The Concept of Freedom in North America in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries with a Brief Comparison to the Developments in Germany

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Abstract

I. Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries

In relation to the current differences between Germany and the United States* it is interesting to compare the development of the concept of freedom in both societies. The German reformation in the first half of the sixteenth century was a step towards a higher degree of religious freedom. Freedom was a keyword in Martin Luther’s theological conception. His theory of justification, entitled the “reforming discovery”, spoke of the unconditional acceptance of the sinful man by God.1 Justification from God was understood as a process of personal libera-

tion with consequences for the life of the Church and the individual Christian. Luther reduced the authority of the church by asserting that the gospel of justification could only be experienced by reading the Bible or hearing God’s Word from the pulpit. The young Luther postulated that Christian parishes should have the right to elect their ministers and to dismiss them if they did not preach the gospel in accordance with the Biblical word. Eventually religious freedom was reduced to the right of the ruler of a regional territory to choose the Lutheran or the Catholic Church (Peace of Augsburg 1555). His subjects had to accept this decision, but were allowed to emigrate on religious grounds.

In a recent study Peter Blickle has shown that Germans enjoyed the so-called “old freedoms” or privileges, such as the freedom of movement, marriage and free disposal of the proceeds of one’s work. However, these rights did only concern the economic part of the classic human rights: the right to freedom of disposal and property. On the other hand, Blickle highlighted that in the early modern period the protest movement played an important role in the biblically founded concept of freedom in the sixteenth century.

II. The development of the tradition of freedom in the North American colonies

In early modern Europe there was a lack of freedom. In the seventeenth century people immigrated to North America because they hoped to lead a life in freedom and to establish a new society without great restrictions. In all North

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American colonies\(^9\) representative assemblies of the people were established. They had less political rights than the English Parliament, but embodied the firm intention of self-government in the colonies.\(^10\) Whereas the Southern colonies took up the British political system,\(^11\) the North endeavoured to create a new society. Puritans immigrated to America because they suffered religious persecution in England. They were Congregationalists, who emphasised the autonomy of a single Christian parish and rejected any authority of a higher church.\(^12\) Hence, the Mayflower Compact mentioned the authority of the English King, but did not speak of the Anglican Church. The competences of the state were reduced. The state should prove law and order, and protect and foster the common interests of the colonists.\(^13\) The Puritans wanted to build a “New England” meaning a “better” England, which was intended to be an example to the “old England”. John Winthrop planned to erect a “City upon a hill”, a “Holy Commonwealth”, which was intended to be an example for the whole world. The Puritan dominated colonies saw themselves as a clear counter system to England


and her ruling political and religious perception; it was an extreme attempt and to a certain extent the last means of the emigrants, to bring about a change in mother land in order to save her from God’s anger by establishing the new society “in the wilderness”. Winthrop’s thesis on the election of the American people, which should become one of the founding myths of the American collective identity, was expanded on thanks to the vision of the covenant. A part of the covenant vision was the divine gift of the land with the task to settle it. However, the covenant should only suffer settlers, who behave socially and in accordance with the community.14 The Puritans derived the principle of local self-government from the Congregationalist ideal.15 Their view of freedom was founded on the interests of the community.16 Whereas in Massachusetts there was a great extent of religious intolerance,17 the colonial charter of Rhode Island guaranteed the freedom of conscience. In the opinion of the founder of the colony, Roger Williams, one church, which was established and supported by the state authority, did not correspond with God’s will. According to Williams the state had no


authority to prescribe its citizens membership of a church. The conscious lies outside the state’s sphere of jurisdiction. Rhode Island became a germ cell of American religious freedom.\textsuperscript{18}

In Pennsylvania the political order was devised according John Locke’s concept of a social contract. Here the citizens committed themselves to only obey such laws, which they themselves approved. It was the task of the government to prevent infringements of the law and to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens i.e. property, active political participation and the involvement of citizens in the court by jurors.\textsuperscript{19}

