

FREEDOM AND DISENCHANTMENT
Rationality and Irrationality in American Political Culture
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Introduction: Two Puzzles

This essay will attempt to unravel two puzzles, one empirical, the other theoretical. The empirical puzzle is the paradoxical state of freedom in American political culture, the fact that it is the Western nation which most celebrates personal freedom that is most disenchanted with political freedom and recently came closest to undermining fundamental civil liberties. The theoretical puzzle is the Weberian concept of disenchantment—what Weber may have meant by it and its usefulness as a tool in the analysis of modern political culture. We hope to show that, in unraveling the empirical puzzle we will illuminate the conceptual value and political significance of disenchantment as well as Weber's theory of freedom and its relation to the problem of rationality.

The American Paradox

Most observers are likely to agree that freedom is America's most cherished secular value. Americans, as we will see, consider themselves to be extremely free and their country the freest in the world. This national veneration of freedom and the claim that Americans have a special mission to impart it to the world goes back to the founding of the nation (Foner, 1998; Wilentz, 2005).

From the earliest days of the republic, however, Americans' views and practice of freedom has been something of an enigma, to both foreigners and thoughtful local people. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed all persons to be equal and the constitution enshrined liberty while condoning the enslavement of a fifth of the nation. Women lost the right to vote soon after the founding of the nation and were to remain second-class dependents until well into the 20th century. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny joined American freedom to the mass displacement and destruction of the native

American population. The South waged a brutal civil war in defense of its cherished liberty, which included the liberty to enslave a third of its population.

The paradoxes of freedom in America, however, are not confined to its past.

Consider the following commonplace social statistics about the country:

- America is the only modern industrial society that still executes its citizens, including many young enough to be considered children and, until recently, others too old and senile, or too retarded, to even understand what is going on at their trials.
- It has the highest incarceration rate in the world—about 2 million of its citizens are in jail, most of whom lose basic rights of citizenship after serving their time
- Long before the September 9/11 terrorist attack, there existed persistent threats to privacy from the state and corporate sectors.
- During the younger Bush Presidency the nation came to the brink of having fundamental liberties threatened, or crossed over it, including *habeas corpus* the most ancient and cherished legal protection in the Anglo-American system of justice
- America now has a deeply flawed democratic system increasingly under the control of financial interests, in which there is widespread contempt for political leadership at all levels among the electorate and chronic voter apathy.

The main goal of this paper is to attempt to make some sense of this bewildering paradox. My argument will be that there is a deep and growing divorce between the public and private meanings and experiences of freedom in America

There is, on the one hand, a *formal rational, public tradition of freedom* that:

- Constitutionally protects civil liberties
- Is highly institutionalized in our legal and political systems
- Is supported by an active civil society, although one that is increasingly elite dominated

- A vigorous, though increasingly threatened political tradition of the division of powers
- An independent judiciary that has powers of review and restraint unique in world history, and an unsurpassed tradition of litigiousness among the population at large, fed by the highest per capita number of lawyers in the world.

On the other hand, there is an informal, highly privatized tradition of *ordinary personal freedom* which conceives of, and experiences, freedom in terms that are psychologically and experientially uncoupled from the democratic political process and tradition of public freedom. Because so many Americans fail to see the critical dependence of the exercise of private freedom on the preservation of formal, constituted liberties, threats to the latter go unnoticed, or if noticed, are considered of little direct relevance to personal freedom.

Freedom and Rationality & Disenchantment in Weber

One way of bringing some clarity to our problem is to see the theory and practice of freedom in America (and any other free society for that matter) in the light of Weber's theory of the rationality and freedom in modern society and the malaise of disenchantment from its consequences.

Throughout his life Weber was preoccupied with two major substantive issues. One was the rise of rationality, and especially its formal expression and institutionalization as a distinguishing feature of Western civilization. The second was the problem of freedom, a problem not often emphasized by sociologists. The two preoccupations were closely, and tragically, linked in Weber's life and work. "He left no doubt," wrote Reinhard Bendix, (1966:9) "that his profound personal commitment to the cause of reason and freedom had guided his choice of subject matter [the development of rationalism in the West]; and his research left no doubt that reason and freedom in the Western world were in jeopardy." To understand why, we have to delve briefly into Weber's theory of rationality and its relation to his view of freedom.

In the broadest sense, Weber meant by rationality the act of making something comprehensive or consistent with what is understood to be reasonable. Beyond the logical or “right rationality” (*Richtigkeitsrationalitat*) of the scientist, including the social scientist (Ringer, 1997: 97-98) the concept is relativistic, depending on the point of view of the person, group or institution being considered (Kalberg 1980:1155). Weber distinguished many kinds of rationality, but the fundamental distinction is that between formal and substantive rationality. Formal rationality is, ideally, ethically neutral and strives for the norms of efficiency, calculability and the least costly means for achieving given ends. In contrast, “substantive rationality cannot be measured in terms of formal calculation alone, but also involves a relation to the absolute values or to the content of the particular given ends to which it is oriented.” (Weber, 1947:185)

These two kinds of rationalities are found at both the individual and institutional levels, yielding a classification of four ideal types: First, there is formal, institutional rationality. This is the distinctive attribute of the modern capitalist state and accompanying bureaucratic systems. Second, substantive, institutional rationality involves action motivated primarily by norms such as social justice and equality, but also those taken in the interest of class hierarchy, political groups or to further war and national prestige: “there is an indefinite number of possible standards of value which are ‘rational’ in this sense.” (Weber, 1947:185-186) Third, there is purposive rationality (*zweckrational*), the individual level counterpart to formal rationality: action in which the individual uses the least costly means to attain discrete ends, taking account of alternate deployment of these means to other relatively important ends. (Weber, 1947: 117) Finally, there is action that is substantively rational at the individual level, what Weber calls value-rationality (*wertrationalitat*), which refers to “the action of persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some ‘cause’ no matter in what it consists.” (Weber, 1947: 116)

These four forms of rationalities Weber identified as the locus of four forms or expressions of freedom. Formal institutional rationality was the foundation of formal, public freedom. Bureaucratic administration, with its superior knowledge and legal rational authority makes the modern economy, the liberal state, the modern judiciary and the rule of law possible. Indeed, Weber saw modern bureaucratic structures not simply as enablers of freedom in the modern liberal state, but as one direct source of public freedom in the equalization of its modes of recruitment to officeholders, in the principle of the “formal equality of treatment” that animates ideal official conduct, and the fact that its relentless growth “greatly favors the leveling of social classes’ and a tendency toward a special form of substantive rationality, the utilitarian promotion of “the interest of the welfare of those under their authority,” in other words, a clear bias toward democracy. (Weber: 1947:339-341. Weber never got around to a full treatment of the theory of democracy which he kept promising, but his belief that the modern capitalist state, founded on legal rational authority, was the primary focus of public freedom became clear from his scattered writings on the subject.

