



BY DAVID BOAZ

“When you combine liberty, wealth, and social openness, we have more choices and options than any people in history.”

Editorial Are We Freer?

In the 1980s, before he was appointed to the Supreme Court, Clarence Thomas spoke at the Cato Institute. He read from Cato’s standard description of itself the line, “Since [the American] revolution, civil and economic liberties have been eroded.” It didn’t seem that way to black Americans, he noted. Duly chastened, we changed it.

But it’s still a common theme among libertarians: we’re losing our freedom, year after year. We quote Thomas Jefferson: “The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground.” We read books with titles like *Freedom in Chains*, *Lost Rights*, *The Rise of Federal Control over the Lives of Ordinary Americans*, and *The Road to Serfdom*.

But is it true? Are we less free? Less free than when?

I think libertarians often find it difficult to rouse most Americans with dire warnings about the state of freedom. Most Americans don’t feel unfree. Maybe that’s because they’re “sheeple,” or maybe it’s because we really aren’t losing our freedom.

One of the problems with discussing whether Americans are more or less free is some confusion over the meaning of “freedom.” There are three things that at least feel like freedom: wealth, which gives us options; openness, which also gives more people more options; and political liberty.

First, let’s consider the effects of widespread wealth. Air travel is so cheap today that young Cato staffers fly off to Iceland to attend a rock concert. That feels like a kind of freedom, a choice barely open to me 30 years ago and unimaginable to my parents. Wealth allows us to choose where to live. It gives us more freedom to choose careers, or to opt out of the career rat-race and still have a decent standard of living. We are less constrained by the necessity of eking out a living.

Wealth gives us cars, computers, iPods, cellphones, knowledge beyond belief organized and accessible at Google.com, and other really cool stuff. It gives us far more options for how to spend our leisure time; indeed, a downside of affluence may be that it gives us so many options that we feel overstressed, conscious of all the interesting things we don’t have time to do.

Wealth is not liberty (though it is a product of political and economic liberty). But having ever more abundant resources feels a lot like freedom.

Second, we live in a more open society. Liberalism has always campaigned for a society of merit, not of status. That meant in the first place the dismantling of the privileges of nobility and aristocracy. Over the centuries it has also meant extending liberty and equality to people of other races and creeds, to women, to Jews, to gays and lesbians. Sometimes that involves dismantling actual legal barriers, and sometimes it means only a falling away of social prejudices and codes. For the most part laws didn’t keep women and Jews out of colleges

and careers in the 1950s; deep-seated social customs did. Sodomy laws imposed real legal penalties on gays, but the closet door was kept firmly shut more by social pressures and the fear of losing jobs, friends, and families.

Even if we’re seeing mostly the decline of social restrictions, it’s hard to tell blacks, women, Jews, and gays that they’re less free in modern America than they were at some earlier point.

Finally, let’s look at actual political and economic liberty. It’s easy to point to the ways that government has grown and liberty has yielded: soaring federal and state spending; a shift to federal and presidential power; the growth of surveillance and databases; intrusive regulations on hiring and firing, on eating and drinking and smoking; expanding entitlements; and all the threats to civil liberties in the post-9/11 era (which just might, if not reined in by the courts and political reaction, make my optimism outdated). The list could go on endlessly, and that’s what causes lots of libertarians to deplore “the road to serfdom” and our “lost rights.”

But that list doesn’t tell the whole story. In so many ways we are freer today than we were at various points in the past. Depending on just when you think was the golden age of liberty, I could counter by reminding you of oriental despotism, slavery, the Dark Ages, absolute monarchy, rigid class privilege, and so on. In the 20th century, fascism, communism, and national socialism. And even in our own country in my lifetime, we lived with military conscription, 90 percent income tax rates, wage and price controls, restricted entry to transportation and communications, indecency laws, and Jim Crow.

I think that, on balance, Americans today are more free than any people in history. And certainly when you combine liberty, wealth, and social openness, we have more choices and options than any people in history. So take a moment to reflect on our history, have a glass of wine, and celebrate what we’ve achieved after centuries and millennia of hard work and political struggle.

And then, refreshed and rejuvenated, return to the struggle. There never was a golden age of liberty, and there never will be. People who value freedom will always have to defend it from those who claim the right to wield power over others. Foreign and domestic, right and left, there are still plenty of people seeking to take our liberty, to force us into collectivist schemes, to promise us security or handouts in return for our freedom, or to impose their agendas on the rest of us. But slowly, over time, with high points and low points, freedom is winning.