During the eighteenth century the number of European immigrants increased. They had various reasons for emigration such as religious persecution, lack of political freedom, compulsory military service or economic need. The American society distinguished itself with a high degree of mobility and dynamic. Efficiency and industriousness were considered as cardinal virtues. It seemed possible for everybody to achieve personal success and advancement. Meanwhile the eligible electorate had become much bigger than that in England.\textsuperscript{20} However, the desire for freedom of the European immigrants was linked to the restriction or denial of civil rights of the Native\textsuperscript{21} and African Americans.\textsuperscript{22}

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Already in the seventeenth century there were harsh critics regarding black slavery. The Mennonites from Germantown\textsuperscript{23} insisted on the establishment of the right of freedom of the body. They highlighted that the slaveholders themselves had come to America in search of freedom.\textsuperscript{24} Already during the colonial period a specific Afro-American culture came into existence. It combined both African and European elements.\textsuperscript{25}

The Anglo-American intellectual life was based on the European developments, but it also had its own accent. The centre of the American Enlightenment was in Philadelphia. In contrast to Europe the Enlightenment in North America was much more sober and more geared towards practice. Altogether it played a much lesser role. Predominantly English ideas were absorbed, while the French Enlightenment with its physiocratic and atheist ideas hardly met with approval. Influenced by the literature of the European Enlightenment the Americans developed a self-image of a simple, rural and unspoilt people.\textsuperscript{26}

Benjamin Franklin was celebrated as a leading figure of the American Enlightenment. He concerned himself with the solutions to practical problems such as the invention of the lightning conductor. For him it was a question of the communication of useful information, which strove towards an educational process for the whole society. Frugalness and the encouragement of autodidactic behaviour were his essential goals. Franklin embodied the triumph of the

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Enlightenment over the darkness and the victory of reason over every form of unreason. His discoveries promised to liberate society from ignorance and superstition.

Additionally Franklin represented virtues, which were considered as characteristic of the American national character, e.g. farsightedness, intellectual flexibility, versatility, self belief, spirit, abstinence, a sense of justice and courage combined with a lack of awe for authority and an animosity for fantastic speculations. Franklin also embodied classical civil values, such as the appreciation of hard honest work and a harsh criticism of idleness. He was a prototype of the American “self-made man”, whose wealth was more the result of his initiative than his inheritance. Nevertheless, he was not irreligious, he confessed to Deism, believed in God and immortality, however he could not accept the teaching of Christ’s divinity or the superiority of Christianity above other religions. Franklin believed that religion was useful for the state because it teaches people appropriate moral behaviour. One serves God best, when one does something good for humanity.27

Between 1735 and 1755 the Great Awakening took place in North America. It was the replacement of Puritanism, which relied on the educated clergy, by Evangelicalism, which was close to the people. From then on those “awakened” henceforth understood the Christian belief as a religion based on experience. It individually approached the people and aimed at their personal decisions. Conversion was seen as a change in the human heart that God had achieved. Turning towards one’s neighbour was an aspect closely connected to this new spiritual existence. The movement understood itself as the call of God, which spanned all churches. At the same time it crossed the colonial borders and acted irrespective of class, race and sex. It was responsible for the establishment of an all-protestant consciousness in North America, but also for the formation of a specific American Christianity. The movement did not only prove itself modern through new forms of preaching, but also through the use of the media of press, flyers and books.

Some of the “born again” (awakened) Christians in New England left their churches and formed Baptist or separate communities, to which people only gained access if they could tell of a conversion experience. In other areas new dynamic Christian churches sprung up. They primarily gained members from outside of the elite and included Slaves in some places. Some of the distinct characteristics of these parishes were individual initiative and the insistence of freedom from state influences.

The Great Awakening movement replaced the European state churches, which had previously been dominant. With its specific form of proclamation of the inherent dynamic it fulfilled the needs of the growing American society, which was generally based according to the market. In the realm of society the Awakening promoted development away from traditional obedience to political competition. Nevertheless, in the majority of the American colonies no division of the state and church had taken place by the end of the colonial period and religious tolerance was generally still not anchored in the law.