Liberal democracy was the instantiation of substantive rationality at the institutional level. While liberal democracy needs, like all modern systems, its own formal bureaucratic structures—especially the party system and legislative process—it is substantive in the priority of the absolute end of constitutional freedoms pursued and the kind of authority that legitimizes outcomes. As Stinchcombe (1990: 288-289) has observed, legislatures are essentially bargaining systems wherein arguments of different degrees of rationality are made but in the end do not determine the validity of the resulting legislation: “Bargaining systems and legislatures then, have substantive reasoning involved in them, but not routinized formal reasoning and are no doubt the better for it.”

Purposive action is, of course, the behavior of the classic free agent, ideally typified in so-called ‘economic man,’ although it should be stressed immediately that Weber’s economic person was a far more complex, human figure than the rational calculator of modern neo-classical economic theory. He or she was, in fact, skeptical of

“the economic way of looking at things.” (cited in Swedberg, 2000: 183) Weber makes clear his identification of rationally purposeful action with one form of freedom in his caustic rejection of the romantic conception of freedom advocated by intellectuals such as Fredrich Meinecke and Heinrich von Treitschke which glorified inner mystery and unpredictability as essential components of the free personality. Such irrationality, he argued, we share with animals. Instead, “we associate the strongest empirical feeling of freedom with precisely those actions which we know ourselves to have accomplished rationally, . . . actions in which we pursue a clearly conscious purpose by what to our knowledge are the most adequate means.” (Cited in Lowith: 66)

The fourth form of freedom, finally, inheres in the value rational behavior of individuals pursuing morally defined ends for their own sake. This form of freedom insists that freedom is not an end in itself, not the act of choosing efficient means to ends, but the realization of right ends. We are free to the degree that we do the good, whether this be in the service of God, the community, one’s country, or realizing one’s inner reality, actualizing or fulfilling one’s destiny, or some other ultimate end. Note the irony here: it is freedom that makes this kind of action rational by being the most efficient means to attain stated moral ends, in contrast with purposive freedom in which freedom becomes the end achieved through the free choice of efficient means for morally indifferent goals. An example of this kind of freedom is the love of independence for its own sake. Thus, Weber attributed the preference of East Elbian workers for independent farming over wage labor, in spite of the former’s far greater economic insecurity, to the “purely psychological magic of freedom.” (Ringer, 2004:42-45)

So far so good. But now we come to what so profoundly troubled Weber about the modern world, the source of his disenchantment and personal crisis. In a nutshell, these were the dangers that lurked in all four forms of rationalities and which had potentially devastating implications for the freedoms he cherished. What Weber recognized was that each of these four kinds of rationalities can go wrong and have consequences that are irrational. These irrationalities are not merely contingencies; in many cases they are the outcome of the very act of rationality.

The irrational outcome of rational action that most bothered Weber were those derived from the relentless formal, institutional rationalization of modern life. While it enhanced technical mastery of the world it seemed unable to undergird a comprehensive and coherent, morally infused world-view capable of ordering and magically animating the routines and subjectively meaningful practices of everyday life. It was not that religion or ultimate values had gone from the world. Rather, they had been divorced from public life. In a critical passage that will be central to our own argument, Weber (cited in Lowith, 1943: 62) wrote that:

It is the destiny of our era, with its characteristic rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, the disenchantment of the world, that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values *have withdrawn from the public sphere.*”

Among the ultimate and sublime values under threat, in Weber’s view, were inherent tendencies toward the erosion of personal freedom. As Lowith (1943: 62) points out “..the yardstick by which Weber judges the historical fact of rationalization is its apparent opposite, namely, the freedom of independent self-sufficient individual, the ‘human hero’, in relation to the excessive weight of the kinds of ‘orders’ institutions, ‘organisations’ and ‘establishments’ effected by rationalization in modern life.”

Furthermore, while themselves internally neutral in principle and, as we have mentioned, even tending toward equality in the meritocratic recruitment of its officers, modern bureaucratic structures were not neutral in their external social, economic and political consequences. Formal rationality often works against the goals defined by the substantively rational liberal democratic state. To the degree that the ends of substantially rational action could only be achieved through reliance on bureaucratic structures, to that degree the ends sought were threatened and the system corrupted. Inevitably, maximum formal rationality favors powerful groups. The expropriation of workers from the means of production, their subjection to the authority of management, their weakened bargaining power, are all, in Weber’s view, substantively irrational consequences of the rationalization of the economy. (Weber, 1947:246-250) Freedom of contract, a prime condition of maximum formal rationality in law and the economy, is a formally neutral

institution, but hardly neutral in practice, in that economically advantaged groups can more effectively use it to achieve their own ends and reinforce their superior status. This was as obvious in Weber's time as it is in America today. (Brubaker,1984:43).

“The question,” Weber wrote, “is always who controls the existing bureaucratic machinery.” (Weber: 1947:338) Weber's analysis of the undemocratic (and hence irrational) features of democratic parties of his time, based partly on contemporary American politics, is as apt now as it was then. They were “organizations for the attraction of voters” in which active party members' main function was the “acclamation of their leaders,” and the “inactive masses of electors or voters...merely objects whose votes were sought at election time,” and in which large financial contributors have outsized influence on policy. Indeed Weber saw a dreadful “formal similarity” between the mass of voluntary party members “and the system of capitalistic enterprise which rests on the exploitation of formally free labor.” (Weber, 1947: 407-413) Democracies could only escape the iron cage of bureaucratization and its illiberal consequences if they existed on a small scale run by amateurs, what he called “immediate democracy”, which tend to suffer from technical inadequacy, or if parties were controlled by wealthy amateur leaders, which, however meant a shift toward plutocracy or representation by the agents of interest groups. As soon as these amateurs recognized their technical inadequacy and turned to bureaucracy, however, power shifts to the latter and the former become “essentially dilettantes.” This is, in fact, an accurate description of the “immediate democracies” of smaller American towns ran by city managers, my own city of Cambridge being a near perfect example.

The contradictions of rationality are also found at the individual level. The freedom inhering in purposive rationality is also threatened by its irrationalities. When someone earns money to support his way of living, he is being rational; but the tendency to make money for the sake of making money, Weber found irrational: it is “rationalization in the direction of an irrational way of life.” (Cited in Lowith, 1943: 62) We now know, more than Weber did—since he died before the first Great Depression-- that such greed and irrationality at the individual level can have catastrophic

consequences for the entire capitalist system, and with it our capacity to choose freely. Even as I write, the American and world capitalist economies are reeling from near collapse as a result of the irrational greed of Wall Street financiers. Thus individual irrationality has feedback consequences for the capitalist order in much the same way that the system's rationality has irrational "iron cage" consequences for the freedom of the individual.

