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Conversation with...Eric Foner

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Abstract

*Eric Foner is De Witt Professor of History at the University of Columbia. Born in New York City to a family that included union organisers, political activists, and historians – his father Jack was a scholar of the labour and civil rights movements – Foner has went on to become one of the leading historians of his generation. His most recent book, for example, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (2010), won the Pulitzer Prize, the Bancroft Prize, and the Lincoln Prize, while he has been one of only two figures to have been elected to be President of both the American Historical Association and the Organisation for American Historians. Previous works have included *Free Soil, Free Labour, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Revolution* (1970), *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), and *The Story of American Freedom* (1998). While two strands run throughout his intellectual trajectory, the first being the abolition and legacy of slavery, it is the second theme that I wish to take up here.*

Freedom. This is a word like any other – or perhaps not. A word that has instant visceral and cerebral appeal. A word that resonates with diverse and quite often incompatible and irreconcilable political audiences. A word that occasionally haunts and in many ways defines the causes and struggles and dynamics of the century from which we have just recently emerged: from imperial geopolitics to decolonisation; from recalcitrant conservatism to the expansion of civil and political rights to previously marginalized groups; from the struggle between fascism, communism, and liberalism, to contemporary debates about the proper relationship between states and markets. After all these days who, we might ask, can be *against* freedom? Such is the power and potency of the word.

Just as interestingly, who can be *for* freedom? Who defines who is for and who is against freedom? Very often two sides in a political contest will claim to be fighting for this word. Yet, they find themselves fighting on opposite sides. Indeed, which political actors, social forces or national communities have been privileged in ascribing meaning to events - events defined as either for or against freedom? How has freedom come

down to us historically, for surely it did not come to us fully formed in the way that Athena sprang from the head of Zeus. How has it been constructed, shaped and advanced and by whom and for whom and with what effects? What are its secrets and silences, its omissions and commissions? For freedom has a history and a story. Like any endeavour that seeks to place the present in context and that seeks to understand antecedent events, we find uncomfortable specifics and inconsistent generalities, whether ensconced in the materiality of the archive, or dormant in the political (un-)conscious; embarrassing instances that have to be quickly forgotten, explained away or accounted for; things done *wrongly* - from a distinctly presentist vantage point – in the family name of ‘freedom’. Like any history there are also interacting structures and agents, processes and forces sometimes within, and sometimes beyond our ken. Like any story, meanwhile, there is drama and pathos, a narrative arc and unforeseen twists in the plot.

In the modern age, one country has been inextricably bound up in this story – if for no other reason than sheer self-identification. Indeed, ‘freedom’ has been alternatively called the United States’ ‘foundational ethic’, ‘ultimate codeword’, and ‘most resonant, deeply held value’. The notion of ‘America’ fulfilling this role has been the case since at least the Pilgrim Fathers, whose memorial in Boston, Lincolnshire mentions their search for ‘religious freedom across the seas’. A century and a half later, meanwhile, an erstwhile corset-maker from Thetford in Norfolk trumpeted out to the thirteen colonies in *Common Sense* (Thomas Paine, 1776): ‘Freedom hath been hunted round the globe...O America, receive the fugitive freedom, and prepare, in time, an asylum for humankind’. In the late nineteenth century the symbolic embodiment of this idea, the Statue of Liberty, welcomed waves of immigrants from Italy to Scandinavia, from Ireland to the Russian Pale of Settlement: ‘give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to break free’. A rather more prosaic example from a recent popular cultural product brings the story much more up to date. In the hugely popular and critically acclaimed TV series, *The Sopranos*, we hear chef and restaurant owner Artie Bucco – whose roots like his boyhood friend, mob-boss Tony Soprano, lie in *Il Mezzogiorno* – tell the young Albanian hostess of whom he is enamoured that he cannot help speed her through the green card process: ‘I guess you’re just gonna have to do it

yourself. I'm sorry...I wish I could help you, but it's a small inconvenience compared to living in freedom, right?'

In what he has termed 'the forever unfinished story of American freedom' the work of Eric Foner stands out. In the course of his career, Foner has examined the ways in which freedom has been shaped and reshaped across American history. My interest in Foner's work stems from my own recently completed doctoral dissertation and forthcoming book *Struggles for Freedom: Afghanistan and US Foreign Policy Since 1979*. In this work, I essentially analyse the role that freedom has played in US foreign policy towards Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion of that country. While based on archival research and oral history interviews, comparing and contrasting narratives of 'freedom' employed by the US during the Cold War and the Global War on Terror, *The Story of American Freedom* was indispensable in helping me place my own research within a much broader historical context. While I work at the intersection of diplomatic history and international relations, rather than American history *per se*, *The Story of American Freedom* nevertheless became merely a starting point for a broader engagement with Foner's *oeuvre* (which in turn rekindled my interest in the US Civil War and gave me the excuse I needed to read the copy of Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs which had been sitting on my bookshelf for several years!).