In New England a counter reaction was formed. Its most important representative was Charles Chauncy from Boston. This was the beginning of the movement towards a liberal Christianity, according to which divine revelation was subject to examination by human reason.

III. Independence and the Constitution

The French and Indian War (1756–1763) made a decisive contribution to the rise of American self-confidence. From now on the people were convinced they could provide their own security without support from abroad. The French and Indian War was considered as a struggle between freedom and tyranny. Under the influence of the Great Awakening America was seen as the chosen people of God fighting against the Catholic enemy.

The North American society had a deeply rooted democratic potential. Some reasons for this development were the wide distribution of property, the broad
possibilities of political participation, the weak power of an aristocratic stratum and religious denominationalism.  

After the war Britain tried to keep the colonies under stronger control than earlier. The American colonists refused the British measures and chose the motto “freedom against tyranny”. Freedom was seen as an essential principle and a natural right of man. The violation of freedom by the state authority caused the citizens to resist. The most prominent advocate of this position was Thomas Paine. The consequence of this position was the seizure and control of the governmental power by the people. The people could protect their freedom by building a civil society by means of social contract. According to John Locke civil or civic freedom was considered as the continuation of natural freedom. Freedom was only limited by the interests of the other members of society and was understood as a universal good with validity for all people. According to this idea of freedom the power of government ought to be restricted. The government had to protect the human right to life, freedom and property.

Another element of this “radical” thought took up the republican ideals from ancient times and the Renaissance (Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli), according to

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which man is only able to fulfil himself by active participation in political life. The ideal man is virtuous, not corrupt and primarily acts in the public interest and not with private and selfish aims. However, there were also “loyalists”, called the “Tories”. They understood freedom as a good, which was granted to the subjects by the government or the rulers. A middle position was held by the so-called “Whig wings”, whose most prominent advocate was John Adams. They connected freedom with the stability, property, the idea of individual competition and equal opportunities.

Both the republican and the liberal idea of freedom, brought about a change in the mentality of the people. The Americans increasingly understood themselves as actively acting subjects. They no longer considered their lives as part of unalterable external events. Instead they placed importance on personal initiative and confidence in the individual abilities and competences. One had the possibility to take his life in his own hands. This way of thinking had clear political consequences; the government only had the right to take taxes from the fruits of honest labour if the citizens agreed.

The American idea of freedom connected ethic ideals with material interests. Freedom and property were both considered as values that were worth defending. “Liberty” became the key word of the American Revolution. This term in its classical meaning connected freedom with independence. For example the inhabitants of Boston understood freedom both as the individual right to private property and as the collective right to self-administration and legality. Freedom was more than a simple idea, it became a passion.

During the revolution some symbols for freedom emerged. One of them was the liberty bell, which originated from the Quaker town of Philadelphia. The Quakers considered freedom as a gift from God, a light, which God gave all creatures and not only a circle of elected people. This godly present obliged people to live in peace and not to suppress each other. The Quakers wanted to spread

rights, which they had secured for themselves, to other people. A bell audible for everybody corresponded to these ideals.40

In its Declaration of Colonial Rights and Grievances the First Continental Congress postulated the validity of “natural” human rights and a universal concept of freedom.41 Meanwhile the readiness grew to protect freedom by fighting for it with troops. In a speech at the Virginia Convention on 25th May 1775 Patrick Henry coined the phrase “give me liberty or give me death”. It might be necessary to risk one’s own life for the preservation of freedom.42 Thomas Paine put this position in a concrete form by postulating the independence of the colonies from England, which was as corrupt as the Pharaoh of Egypt in Moses’ times. The Biblical Exodus story, which Paine mentioned, was considered as a process of liberation from serfdom. A just Republic should substitute the British colonial power. Again, Paine referred to the Old Testament. The prophets had rejected the Jewish monarchy. Paine considered America as the only place where the principle of universal freedom would be able to plant roots.43 The American Declaration of Independence considered life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness as unalienable rights of the people, who have been created equal.44 The text is traced back to a draft from Thomas Jefferson, a 33-year-old lawyer and landowner from Virginia. Right at the beginning the declaration formulated the claim that North America should take an independent and equal place alongside