Finally, there is the irrationality of the value rational identification of freedom with the search for and realization of absolute ends or values. Here the danger is extremism, especially when viewed from the purposefully rational perspective: "the more the value to which action is oriented is elevated to the status of an absolute value, the more 'irrational' in this sense the corresponding action is. For the more unconditionally the actor devotes himself to this value for its own sake, to pure sentiment or beauty, to absolute goodness or devotion to duty, the less is he influenced by considerations of the consequences of his action." (Weber, 1947:117) Examples abound in America today as in Weber's Germany: consider extremist culture warriors who, in the name of freedom, oppose women's freedom to choose what do with their bodies, sometimes to the point of murdering doctors who perform abortions or, on the left, those promoting the freedom of identity groups by advocating speech-codes.

With this theoretical backdrop, I can now restate more formally my objectives: First, To examine closely the privatized views of freedom held by ordinary Americans. Second, To indicate the important and disturbing ways they differ from the view of freedom that prevails in the formal, legal-rational and substantive (essentially political) tradition of public liberty in America. Third, To offer some reasons for the uncoupling of the ordinary view of freedom from substantive freedom of democracy. And, finally, to discuss some of the main consequences of this delinking.

The paper draws on research conducted over the past decade on Americans' views and experience of freedom today and in the past. This includes a national survey conducted in 2000, a systematic review of newspaper accounts of Americans being free

and the stories they tell about these experiences over the course of the 12 months July 1 1999 to June 30th 2000; in-depth interviews with 29 Americans who grew up in different parts of the country; and analysis of primary and secondary sources on the history of freedom in America.

Private Freedom in America

A story reported in the Seattle Times (10/03/1999) illustrates the depth of commitment of ordinary Americans to the value of personal freedom. Nancy, a 63 year old retired attorney who lived in Spokane, Washington, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. After discussing the matter with her husband, they agreed that she should continue driving to her aerobics class, only a few blocks away from their home. They were fully aware of the dangers involved but both considered this a matter of deep personal freedom: if she couldn't do this one last thing on her own, all freedom would have been lost and life would not have been worth living. On her way to the gym one day in 1999, she got confused, missed her turn, and disappeared. After a search, she was found in a farmer's field with her coat folded under head. She had frozen to death, not far from her Ford Explorer. There was much debate in Spokane over Nancy's death, mainly focusing on the tension between freedom and security. But in the end nearly all agreed that she and her husband had made the right decision. "Safety versus freedom," one local expert on Alzheimer's summed it all up, "I'm very much on the side of freedom." He added that driving is the ultimate expression of independence in America and that "giving up the keys amounts to giving up the fight for a fulfilling life." It is hard to imagine such a view being voiced in any other part of the Western industrial world, certainly not in the welfare states of Western Europe.

This story illustrates many elements of personal freedom in America: the depth of commitment to it and the significance of the car, and movement, as fundamental experiences of it. More broadly, the debate could be seen as a public discourse on the relative merits of formal public and private substantive freedom. Officials and other advocates of the former recognized the Millian harm principle as a necessary

precondition of equal freedom, which logically extends to preventing individuals with diminished responsibility from doing harm to themselves. But this principle was most adamantly rejected by the great majority of persons in Spokane who voiced their views the issue.

I have 354 other stories like this from my newspaper files on ordinary Americans from all walks of life and from all ethnic groups and regions: from ferocious opposition to publicly rational, seat-belt legislation in Kansas, to rallies by lay Lutherans in Minneapolis against a proposed union with Episcopalians because of the unfree nature of the latter's disenchantingly formal, legal-rational denominational structure, to debates between advocates for formally rational, freer and better choices in houses and moral-aesthetic opponents of urban sprawl in New Jersey, to heated arguments over whose freedom was being violated in the opposition to the location of a soft-porn store in a suburban Miami neighborhood.

These gleanings from the newspaper accounts were fully substantiated by findings from my 2000 survey of a random sample of the U.S. population. It re-confirmed, first, that the vast majority of Americans (over three quarters) think that they have either complete or a great deal of freedom. This holds for both genders, and all classes and ethnicities. What is the nature of this freedom? In general, Americans seem to hold quite positive views about freedom: it is doing what one wants, exercising one's rights and making choices. Surprisingly, only 5 percent of respondents expressed what they meant by freedom in negative terms. There were few differences along ethnic or class lines in talk about freedom in the abstract. Differences between men and women were significant, but not very strong. Men tended to emphasize getting what they want more than women while the latter emphasized rights, self-actualization and inner peace as the main notions of freedom.

Regarding the experiences that made them feel most free, movement—especially associated with their cars—leisure activities, inner peace (usually some kind of religious experience), being engaged, especially with family and loved ones, but also being disengaged from these very people and from one's responsibilities, are the

experiences that lead Americans to feel most free. There are significant gender differences in how Americans experience freedom. Men's somewhat greater tendency to emphasize movement, economic security and leisure activities, especially sports, with freedom, is broadly consistent with what we would expect. So too, is the greater female tendency to mention inner or spiritual experiences with freedom as well as engagement with persons, especially family. Interestingly, women were more likely than men to emphasize disengagement from the very responsibilities that also made them feel (positively) free as one of their most important ways of being free.

However, the most important finding of our survey is what we did *not* find. It is truly remarkable that almost no American mentioned any aspect of democracy in their notions and experiences of freedom, in spite of the fact that the survey was conducted in the midst of a hotly contested presidential primary campaign! Only a statistically insignificant number of persons (15 persons out of the total national sample of over 1500) mentioned voting, or some kind of participation in the political life of the nation—attending meetings or demonstrations, campaigning, serving on some political or governmental body-- as experiences central to what they considered freedom.

Note that this is not a confirmation of the Putnam (2001) thesis about civic disengagement and the loss of social capital in America. What Sidney Verba (Verba et al 1995: 7) and his co-authors found of the nineties still holds largely true, that the “number and range of voluntary organizations in America are probably unsurpassed anywhere.” However what is new is disengagement from politics and more public voluntarism, as Andrew Kohut (1997) demonstrated in the case of Philadelphia. Instead, what we find is that for most ordinary Americans civic life has become almost entirely private. One major reason for the change was already made clear by Verba and his associates (Verba et al, p.511) the fact that in politics “the voices of citizens may be loud and clear, but they are decidedly not equal” and “that participatory input is tilted in the direction of the more advantaged groups in society—especially in terms of economic and educational position, but in terms of race and ethnicity as well.” People were not bowling alone, they were bowling and engaging in civic activities non-politically because of their

disenchantment with the unequal and unfair workings of the formal political and governmental institutions. This is especially true of younger Americans who vote at far lower rates than older ones. However, as Cliff Zukin and his co-researchers recently reported ((Zukin et al, 2006), while they remain turned off political life, young Americans are hardly apathetic. There is, rather, what they call a “civic-political divide,” especially among the young, a significant number of whom deliberately abstain from voting and political activities while actively engaged in “civic activities such as volunteering and community problem solving with others”

