

UDC 327.1(73)"20"

Shane N. Holden,
Seton Hall University
ORCID: 0009-0000-7674-2893

IDEAS AND INEQUALITY: REASSESSING FREEDOM AND POWER IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract: This paper examines the contradictions between the foundational ideals of the United States and the realities of its historical and contemporary practices. While the nation was established on principles of liberty, equality, and individual rights, these values have been selectively applied. This paper further explores how U.S. foreign policy and globalization have extended these inequalities far beyond domestic borders. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the country's definition of freedom has been continuously shaped to preserve political and economic dominance, raising critical questions about the alignment between American ideals and lived realities.

Foundations and Contradiction of American Freedom

The United States of America became an official sovereign state 250 years ago on July 4, 1776 after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Shortly after in 1789, the Constitution was ratified, outlining the values, laws, and eventual guaranteed rights of its peoples. It is important to attribute the history of the United States' beginnings to its domestic and foreign policies over the past 250 years, as these important dates shaped how the United States will operate. The country prides itself on its diversity and willingness to provide freedom to others, setting itself apart from the rest of the world as a model of freedom, described by Thomas Jefferson as an "empire of liberty" (Craig). However, does the country's history actually align with its values?

At its source, the republic was founded on principles of liberty and individual rights, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, but economically resting in large measure on slavery. Among these principles is the idea that all people are created equal, whether European, Native American, or African American, and that these people have fundamental rights, such as liberty, free speech, freedom of religion, due process, and freedom of assembly ("Founded on a Set of Beliefs" 19). Accompanied by these values, the first Naturalization Act of 1790 contradicted them, establishing an early exclusive American identity of free white men. Freedom came to be defined more by the boundaries of race, and slavery shaped the language and idea of freedom (Craig: 2007). American values staggered heavily, especially during the American Civil War (1861), as well as times of international conflict, where rhetoric of liberty and diversity continued to be challenged at an extreme level. These contradictions highlight that the nation's founding ideals were not universally applied, but rather selectively extended in ways that preserved the existing systems of power.

Institutions, Expansion, and the Limits of Democracy

Systemic institutions such as the Electoral College, Senate, and the Supreme Court are designed to check and constrain majority rule. This function gives significant power to the leading representative parties (Republican and Democrat), as the system places significant power in the hands of elected officials, rather than the immediate will of the people.

This overarching distribution of power is combined with long periods of restricted voting rights and racial, patriarchal, and property-based exclusivity. Although checks and balances exist within the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, these processes take considerable time to enforce restrictions on the executive, which allow opportunities for exploitation. As a result, democratic participation has historically been limited in practice, reinforcing a system where political power is filtered. This structure reflects the preservation of established hierarchies and deliberate models to maintain stability.

Additionally, as the United States expanded its influence, the pursuit of global hegemony outweighed concerns for marginalized populations. What sets the United States apart is its inherently powerful geographical position, which allowed it to prosper as an isolationist power focused on internal development. However, this growth was deeply tied to imperialism and territorial expansion. The transition from a settler colony to extending its power over others—taking land, extracting resources, exploiting labor, and ensuring unequal relationships that benefit its interests has allowed the United States to grow exponentially with limited opposition (Paik 2023: 1). These policies place racism as central to the:

U.S. settler colonial project that seeks to exclude and remove anyone who does not fit the ideal settler community—one based not only in a white racial identity, but also property ownership, patriarchal gender norms, and health and ability, among multiple factors. Unfit for citizenship, such others cannot access the rights consecrated by the United States. Instead, citizenship is defined against them, its contours sharpened with every exclusion (Paik 2023: 2).

These peoples are left subjected to U.S. state power, as the state's significant hegemonic power constrains nearby country's freedoms and accessibility to resources significantly. These countries can be classified as domestic dependent nations, which allowed the United States to continue expanding further West, entrenching itself as a global superpower. It is apparent that the United States is quick to abandon its solidified values, as long as it can be justified to improve the country's aggregate power. Over time, this accumulation of predominantly white power and imperial actions has led to unstable fluctuations of domestic and foreign stability. This demonstrates how the United States limited the application of its founding principles to preserve power.

Despite its willingness to encroach on other states' sovereignty, the United States was once an isolationist power, unlikely to engage in foreign conflicts. It was not until the twentieth century that the country reluctantly participated in both World War I and II. As its global role expanded, so did a significant conservative focus, as the country thrived as an exploitative power for generations. This ideology would persist, focused on increasing economic power and a more active role in Latin America. However, domestic transitions and public opinion shifted towards a self-perception as a defender of rights and freedoms, though not for all people. Legacies of racism and imperialism continue to limit who counts as the proper subject of rights (Paik 2023: 5).

During the Cold War, the United States wielded civil rights as an instrument of soft power to advance its geopolitical interests. Domestically, openly racist segregation and immigration laws tarnished the United States' international image during this time. Segregation and discriminatory

immigration policies exposed the limits of its commitment to equality, prompting reforms that sought to polish its image as a defender of freedom.

Through systems of exclusion, constrained democracy, and imperial expansion, the United States has consistently shaped the meaning of freedom to serve its political and economic interest.

While these contradictions are often analyzed at the institutional level, they are not confined to seemingly faraway systems alone. The identity of the United States shapes everyday realities of those living within them, but also those affected by the influence of the country.