the “Powers of the Earth”. The self-characterisation as one of the “Powers of the Earth” spoke of an extremely great self-confidence. This claim was founded on natural and divine laws. Life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness were classed as unalienable rights of men, who have been created equal. The American struggle for independence provided official legitimisation with this proclamation.

At the same time the continental congress bade farewell to the previous line of the movement, according to which the right to freedom called on the definition from the English constitution and the rights of the British citizens. The right of freedom was essentially to defend oneself against the British establishment and the English parliament. As a result of the influence of the independence movement the understanding of freedom changed from a defensive understanding into a positive, forward moving and dynamic concept. The “United Colonies” already understood themselves as free and independent states. They firmly believed in the “protection of Divine Providence”.

The rights, which are proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, do not call on the English constitution but on “self-evident truths”. It is a matter of natural and universal truths. As independent citizens, the former sons of Great Britain now regarded the inherited freedom as the true guarantor of freedom. A nation was born out of this understanding. Sovereignty was no longer granted by the King and the English parliament but by the American people. The citizens of America had granted themselves freedom, this maxim was to become an essential element of the American freedom myth. However, freedom touched on geographical preconditions. There was a great physical distance between America and Europe. The Ocean was regarded as a natural bulwark given by God, against all attempts to suppress America from other parts of the earth. The great natural resources of the vast continent were a sufficient basis to be able to insure economical independence. Additionally, it provided the people with freedom from economic exploitation. This concept of freedom was no longer defensive, but positively defined, improving and full of dynamic. The citizens of America had defined freedom themselves.

The freedom that America had gained was considered as the start of a great future for the whole of mankind. The Americans were convinced that their new concept of freedom would reach the whole world. This was a great vision of freedom. Furthermore, the basic for another characteristic of the American understanding of freedom was laid: its dynamic.

46 Cf. ibid., p. 102.
47 Cf. ibid., p. 100.
48 Cf. Thomas Paine, Common Sense, e.g. p. 3, 22.
The text of the Declaration quickly spread throughout the land and was received with great enthusiasm. It came to spontaneous celebrations with rituals, which had previously only been used for the birthday of the English King, in the form of fireworks, illuminations, the firing of canons, the ringing of bells, military parades, celebratory processions of the people, speeches and meals. New additions included the public reading of the document and speeches on the meaning of freedom. Many Americans hung a copy of the printed Declaration of Independence in their homes. The document, which quickly became a national icon, intended to always remind them that they were citizens of a free republic and the personal advantages, which came from it. Moreover the Declaration of Independence did not enter the nation’s collective memory as the work of an individual but rather as a document passed by the American national representation.

In the battles during the War of Independence the motto “Liberty or Death” became a wide spread battle cry. The ideal of freedom was considered as worthier than life alone. In the former colonies there was a great movement to create constitutions for the new states. They connected the concept of freedom with the concept of equality, which was valid at least for the free citizens. It did not only mean equal legal and political rights, but also equal economic chances. This
development lead to the decision of the majority of the Northern states to gradually abolish slavery. However, in the South the concept of freedom was constructed in a hierarchical way. Edmund Burke declared that slavery clearly showed the masters that their own freedom was a valuable good.53

The principles of freedom became amendments to the American Constitution in the “Bill of Rights”.54 Religious freedom was and remains the First Liberty. The establishment of an official state religion was forbidden. Nobody should be prevented from exercising his right to practice his personal religion in a free way.55 The right of free speech,56 free press and participation in peaceful assemblies were also unchangeable rights.