Our interviews added depth and nuance to these preliminary survey findings. Having choices – purposive freedom in Weberian terms--emerged in the interviews as a major component of what Americans mean by freedom. While important to both genders, women gave it greater weight and centrality. However, class interacted in important ways in the articulation of choice with freedom. There was surprisingly little mention of choice among our working and lower middle class interviewees and when mentioned it entailed material choice such as the availability of goods at stores. On the other hand, exercising freedom through choice was of major significance to middle and upper class respondents and, especially for women, was closely allied to control. Clara, a very poised and articulate real estate consultant, was typical. Having choices, she said, meant having options. “I think options are extremely important to me and the more options I have, the more I feel free to choose.” Asked how she got to the point of having many options, Clara, was emphatic: “You have to create them” which she added gives her a sense of “tremendous freedom.” Asked what it does for her to have “tremendous freedom,” she replied unhesitatingly: “It gives you power.... the power to say yes and the power to say no.” Clara also made a distinction that was important for all our middle and upper middle class respondents: that between the choices they made and what she called “choice by default,” the choices that are made almost unconsciously or because they are expected of you and that are, as often as not, pre-made for you. These are choices made “in a world of ‘shoulds.’ It’s living in the conditional.” Real choices , she

insisted, are those made and created consciously. This perfectly instantiates Weber's account of personal freedom prompted by his argument with the romantics.

The sense of control as a defining feature of freedom is pervasive among Americans. It applies as much to familial as to non-familial relationships. One woman described how looking after her children "makes me feel in control which is key to making me feel free for my personality. I don't know why, but in control I'm just happy" Childminding also gave her a sense of independence and autonomy: "... it makes me feel like I don't owe a thing to anybody. I don't have to call and check in with anybody... They are with me."

More typical of male views of freedom was the emphasis on the liberating feeling that came with control over others (rather than oneself, as is more the case with women) or their environment. Michael, a lower-middle class African-American told us that his most exhilarating feeling of personal freedom came from beating others on the basketball court: "... Yeah! Because I know that I'm a good basketball player and to have my way with someone on the court that's kind of like being free. So I feel really good about that.... Someone is trying to defend me and they can't and after I score I'll run back and I'll say something like, 'I thought you were playing defense' or just something like that, just to keep me going. And it takes a couple hours of that, and then I'm good, and then I go back to my quiet silly self, and that's it."

Doing what one wants is not only a core component of freedom, but one that strongly discriminates between men and women, the former being over three times more likely to refer to it in their talk about freedom. Having control and doing what one wants are obviously related, but the Americans we interviewed nonetheless took care to distinguish between the two concepts, as they did between choice and control. Often, doing what one wants meant simply getting away from all control—control by others or by forces beyond one's control: the just-leave-me-alone attitude. Joe, a working class retiree in his mid-fifties, simply wanted to spend as much time as possible by himself on a lonely Boston beach where he had fantasies of surfing and being out of reach of his relatives. : "I don't have to answer the phone. This is my freedom of rights. Nobody is

going to push me into things I do not want to do” Joe’s view of freedom as escape was reinforced by anxieties and fears of being chased and devoured by mighty forces beyond his control, a recurring dream of his being run down and swallowed up by a huge tornado in the middle of nowhere.

However, it was in the second sense of doing what one wants that most of our subjects most frequently used the term, especially when identifying it as a core component of freedom. In this second sense the term was closely associated with decision making, especially in regard to important ends and events in the life course, and, as such, exemplified Weber’s fourth, value-rational form of freedom. Americans in all walks of life seem to share these anxieties about what they wanted to do, what they *really* wanted, and it was closely related to how free they felt. Daniel, a middle class Euro-American in his twenties, thought that getting to know what he wanted required a good deal of introspection: “Becoming aware of the person you are. That means my individual desires and plans and so on” When asked, why, he responded: “Because if you ignore what you really want then you don’t end up being where you want to be.” Exactly similar sentiments were expressed by other young Americans we interviewed. As another put it, our freedom inheres in the fact that it is entirely up to us “to make those decisions and it comes from this desire to want to be more and do more. Not necessarily financially, but just to be able to be more of a person and to have more life experiences. It comes from just saying, you know what, I know what I want in my life and I know what decisions I got to make to get there.” Several of our interviewees expressed sentiments exactly similar to the East Elbe farmers observed by Weber, so enchanted by the “magic of freedom” that they would risk financial ruin to have it. Jake, a financially strapped, divorced school teacher told us that: “You have total freedom to do whatever you want.

And I suppose there is nothing that is stopping me from just quitting my job and doing whatever. Ultimately I guess I could. There are going to be serious ramifications because of it, but I could. There is nothing stopping me and there is freedom in that -- to be able to say, 'I can do anything I want.' That to me is amazing freedom.”

Americans' strong belief that they should have control if they are to be free combined with another important value associated with freedom--- the idea that life and work should be fulfilling or self-actualizing —to create enormous problems for them with respect to work. One of the most surprising findings coming from the interviews was the level of Americans' disenchantment with work. The workplace, the physical expression of corporate rationality, was the site for our respondents' strongest feelings of *unfreedom* and, what was equally surprising, this disenchantment cuts across all classes. As is now well known, their rational, market driven capitalist system requires Americans to work harder and longer than any other group of people in the industrial world, longer even than the Japanese. For the growing ranks of the barely coping working classes it often takes each member of a couple working two jobs in order to fend off poverty. (Schor, 1993; Warren & Tyagi, 2003).

The problem is that Americans insist on seeing work not in instrumental, means-end, morally neutral terms (complementing the formal rationality of the corporate sector) but as an activity that should be self-actualizing, that defines their freedom in terms of such fulfillment. This, tragically, sets them up for deep anxieties and disenchantment with work. One respondent showed us a photograph of an office party which included his boss. As he pointed her out his entire countenance changed. He became anxious and agitated as he spoke: “This is making me feel not free. This picture represents my non-freedom, my chains, my shackles, my glass ceiling.” These anxieties, as I mentioned, cut across class. Robert is in a solidly middle class job and earns close to a hundred thousand dollars a year (in year 2000 dollars). But he told us that he is tormented by his watch, his sense of not having enough time and his deep feeling of un-fulfillment and hence, of not being free.

“As far as the job goes, I think being free is something that you really enjoy doing. I mean, when you work somewhere you want to help the company do well, you want people to like you; you want people to think you are doing a good job for the company and when you get fired, maybe you look at yourself and say, well, maybe I didn’t go a good job, maybe I didn’t do what I set out to accomplish.”

