

# Look deeper at freedom, democracy

Such terms are clothed and twisted over time in the West to suit different needs and purposes

Nowadays freedom, democracy and human rights have become popular concepts cited often to suit ideological and political manipulations by some groups and countries. But the shift in their connotations remains intriguing, especially given how forces on the right have taken over the interpretation of these concepts from the left.



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With the historical decline in the dominance of religion in the West, new politico-philosophical concepts emerged as ideological building blocks.

They included the three mentioned above, together with progress, rights and equality. These ideas have a common characteristic: everyone can use any of them to justify their pursuits, no matter how different or even conflicting those pursuits might be.

For example, it is said that the essence of freedom is self-determination. But between slaves and slave owners, freedom for the latter includes the right to keep slaves, and for the former, it includes the right to rebel against their owners' authority. That means the definition of freedom changes drastically between slaves and slave owners. Their freedoms are in fact mutually exclusive.

The term freedom, or liberty, in the West came from the aristocrats. The Magna Carta Libertatum, commonly called Magna Carta, agreed to by King John of England in 1215, has been regarded as a milestone of freedom. However, the freedom enshrined in the Magna Carta, won by priests and barons from the king, included their right of control over the villeins working on their manors.

From the Magna Carta to the Victorian era of the 19th century, the essence of freedom remained unchanged. Britons who felt so free at that time failed to appreciate that their freedom was based on the lack of freedom for the villeins working on their properties like slaves, and the peoples of British colonies.

The French Revolution in 1789 spread the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity around the world, setting off a great campaign to emancipate all the slaves in the world.

This inspired the uprising by slaves against French rule in Haiti in 1791, following which freedom has been linked to all the peoples enslaved by their colonial rulers



French citizens in Paris wait to cast their votes in parliamentary elections on June 11 last year. France gave over two-thirds of men the right to vote through the 1791 Constitution but universal suffrage was achieved only in 1944. Still, this was much earlier than in the United States, where complete universal suffrage was achieved only by 1965. NURPHOTO

and their struggles to win emancipation.

For a long time the understanding and definition of freedom established by the peoples fighting to free themselves from colonial rule was seen as the genuine article.

However, World War II turned out to be another critical point for the changing connotation of freedom. In 1941, US president Franklin D. Roosevelt joined British prime minister Winston Churchill in drafting what is now known as the Atlantic Charter, which set goals for the postwar world.

The US and UK, imperialists and colonialists, suddenly metamorphosed into defenders of human civilization. After the US and UK defeated Nazi Germany, Italy and Japan, freedom was again synonymous with the West.

Amid Cold War confrontation, the West further misinterpreted its own identity — the “free world” as opposed to the socialist bloc — by picking on certain characteristics of the latter. Meanwhile, many emerging nations, after seizing governing power, turned to strengthening the government, suppressing enemies of the state, and fighting subversive attempts, all of which distracted them from freedom advocacy.

Like the concept of freedom, democracy has also been redefined by the West. In the 2,400-odd years from the days of Pluto in

ancient Greece to the postwar era, democracy was always vilified by the aristocrats and elites of Western countries. Pluto and his fellow detractors of democracy were still being quoted by British conservative thinkers after the French Revolution.

For example, in 1797, UK prime minister William Grenville concluded that the success of the French Revolution greatly bolstered the democratic camp, adding that democratic politics could dominate Europe in the following century and pose a formidable threat to the monarchs and aristocrats.

From Plato to Grenville, the anti-democratic political front they represented was consistent and unequivocal throughout. They maintained that only the aristocrats were outstanding, respectable and intelligent, while the masses were undisciplined, ignorant and the governments they formed were worthless.

This rivalry between democracy and aristocracy lasted until after World War II, when newly established socialist countries were referred to as “democratic states”, because they believed they represented popular sovereign rule.

The Cold War split democracies into two blocs. “Democratic states” represented people's sovereignty, state and politics, whereas “democratic societies” represented

capitalist sovereignty, state and capitalist-led politics. The two blocs became sworn enemies and mutually exclusive.

That rivalry was evident throughout the process of drafting the United Nations Charter and La Declaration Universelle des Droits de L'Homme (The Declaration of Universal Human Rights, or DUHR) after WWII. When the Soviet Union's representative proposed adding “scientific development should serve progress, democracy and international peace”, and replacing “democratic societies” with “democratic states” in the DUHR, the changes were rejected by Western countries and eventually voted out, because at that time democracy and democratic states only referred to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

In those days, Western countries avoided confronting socialist states over who were real democracies, because their pace of expanding the right to vote was extremely slow. In the UK, for example, less than 4 percent of the population had the right to vote in 1761, about 8 percent in 1883, and women were given the same right to vote as men in 1928. And universal suffrage was implemented in the last of UK territories in 1968.

It took the country more than 560 years to complete the journey of universal suffrage. The story is

quite similar in the US, where the 1789 Constitution stipulated the federal government must be elected by the people of the member states of the union; but only white male citizens were given the right to vote in 1868 via the 14th Amendment of the Constitution.

American women won the right to vote even later, in the year 1920. And complete universal suffrage was achieved in 1965, when the Voting Rights Act took effect. The process took over 170 years to complete.

France attempted to achieve complete universal suffrage during the Great Revolution and managed to give over two-thirds of grown men the right to vote through the 1791 Constitution, but such efforts failed as a social experiment back then.

The number of legitimate voters in France was kept at about 70,000 in 1814 and grew to over 240,000 in 1846. Voting rights were given to all grown men in 1875 following the establishment of the Third Republic; but complete universal suffrage, including all women of legal age, was finally achieved only in 1944.

This chapter in the history of Western civilization can be seen as the victory of the bourgeois class in establishing its dictatorship rather than that of the people's democracy, because universal suffrage was achieved only after the general public agreed to a compromise over political rights and the bourgeois class finessed its ruling skills. Socialist states, on the other hand, achieved people's rule by overthrowing the bourgeois dictatorship.

Soon after major Western countries achieved universal suffrage, the long debate over democracy took a turn in the Western countries' favor, thanks to politico-economic studies by generations of Western sociopolitical scientists that culminated in a theoretical standoff of sorts.

It was decided that the “competitive election” of one man, one vote was the ultimate definition of democracy, without which, societies were either totalitarian or authoritarian. Books such as *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* by Joseph Schumpeter (1942) reestablished the standard of democracy on paper, and voila, democracy became a label owned by Western countries.

Yet clothing such labels with ideological glamour can prove illusory, and hijacking of their true value may face judgment of history.

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