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Altogether much had been gained in the name of freedom. It was firmly anchored in the constitution and the Bill of Rights, connected to it. In the future these documents could be invoked if freedom was in danger.

Slaves, women and Native Americans in contrast could not call on the guaranteed freedoms for a long time.\textsuperscript{57} The American concept of freedom remained limited for a long time although it should have continuously spread in a dynamic process of further development.

\section*{IV. Consequences for Germany?}

The American Revolution triggered a number of revolutions on the European continent. This development lasted until 1848. In Europe there was a great wave of support for the events in America.\textsuperscript{58} Enlightened Germans also welcomed the American idea of freedom. However, compared with France the principle of equality or human rights were not discussed particularly intensely.\textsuperscript{59} During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the concept of freedom in Germany placed less emphasis on the personal rights of an individual, but referred to the liberties of political communities. Under the impression of the excessive after-effects of the French Revolution the German public preferred cautious reforms of society.\textsuperscript{60} The Protestant shaped German Enlightenment saw in the religious renewal initiated by Luther a general promise of freedom, which was to be realised step by step. Prussia preferred reforms, which came from the government. The main supporters of these reforms were intended to be the cultivated civil servants, not the people.\textsuperscript{61}

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\bibitem{61} Cf. Bernd Sösemann (ed.), Gemeingeist und Bürgersinn: Die preußischen Reformen (Forschungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preußischen Geschichte, Beih., N. F., 2), Berlin 1993; Paul Nolte, Staatsbildung als Gesellschaftsreform: Politische Reformen in Preußen und den süddeutschen Staaten, 1800–1820 (Historische Studien, 2), Frank-
During the Napoleonic Wars German nationalism arose. As there was no united national state in Germany, German nationalists thus thought that national unity should be a precondition of political freedom.62 This was one of the reasons why the congress of Vienna restored the ancient political order.63 Freedom and unity constituted the political program of German liberalism in the “Vormärz” period between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. In the eighteen-thirties freedom took precedence over unity. Most German liberals hoped for limited constitutional reforms or a Prussian hegemony. Some, especially from the Palatinate region, were advocates of the principle of peoples’ sovereignty.64 The celebration of Hambach in May 1832 postulated a free and democratic Germany, which should be established against the power of the royal rulers. However, the convention did not specify with what means the gathering people wanted to achieve their goals. Finally, this position was the feeling of a minority in German liberalism.65 During the eighteen-forties the French threat to Germany taught the moderate liberals that the German question was mainly a question of power. To solve it, it was considered necessary to cooperate with Prussia.66 This idea referred back to Hegel’s theory that freedom meant the insight of a necessity.

In 1848 the simultaneous quest for national unity and liberty failed.67 The following years saw a long period of decline in the liberal movement. Economic liberals proved to be daring industrialists and venturesome speculators on the stock markets, but they supported the conservative policy of the states not to in-
terfere in common affairs. The German Empire of 1871 placed unity before freedom and bureaucratic-military strength before civil society. The Kaiserreich had a modern culture, a strong market economy, social dynamic and a high culture of justice, but there were also strong elements of illiberalism in the constitution, the society and the mentality. The German conservatives celebrated the victory of 1871 as the final defeat of the principles of the French Revolution. It was considered as a victory of the loyalty of subjects over the spirit of revolution, of the godly order over anarchy and of morality over immorality. The identity of nationalism also changed. Since 1878/79 it was no longer connected to the struggle for emancipation, but defended the political and social status quo against all positions, backing a greater degree of cosmopolitan attitudes, more freedom and more equality.

V. The further development in the democratic culture of freedom in the United States

Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century United States freedom made further progress. In the founding era of the republic, the Federalist period of the seventeen-nineties, it could be protected against Federalist efforts to restrict the freedom of press and free speech (Sedition Acts). The free press was strengthened and had become the fourth power of American democracy. Freedom of research and free expression of one’s political opinion had become the strong democratic values of liberty.
However, the anti-federalists under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson did not only expand personal freedoms. Under their leadership the American Empire could celebrate its hour of birth. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the territory of the “empire of freedom” (Jefferson) doubled.