Note the complete absence of any anger toward the firm that does the firing. Instead it is all turned inward on himself: there is shame in his inability to be in control and to find fulfillment in his work and this is experienced as a frustrating sense of unfreedom, a condition for which he blames himself.¹

We have space to elaborate here on only one other aspect of personal freedom that came out of our interviews: the fact that, for women in particular, it is deeply embodied. Marion, a successful professional, Euro-American, used a picture of a beautiful model in a bathing suit to make the point: “I do not feel free when I look at pictures in magazines, stuff like this. Because it reminds me of how I feel about, like, I’m not happy with my body, and so that’s what it reminds me of, and it makes me feel, it doesn’t make me feel free. It just reminds me of what I need to be doing, you know, it’s constant, what I need to be doing physically at the gym, and I’m not necessarily motivated at the moment, so it makes me feel not good. I’m not free... I don’t feel free in my, I don’t think I feel free, say, in my womanhood.” This, in turn, meant that she did not “feel like I’m connecting to myself. In who I really am. Because I’m letting like maybe my body weight right now get in get in the way of it, or something.” Sooner or later, she added, she had to face her “demons”: “I need to face that and be real about it and be honest about it and do something about it.” Only then, she told us, would she be truly free. On the other hand, women who were fit and happy with their bodies said that this was a major source of freedom and power for them. Clara, the prosperous consultant, was quite explicit. “Freedom to make choices about my own body,” she said, “that’s the

¹ For the best account of how Americans came to interpret their work for others in such self-directed, characterologic and moral terms, see Sennett and Cobb (1972)

most basic of freedom.” Being fit gave her the confidence to “tap into your higher self and just listen to your intuition and operate from there and just really be grounded also.”

Finally, and most importantly, our in-depth interviewing confirmed what the survey data had already indicated: that political life in general, and democracy in particular, is no longer a meaningful part of the semantic field of freedom. In every case, the Americans we interviewed spoke for periods of up to two hours in heartfelt terms about their views and experiences of freedom without once mentioning any aspect of democracy—voting, attending meetings, participating in political activities--or, for that matter, the celebrated elements of the formal theory and practice of freedom: the constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Courts. That this may not necessarily mean that Americans actively hate politics, although there are many perceptive analysts who insist that this is indeed the case. (Dionne, 1992;) It does suggest a disenchantment with the democratic system. My own survey, as well as those of others, indicate that when directly asked if they are satisfied with democracy the great majority of Americans say they are. And when, after a couple hours of interviewing we mentioned to our interviewees that they never once mentioned democracy, or any aspect of political participation in their talk about freedom, they all said that it was something they took for granted and are certainly grateful that they live in a democracy. It would seem that Americans distinguish between democracy in the abstract (which is what they seem satisfied with) and democracy in practice—the actual behavior of politicians (though rarely their *own* Congressmen) and the way the system works. Numerous works have shown that Americans have been thoroughly disenchanted with the negativity and superficiality of political campaigns and the failure of Congress to meet the needs of “ordinary people like me.” And their distrust of politicians and political institutions as well as bureaucracies in all domains of corporate and public life are well documented (Patterson, 1999; Cooper, 1999)

The important point is the cognitive uncoupling of democracy from the meanings and experiences people attribute to freedom. How did America get this way?

And what are the consequences of this uncoupling? Let me now turn briefly to these questions.

4. Liberty against democracy: the historical roots of privatized freedom

America's disenchantment with democracy and the formal ideology and structures of public liberty, has been long in the making. Willis (1999) has argued that a "fear of government, sometimes sensible, sometimes hysterical, but always pronounced" is a "constant of American history." This is not entirely correct, though true of most of the nation's history. In the revolutionary era, the prevailing Republican conception and practice of freedom entailed active participation in the democratic state. "To be free," Pangle (1993: 106) observes of the republican ideal, "is to be, not an independent individual, but the citizen of a polity in which one has direct access to, or at the very least eligibility to participate in, sovereign office and the deliberations that authoritatively shape communal life." There was, however, a rapid shift in the more conservative and powerful members of the elite from this republican ideal to the mid-century classical liberal view of the state as a sinister power, the greatest threat to one's liberty. In short, liberty against the state emerged as one of the central themes in the conservative northern democratic tradition of America. The state, quite simply, could not be trusted, nor could the institutions it required. It was, at best, a watchman, a policing guardian of national security and personal liberty; at worst, a potential monster under the command of corrupt politicians. Sooner or later this sustained propaganda against the state was bound to taint democracy itself, for after all, is not democracy quintessentially an act of political life and an involvement with the state? The success of this propaganda has also denigrated political parties, which are essential for any well working modern democracy. As Kleppner (1982:150) points out: "A deep-seated ambivalence toward political parties has always been a characteristic of American political culture. In the best of times parties have been viewed simply as necessary evils, and at other times as more evil than necessary."

This elite view of the state was reinforced by, indeed joined to, the principle of judicial review, the most distinctive aspect of the formal rationalization of America's

judicial system. Through the "due process" and "equal protection" doctrines of the supreme court, liberty came to be interpreted as a constitutional limitation on the legislative branch of government and, in principle, hostile to equality. By the late 19th century even the notion of economic security as fundamental pre-requisites of freedom for all citizens—so central to early 19th century republican thinking—had eroded in the formal, rational version of freedom as interpreted by the courts. A clear “double standard” had emerged over the course of the 19th and early twentieth up to the Roosevelt era, in which the formal, “preferred freedom” was the protection of property. (Abraham, 1982).

Counteracting this denigration of democracy was the emergence of Jacksonian democracy which championed the common (Euro-American) man and actively encouraged the view that ordinary people could participate in government. It was during the Jacksonian era that the nation came closest to the syncing of public and private liberty for the political nation (Sean Wilentz 2006). American associational life, celebrated by Tocqueville, rose and flourished, growing rapidly thereafter up to the First World War. Theda Skocpol (2004: 23024) has joined an older generation of scholars who agree that civic voluntarism developed hand in hand with the rise of the democratic state, that most of these associations were nation wide and “thoroughly intertwined with government activities and popular politics” although others have questioned how far they operated on behalf of the common good, given their ethno-racial and gender exclusiveness (Kaufman, 2002). Jackson's southern background was the filter for many of the region's primal influences. The rabidly racist subsequent history of populist democracy had its origins here. The white male republic with its expanded franchise learned the Southern primal trick of exclusive inclusiveness, of uniting and expanding the club of democracy by the exclusion, marginalization and demonization of certain groups, including the recently arrived not-quite-white Irish and Southern Europeans. (Roediger, 1993; Saxton, 1990)

But even this racially restricted era of political participation was to peter out by the late 19th century. While the civic organizations themselves may have been politically linked and national in scope, this was not necessarily reflective of what was happening at

the level of individual citizen participation. Paul Kleppner's (1982:13) work clearly demonstrates one of the great anomalies of American political life: "Since the 1840s aggregate turnout rates display an unmistakable trend: a long-term decline in the general level of voter mobilization. That decline has occurred as the measures of the individual and structural factors that mediate turnout have moved at least as decisively in the direction predicting increased participation." In the North the great era of white, male citizen mobilization lasted between 1840 and 1900; this was followed by the era of electoral demobilization between 1896 and 1928; then came the New Deal and a new wave of electoral remobilization between 1930 and 1960; followed by what Kleppner calls the era of "demobilization and disillusionment," in short, disenchantment, between 1964 and the present. In the South, the trajectory has been a long downward slope after the Northern army's post-bellum retreat.. Demobilization was the direct result of sustained efforts to disenfranchise the black and poor white citizen body.