As a citizen raised in a low-income household with divorced parents, I have experienced firsthand how the promises of equality and opportunity are not equally accessible. The ideals of freedom that define the American lifestyle face structural limitations that affect economic stability, education, healthcare, and opportunity. My experience reflects the broader pattern of selective inclusion that has defined the United States since its founding, especially since I am a white male still confined by these systems.

Lived Experience and Structural Inequality

I lived in a large household growing up with six older siblings until my house foreclosed and my parents divorced. What resulted was a significant decrease in opportunities based solely on my household's low income. My housing situation was precarious, which directly limited my access to education and other resources. This gap between the idealized "American Dream" and the realities of the common American people highlights the lack of equal opportunity as freedom is conditional, not universal.

My experience growing up in a low-income household reflects the broad structural pattern of economic inequality described by Carles Boix. He argues that individuals without sufficient resources are often "constrained to invest in low-return technologies and to remain in low-income brackets" (Boix 2010: 4). Meaning that economic inequality persists not simply because of differences in effort or ability, but that those individuals are more likely to make decisions that prioritize immediate survival over long-term advancement. As a result, inequality becomes self-enforcing, as those with fewer resources are unable to accumulate the capital necessary to improve their economic position. Models of inequality show "intergenerational transmission of wealth" shapes outcomes over time, demonstrating that these conditions are inherited, not just based on income. In my case, I inherited poverty through my family's social and economic instability. These forceful restrictions on upward mobility contribute to the institutional injustices that further separate class by income which do not discriminate by race.

Capitalism, Globalization, and the Reproduction of Inequality

While these inequalities are historically ingrained, they are actively reproduced through the economic capitalism of the United States. Capitalism plays a large role as the privatization of goods creates further disparity between class and extends this influence over the world. Economic systems are not neutral; they are structured in ways that reproduce existing hierarchies, particularly through the intergenerational transfer of assets and opportunities. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the capitalistic society of the United States burst into its unipolar moment. The American economy, built on Hobbesian and Lockean possessive individualism to provide a commodious living to its citizens at the cost of nature and other human beings, has been the coping stone for other countries to shape their political and economic life. In that way, its multinational corporations and transnational corporations became accessories to the American grand strategy. This era of

globalization ushered “squeezing the entire globe into its [United States’] cocoon of concern for affluence and wealth production” (Gann 2009: 126).

The American world order—and seemingly its domestic system—is the coercion of others to dedicate themselves to the extravagant lifestyle of American people.

Moreover, this objective required the proliferation of various institutions and structural arrangements which controlled and adapted the political systems of other countries into the liberal market economy. Not only did the global order change, the way in which countries operated shifted towards a Westernized view, and in many cases, directly puppeteered by the United States. Gann (2009: 127) describes globalization and the New World Order as “a camouflage for the American world order, has not yet facilitated democratization of world economic and trading systems in terms of equity in participation and access to resources.” Japan is one of the many countries the United States holds significant leverage over in its grand strategy, and its historical congregations clearly display proof of U.S. self-interest. The withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol highlights these interests through the unwillingness to compromise on the American way of living. Therein lies a divide of opinion however, as the rise of non-governmental organizations and greater participation of civil society directly oppose American supremacy and the conservative side. Through globalization, these inequalities are not only reproduced domestically but extended internationally, which reflects the class structure and American identity.

The two-party system was built on the direct opposition of views within the United States, creating further disparities between gender, economic status, and especially race. These structural inequalities are most visible at the local level, where economic vulnerability directly impacts the stability of individuals' lives. Through his work in *Evicted*, Desmond (2012: 91) reiterates the struggles of families at high risk and the persistence of poverty showing,

Findings from ethnographic fieldwork reveal how structural constraints, having to do with work, welfare, and housing costs, interactional patterns, and gendered reactions to receiving an eviction notice, place women from poor black communities at especially high risk of eviction.

Eviction rates are legitimate sources to draw from to properly show structural constraints through ethnographic data and neighborhood demographics. His work demonstrates how these constraints render low-income individuals and families incapable of breaking out of these barriers. This framework can outline the institutional disincentives these families face while explaining how welfare programs, income, housing costs, and ability drive the downward mobility of these families and the persistence of inequality within the United States. Desmond contends that eviction is not simply a consequence of poverty, but a mechanism that multiplies it, as housing instability disrupts employment, education, and access to resources.

Reconciling Ideals with Reality

Although, the United States does not fail to uphold its ideals accidentally, it does so through its complicated structure and deliberate extension of its sphere of influence. From its founding contradictions rooted in slavery and exclusion, to the development of institutions that filter democratic participation, the nation has consistently defined liberty in ways that preserve existing hierarchies of power. These patterns exist beyond domestic policy, as imperial expansion and global influence have reinforced inequality both within and outside of the United States.

At the same time, capitalism serves as a central piece in which these inequalities are produced, as the accumulation and transmission of wealth across generations limit mobility and concentrate opportunity to those with access to capital. As demonstrated through theoretical

frameworks and lived experience: economic instability, housing insecurity, and limited access to resources are not isolated issues, but deeply connected outcomes of a system that prioritizes accumulation over equity. Only by recognizing how these structures operate can the United States begin to reconcile its foundational principles with the realities it produces.

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