In the following decades the American concept of freedom was combined with two national myths: the manifest destiny and the idea of the frontier. The myth of the frontier constituted American exceptionalism, i.e. the readiness to accept new challenges and to conquer existing frontiers in the spirit of innova-

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tion. The taming of the wilderness was defined as a special American experience.74

This experience was connected to the strong conviction of a manifest destiny of the American nation to play a special role in history. This theory served as a legitimisation of the expansion of the United States to the Pacific Ocean. This expansion was considered as legitimate, because the United States was a great experiment of freedom. In his novel “White-Jacket” Herman Melville described the Americans as “the special, the elected people”, the contemporary Israel, which bore the ark of the freedom of the world.75

During the first half of the nineteenth century there was a massive expansion of suffrage. In 1860 every free man had the right to vote. This was considered as


an essential freedom.\textsuperscript{76} The consequence of this development was the widening of a democratic public. President Andrew Jackson popularised the conviction that each citizen should be able to occupy a public office.\textsuperscript{77}

However, the main focus of this policy was not in Washington but in the local self-administration. Although it was recognised that a certain amount of national politics was needed in order to support the Western expansion and to encourage economic initiatives, the American philosopher and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, nevertheless accurately described the Americans as “freedom fanatics”.\textsuperscript{78} The obsession with freedom was simultaneously expressed with their hatred of duties, taxes, toll barriers, banks, hierarchy, governors and almost all laws. A weak government proved to be beneficial for the maintenance of private and public freedoms. Freedom was understood as the absence of government from the sphere of personal life. The individual should be able to follow his interest and train his talents without external intervention. Whether they were Democrats or Whigs, as soon as their party was in opposition, the supporting press of both parties forged a connection between freedom and a minimum amount of government. Freedom was ever increasingly connected to a defence of private rights and local interest.\textsuperscript{79}

Freedom remained an essential characteristic of the young nation in its self-description. The French noble and political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, published in 1835 his work \textit{Democracy in America}, a descriptive impression of politics and society that he gained during his long travels in the “New World” for the French public. Tocqueville had, as he put it, fallen on a “holy culture of free-


dom”.80 As he later maintained this was deprived of the basis feeling of analysis and must be more defiantly felt. It settles in the heart, fulfils and delights it.81 Tocqueville had learned that in the United States the great possibility of participation in public life hinders the creation of a tyranny of the majority and with it also the establishment of tyranny and anarchy. At the end of the first volume Tocqueville freely gives a profound criticism of America’s civilisation. He wrote that one could not longer quash the people with respect for the laws of humanity.82 In many statements the Americans congratulated themselves on the won freedom. This was clear in the farewell address of President Andrew Jackson in 1837. Never has a nation of million enjoyed so much freedom and happiness as the United States of America.83

This development was accompanied by the market revolution, which was a further democratisation of the economy. A strong component of the idea of freedom was the right to participate in public competition and to have equal access to the market.84 The market revolution was conditioned by technical innovations in the fields of transport and communication (steam boat, canal, railway and telegraph). They connected the farmer to the national and international markets.85 At least in the North the consume of factory produced goods also grew. Together with the industrialisation86 and huge economic growth87 a complete revolution in the private sphere occurred before the middle of the century.