Perhaps the most powerful force accounting for the uncoupling of private from public freedom is the capitalist system itself and the role of mass consumption in people's lives. A growing number of works on women's history have shown how female sentimental culture initiated the turn toward consumption as a legitimate expression of civility during the 19th century (Douglas, 1977; Merish, 2000). But it was during the early 20th century that modern advertising combined with the rapidly ascending American economy to create the distinctive American practice of explicitly identifying freedom with consumerism. Foner (1998: 147) nicely summarizes the early phase of this development: "... the new advertising industry perfected ways of increasing exponentially the "wants" of mankind. It hammered home the message that freedom would now be enjoyed in the marketplace, not the workplace. ..Consumption was a central element of freedom, an entitlement of citizenship... Consumerism was also, accordingly to the department store magnate Edward Filene, a 'school of freedom,' since it required individual choice on basic questions of living." What eventually emerged by the middle of the 20th century was what Cohen calls the "Consumerized Republic" in

which “self-interested citizens increasingly view government policies like other market transactions, judging them by how well served they feel personally.” (Cohen 2004:397)

The complement of viewing government transactions in market terms is the ongoing transformation of the citizen into a customer in the eyes of politicians and statesmen. A related development is that even when Americans are still civically engaged they tend to be “organizing more but joining less,” as a result of the highly rationalized “professionally managed organizations” that allow citizens to simulate participation by simply mailing a donation (Skocpol, 2004:13) . The result of all this has been grimly summarized by Crenson and Ginsberg (2002)

“The era of the citizen is now coming to an end... despite the nation’s initial democratic exceptionalism, contemporary political elites have substantially marginalized the American mass electorate and have come to rely more and more on the courts and the bureaucracy to get what they want. We call this personal democracy to distinguish it from popular democracy, a way of doing business that requires elites mobilize non-elites in order to prevail in the political arena. It is personal because the new techniques of governing disaggregate the public into a collection of private citizens.”

Explaining the Paradox

We began by posing a paradox in contemporary American life: the fact that a nation whose citizens are deeply committed to the belief in freedom, and consider themselves the freest in the world, nonetheless, until recently, had a government that threatened basic civil liberties and, more importantly, has systematic flaws such as the way its elections are financed and the role of moneyed interests in the passage of its laws that often make a mockery of democracy and the principle of equal freedom. We sought illumination of this problem by an examination of Weber’s views on freedom, rationality and disenchantment in the modern West.

We can now begin to understand the paradox. Ordinary Americans, for reasons discussed earlier, are utterly disenchanting with politics, with their state and with the institutions of democracy that make formal freedom possible and through which it is

enacted. Because they remain deeply committed to belief in freedom, yet are suspicious of the formal institutions of freedom that sustain all freedom, they have resolved this profound discord in their political culture in two ways familiar to students of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957:25-26): by cognitively separating democracy and its related institutional processes from the semantic field of freedom, in other words through changing what freedom “truly” means by restricting it to its private, purposive and substantive versions experienced in their personal lives. Secondly, by reducing the importance and salience of the state and formal institutions in their lives or, more properly, by persuading themselves that government shouldn’t matter, and that the less of it the better.

The process is self-reinforcive both internally and externally. It is internally or cognitively reinforcive in the preference changes resulting from the feedback of choosing to believe in, and experience, freedom in purely personal terms. Having chosen to believe that freedom is all, and only, about one’s personal, individual life and relations with others-- one’s autonomy, being left alone, one’s inner self-determined state of fulfillment through doing what one wants, having nothing to do with government-- this choice becomes a powerful motivator to continue believing that this is the only real and true freedom.

It is also externally reinforcive, and in examining how, we come both to the major consequence of the privatization of freedom and the answer to our opening question. First, it is a reasonable guess that the divorce of freedom from democracy may be a major feedback factor explaining continuing political apathy and ideological incoherence among ordinary Americans (Piven, 2000; see also Smith, 1989 who convincingly argues against Nie, Verba & Petrocik ,1980, claim of a post-sixties spurt in political sophistication). The average turnout rate in presidential elections since the sixties has been between 50 and 55 percent, and although there was a significant increase in presidential turnout during the 2004 and historic 2008 elections(up to 63 percent, the highest since 1960) resulting in the election of the first African American president, there is no reason to believe that the basic trend has shifted or disdain for politics has

decreased. Obama's extraordinarily well organized campaign succeeded in motivating young people who actually voted, to enthusiastically engage in a wider range of electoral activities, but he did not significantly increase their overall rate of voting over the 2004 level. And in rejecting government financial support, and running the most expensive campaign in American history, over \$730million on his campaign, he may well have fatally undermined the already limited campaign finance law. I'm suggesting that the uncoupling of freedom from democracy has meant that democracy has been denied one of the most expressive factors motivating people to participate politically: what Weber called the psychological magic of freedom. The enormous psychic force, the civic passion and moral valorization associated with freedom accrues less and less to democracy.

One effect of low levels of participation is to greatly enhance the influence of those who do vote and these are disproportionately the wealthier, more educated and more powerful members of the electorate, a pattern already evident in Weber's day. This makes the system more responsive to their needs, and motivates them to participate more. (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995:495) But the converse is equally true: "political interest also works to reduce the representation of the needy," which, in turn reinforces the view of the disenfranchised that government cares little for "people like us," thereby confirming their tendency not to participate politically, and so perpetuates the vicious downward spiral of disengagement and disenchantment.

