their moral bankruptcy? Thabo Mbeki, faced with the daunting prospect of filling Nelson Mandela's shoes as President of South Africa, recognized that the identity of the citizens had been splintered by apartheid. A man of considerable intellectual acuity, Mbeki delivered his remarkable 'I am an African' speech, an attempt to galvanize the myriad stripes into the rainbow nation. "This quest for an African way" Professors Ibhawoh and Dibua suggest, ideally "neither denies the appeal of universals nor rejects local exigencies, but builds on local inventiveness."

But Mbeki's valuable positive agenda—to instill pride in the nation's rich heritage—turned quickly into an unyielding and destructive dogma. At the turn of the millennium, when the awful facts of South Africa's HIV/AIDS epidemic became clear, Mbeki refused to see the matter as a national medical imperative (as neighboring Botswana did, for example), but treated it rather as an opportunity to resist prevailing 'Western' opinions and develop a distinctively 'African solution to an African problem.' Even as thousands died around him, he rejected the unanimous findings of the international scientific community—the causal link between HIV and AIDS, and its widespread infection in Sub-Saharan Africa—and he refused to deliver the free life-saving medication which would have stemmed this gruesome tide.

In his words, his opponents were simply bent on propagating the racist colonial stereotypes of the African as a “natural-born, promiscuous carriers of germs, unique in the world” and Africa as “doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust.” Though the Constitutional Court of South Africa ultimately compelled the government to roll out antiretroviral drugs (a policy which has proved highly effective across the continent), the cost of Mbeki's reckless denialism reached genocidal proportions: Harvard researchers estimate conservatively that 330,000 lives were lost as a direct result of the government's health policy over that period.

Nonetheless, there are a few encouraging elements to be gleaned from this bitter saga, especially as concern freedom. In particular, the South African judiciary demonstrated admirable independence in the face of a precarious political case. To the credit of the government, they did not seek improperly to coerce the court, and the judges were free to make their ruling consonant with the constitution. Furthermore, ordinary citizens were able to exercise a great many liberties: they protested, assembled, published, and petitioned the court for justice—and they saw justice done.

Generally speaking, in Africa, democracy is a far more robust demand now than it was after the first liberation, when post-colonial leaders were able to shut down competitive politics with near-impunity. Although democracy is flawed and imperiled in the majority of African countries, even its worst enemies feel the need to claim democratic legitimacy, and African polities have responded vigorously to presidents seeking to loosen term limits or fake election results. Fowkes deftly articulates the political mood: “the heady optimism of the 1960s, and the crushing despair of the 1980s, has morphed in many African countries into a spirited demand for freedom.”

I commenced by suggesting that there are perhaps no fully general claims about freedom and Africa which will pass analytical muster. I conclude by presenting one exception to this rule—an exception from truly exceptional quarters. On the penultimate page of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes:

“The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.”