83 Cf. Farewell Address Andrew Jackson to the People of the United States, Harrisburg 1837, p. 16.
A mobile population appeared. It dauntlessly seized the new possibilities brought about by the economic changes. The right of participation in public competition and access to the market ever increasingly became the touchstone for American freedom. Freedom and material progress or wealth were now also connected in the public symbolism.88

VI. Slavery, Civil War and Reconstruction

An other expansion of freedom was the abolition of slavery during and after the Civil War 1861–1865. The abolitionists89 supported the northern principle of “free labour”. According to the principles of the market revolution they were convinced that man should have the right to enjoy the fruits of his labour.90 Parliamentary restrictions against abolitionists made the argumentation against slavery much easier. The abolitionists could make clear that the system of slavery did not only violate the rights of its victims, but it also threatened the rights of free people.91 Acts of violence against abolitionists by a fanatical mob proved that slavery threatened the civil rights of White Americans.92

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The abolitionists did not only revive the spirit of the Bill of Rights, but placed the universal idea of freedom in the conscience of the Americans once again. In their understanding the right of personal freedom took priority over the right of property and local or regional self-government. They considered slavery as a backslide to hierarchic and non-egalitarian structures. These were traditions that did not appear to be acceptable in the America of the nineteenth century.93 In 1854 the Republican Party was established. It emphasised the values “free soil, free speech, free labour, free people” and free press.94

Among the slaves the desire for freedom was the predominant issue. The mental background of this position was the biblical story of the Exodus. Slavery was seen as a part of the journey of the Black people to the Promised Land of freedom.95

The conflicts after the election of Abraham Lincoln96 as President97 lead to the Civil War.98 Lincoln was convinced that slavery violated the essential conditions of American freedom, i.e. personal freedom, the democratic order and the


possibility to improve the personal conditions of life.\textsuperscript{99} The South fought for the right of self-government, economic independence and security of property.\textsuperscript{100} Lincoln initially understood the war\textsuperscript{101} as a fight for the continuation of the Union,\textsuperscript{102} but with the Emancipation Proclamation of September 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1862 the war became a crusade against slavery.\textsuperscript{103} Lincoln stated that this was “a new birth of freedom.”\textsuperscript{104} Lincoln declared in Gettysburg that freedom and equality were the essential fundamentals of American democracy. American soldiers had sacrificed their lives for these ideals.\textsuperscript{105}


The speech clearly marked the warpath of the North. It was no longer a simple question of protecting the Union but also defending the establishment of freedom and equality before the law for all inhabitants of the United States. Of the constitution, which tolerated slavery, the President directed the attention of the nation back to the Declaration of Independence, which contained the principle of equality.

Lincoln’s speech combined a religious with a secular understanding of freedom, which had already been formed in the time of the revolution. This combination also determined the public political culture. The *Battle Hymn of the Republic* even compared the death of Christ for the salvation of humanity with the death of a Union soldier. In this sense the war had become a Christian crusade. The fighters in the North died for the freedom of man. Those, who advocated the vision of America’s divine mission, saw the war as God’s punishment for the national sin of slavery. This justification was adopted by the otherwise unchurchly Lincoln in his second inauguration speech,106 after he had won the presidential election in 1864. Lincoln enjoyed, at least since his speech at Gettysburg, the general recognition as the leader of a free republic and as such he became a symbol of freedom.

Both sides of the war linked themselves to the freedom rights, but with limitations. Although there were still free elections and in the North the opposition press could still be printed, in the South hundreds of “Union” supporters were sentenced to imprisonment by military tribunals, many others were violently expelled from their homes and some were even executed in the quick processes. It effected, for example, newspaper publishers or democratic politicians. Their number ran into thousands. Lincoln as the topmost war leader claimed the right to allow arrests to be carried out, even when there was no concrete comprehensible circumstance of guilt for the person in question. In light of the demands, conditioned by the war, for the uniformity of the nation the civil rights became fragile.107 During the First World War this experience was repeated.108

108 Cf. e.g. H. C. Peterson/Gilbert Fite, Opponents of War, 1917–1918, Madison, Wis. 1957.
After the war the slaves were released, but a real reconstruction of the Southern society failed.

VII. Conclusion: The “Gilded Age”

The “Gilded Age” (1877–1901), which immediately followed, was an era of far going social changes and modernisation. The Statue of liberty in New York was an expression of the Zeitgeist. She symbolised the freedom, which illuminated the world and eminated from a henceforth “completely free” nation.