Other factors reinforce this downward spiral, especially the exponentially growing cost of elections, resulting in the incumbency crisis and corrupting role of moneyed interests. In 2004 the cost of defeating a sitting congressperson was \$2M, and to defeat a sitting Senator, \$14.6 million. These figures all increased substantially during the 2008 election cycle. (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009) It is hardly surprising then, that there is no serious contest in the great majority of congressional and senate seats. Perpetual campaigning, the trivialization of issues by candidates and the press alike and institutional factors such as the primary system, all feed into the growing elitism and plutocratic nature of the political culture (Patterson, 2002). The vast majority of

American voters are aware of all this, consider the system corrupt, but either feel impotent to do anything about it, do not care, or are not sufficiently motivated to act to change it. Contributing to their inaction is their belief that it has little to do with their own sense and experience of freedom. Leaving politics and government alone is deemed the best way of having government leave them alone to enjoy their cherished personal freedom.

In this, of course, they are gravely mistaken. A non-engaged electorate is one that places itself at great risk of emboldening elites and government to do precisely what is most feared: erode personal freedom, which is what happened during the Bush Presidency, when the need for enhanced national security after the September 11 terrorist attack was used as cover for an unprecedented assault on a wide range of formal, constitutional liberties. One important study (Doherty & Perlstein, eds., 2003) by a group of civil rights lawyers observed that a “new normal” had emerged in which government had become less and less transparent while intruding more and more on the privacy of individuals, the very reverse of the traditional default position in America. The many abuses and threats are now well known: the secret tapping of telephone conversations and probing of citizens library usage; the secret shift toward domestic spying by intelligence agencies; the by-passing of the Federal Judiciary and the use of extra-judicial organizations such as military commissions and detention centers; indefinite detention; the skirting of habeas corpus; the jailing of journalists and other threats to the press; executive branch efforts to restrict Congressional access to information; the rejection of the Geneva Convention and the justification of the use of torture in the interrogation of enemy combatants or suspected enemies, several of whom have turned out to be innocent, to list the most egregious. One of the most alarming aspects of this development was the passivity and lack of concern on the part of ordinary Americans. Especially troubling were polls showing sixty percent of Americans agreeing that the government’s power to keep wartime secrets is more important than the freedom of the press. What accounts for “the Quiet Republic,” as Richard Leone (2003) phrases it?

The delinking of personal freedom from democracy, and governmental action more generally, not only explains this passivity, but the strangest aspect of the paradox with which we began: that it was precisely the president who most threatened the formal liberties of Americans who, more than any other president in modern times, most celebrated America's freedom and its mission to spread it globally. The Bush-Cheney administration was able to do so knowing that few would perceive any contradiction between their freedom rhetoric and anti-civil liberties practices. Significantly, at the height of his popularity after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Bush urged Americans to show the terrorists and the world that freedom thrived in America by going to the shopping mall.

Conclusion: Weber, Freedom and Disenchantment

Our case study of American political culture has, I hope, not only unraveled our empirical puzzle, but in the course of deploying Weber's insights, helped to clarify his theory of freedom and to arrive at a sounder grasp of what he meant by disenchantment. The more common view refers to his complaint about the loss of magic brought about first by Protestantism and furthered by the modern capitalist order it partly engendered (Weber, 1985) But surely he must have meant far more than that, for if that is all he meant, later developments would have proven him empirically wrong. The modern industrial world, more now than ever, is still replete with magic, especially in America where fundamentalist religion of the most anti-intellectual and magical sort thrives, and where an important component of the corporate sector is devoted to the fabrication of the magical: the cinema, T.V., Disneyland, Neverland, Presleyland, and the many other fantastical extravagancies of popular culture that can hold their own with any magical enchantment pre-modernity has to offer. (See Ritzer, 2004).

No, Weber's disenchantment was with the inhumanity of rationality, the "dominance of a spirit of formalistic impersonality, 'Sine ira et studio,' without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm," (Weber, 1947:340), its unrelenting universalization in all domains of life – the economy, science, law, all administration,

charities, politics, even religion-- and its dread irrational consequences: “ a system of multiple dependencies, an ‘iron cage’ of ‘subordination,’ a general subjection of people to an ‘apparatus,’” (Lowith, 1943:64) But above all else, Weber dreaded its consequences for freedom.

Like Tocqueville before him, Weber saw clear dangers to freedom springing from essential features of modernity. But his grasp of this problem was far more complex and sophisticated than Tocqueville (on whose views, see Michael Hereth, 1986). Weber, for one, did not make the simple contrast between modern democracy and freedom that Tocqueville did, recognizing democracy to be an integral element of freedom. Rather, he saw the threat to the substantially rational ultimate ends of the democratic state—freedom and security—coming from its rationalization and the opportunity this offered to the exercise of “imperative powers” by controlling elites.

But Weber also saw that what modernity threatened is also what it made possible. Capitalist rationality, through the material emancipation it created, enabled modern freedom, freeing us from the awful physical dependencies of the pre-modern world. And the modern state, especially the democratic version with its mass electorate, is simply not possible without a legal-rational and bureaucratic foundation. Without it there would be simply inefficiency, dilettantism or plutocracy.

The problem then, is how to prevent, or at least manage, the irrational tendencies of a modernity we cannot do without, especially the cherished freedoms it gives with one hand but threatens to destroy with the other. Our case study of America clearly indicates the answer. This is political engagement, a point forcefully brought home by American political history over the past decade. The political engagement of the conservative right, a minority of the electorate, accounted for two terms of an administration that posed the gravest threat to American public freedoms, in the pursuit of their extremist (irrational) value-oriented freedom and as a consequence, the private purposive freedom of all, as well as the substantive personal freedom of those not holding similar values. And the increased political engagement of young Americans, African Americans and women, during the 2008 election cycle, produced what could have been (though only partially

achieved because of the politically engaged extreme right) the most liberal administration in the nation's history, headed by a president identified with one of the most disadvantaged groups in the nation.

We have seen, however, that what most prevents such engagement is disenchantment itself. Nothing better secures the locks on the iron cage of modernity and its dread threat to all forms of freedom than the very disenchantment it generates. And it is this realization that most depressed Weber.

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Figure 1. Percent Levels of Freedom for Self by Gender

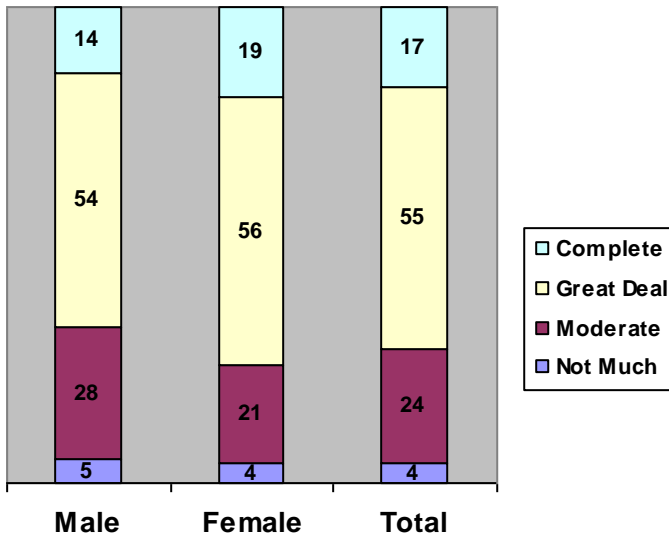


Figure 2. Percent Reporting 'Complete' or 'Great Deal' of Freedom by Gender & Ethnicity

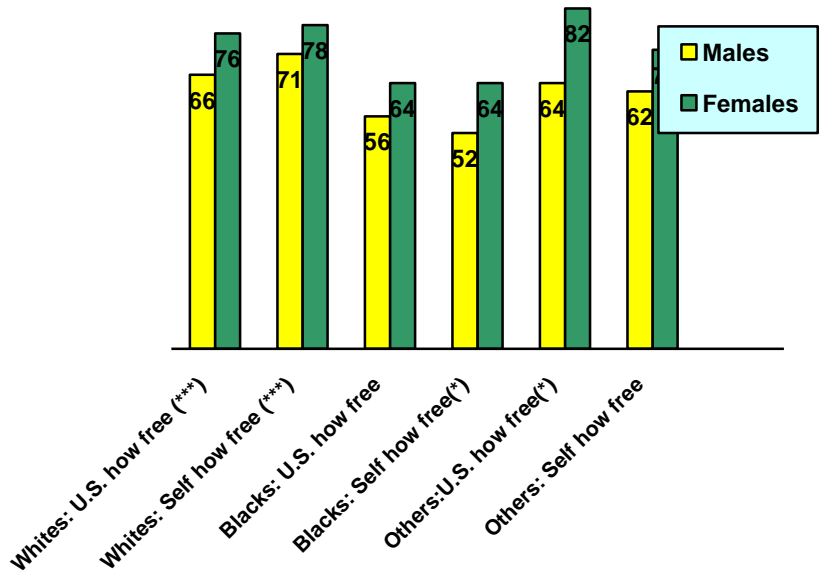


Figure 3. Perceived Change in Amt. of Freedom For Self by Gender & Ethnicity

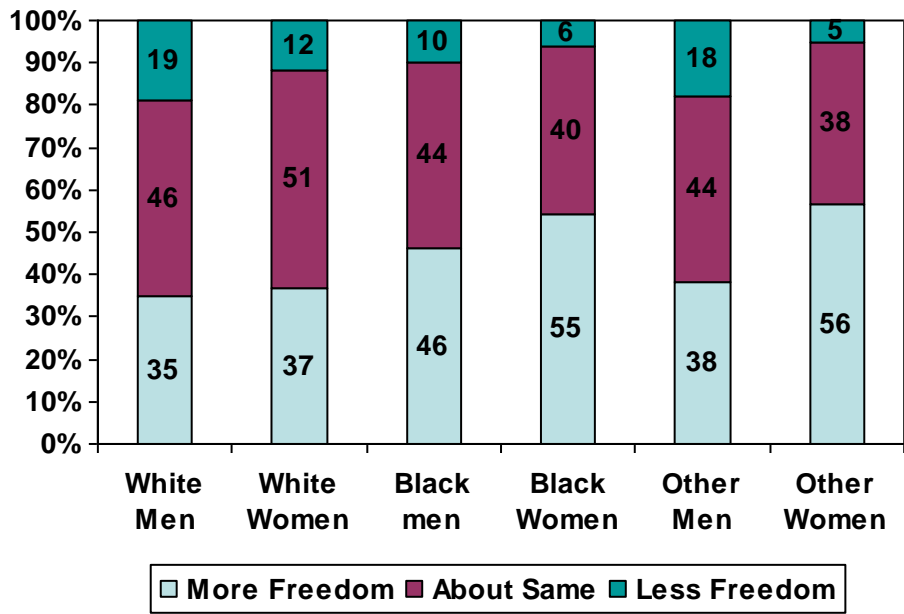


Figure 4. Perceived Change in Amount of Freedom in Nation

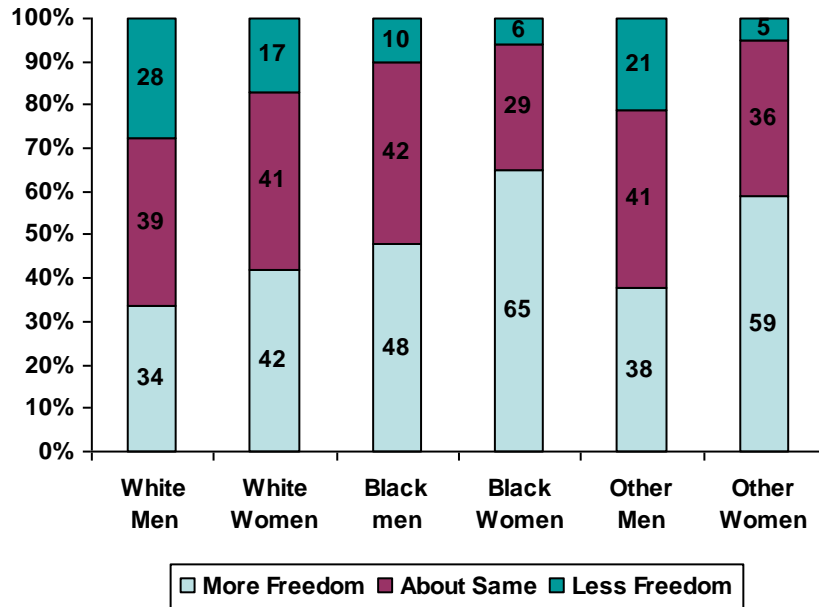


Figure 5. First Mentioned Notion of Freedom by Gender

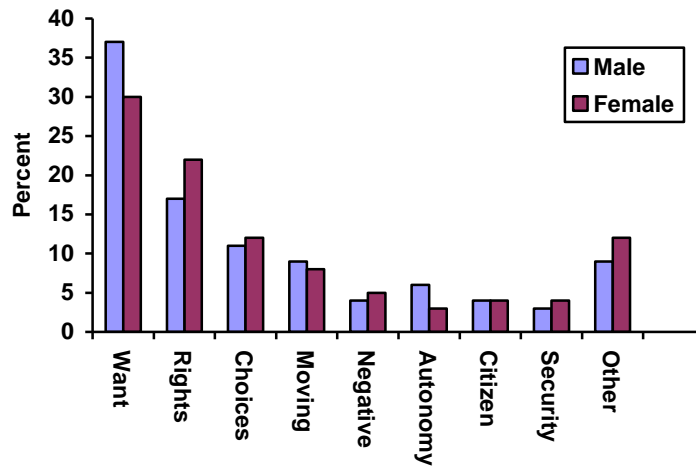


Figure 6. Percent first Mentioned Experience of Freedom, by Gender