Building upon Foner's work, I have found 'freedom' to be a powerful interpretive frame through which to understand the United States. Indeed, I would suggest that an understanding of the relationship between the United States and this key term is crucial for those who wish to understand not only this most powerful of countries, but America's place in the modern international environment and its own understanding of its role in history (this extends way beyond Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the names ascribed to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq respectively). It was, therefore, a real honour and a pleasure to be able to talk to Professor Foner about 'American freedom'. I spoke with him over coffee at the Old Bank Hotel opposite All Souls, Oxford, while he was in town for a board meeting of the landmark social history journal *Past and Present*.

AH: *Central to your academic career has been the question of American freedom. I think the readers of this article would be quite interested to know how you came to be interested in this theme?*

EF: Well let me start by saying, historians are not necessarily the good autobiographers, we tend not to analyse ourselves as much as other people. I was an undergraduate and then a graduate student in the United States during the 1960's at the height of the civil rights movement, and of course the Vietnam War, but particularly the civil rights revolution, which led many, many people, including myself to try to understand the history that had led to this crisis in American life. The study of slavery [also] exploded and the study of the period after slavery, and I became one of those people studying the anti-slavery movement. My first book was called *Free Soil, Free Labour, Free Men* and even though I didn't conceptualise the concept of freedom in quite the same way as I later would, it really was all about the whole question of slavery and freedom...That book began a series of works which culminated in my work on the reconstruction era after the civil war which was published in the late 1980's, a study of the time when freedom was a concrete question of public policy, not just an ideology, or a set of values...So in a sense, I think the main inspiration initially was simply to understand the world I was living in which is the inspiration of many, many historians...America was riven by really deep divides and so where did they come from in our past...that was my main motivation in the beginning...along the way I had a little detour where I write this book on Thomas Paine and the American Revolution, again a book in which the concept of freedom figured very dramatically...I always seem to be attracted to studying people or moments of crisis...where these issues get galvanised, and pushed to beyond in a sense where previously we had conceptualised them...so that was the first part of my career and the concept of freedom was quite important there, and then a little later on in the 1990's I decided to write this book about the history of this idea of freedom from the Revolution all the way up to the present.

AH: So from Thomas Paine up to the present era the meanings of American society are played out within this term...

EF: That is exactly right, but that can also be somewhat misleading, or at least can obscure the fact that Americans tend to absorb all sorts of ideas into the notion of freedom, sometimes when we are talking about freedom we are really talking about equality or community or economic justice, or things like that, but they always seem to be expressed in the language of freedom. So that this is part of the reasons why American political discourse doesn't seem to always coincide with that, let's say, in Europe, where I think there is actually a much richer political language, there is a problem with everything being reduced to freedom, because it really flattens out what are really very different sorts of concepts...in the United States...we are always talking about freedom or liberty, which are used pretty interchangeably regardless of what the actual subject is.

AH: One of the things that I found interesting in my research was that in the American Presidency Project, the online repository of all the presidential speeches and pronouncements, in keyword searches 'freedom' comes up roughly 17,000 times, 'liberty' around 7000 times, 'democracy' 3000, in fact 'exceptionalism' only comes up half a dozen times or so, most of those past 10 years, I found that really fascinating...

EF: Well that is true, of course...[but] there may be something a little misleading about that...the problem is the more recent you get, the more presidential papers there are. So Reagan's were gigantic and he used freedom all the time, so if you look and see how many of those thousands of citations were just Reagan...as time has gone on presidents have said more and more things, and issued more and more papers, so just counting up the numbers doesn't really tell us, we also need to look at the distribution over American history. I think the slavery issue did galvanise a great deal of talk about freedom in 19th century America, even though presidents were not issuing as many, ...the entire collective works of Lincoln is seven volumes and two or three of those are before he is president, that is nothing, I mean the works of Roosevelt, of Reagan, are multiple,

multiple volumes...but still your point of course is correct, that this is the key word, as they say, of American political language.

AH: While 'liberty' is of course still used, it seems to me that 'liberty' is more prominent in the early days of the Republic, but then freedom seems to gradually supplant it in terms of prominence...

EF: Well, I just had an email from a journalist in the USA...some of these Tea-Party, you know [these] very conservative people, are trying to urge people to use liberty and not freedom, they say liberty is the individual without restraints, and freedom they think is more of a statist sort of idea, and in some ways there may be some merit to that, but I think most people use them interchangeably. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln talks about a nation conceived in liberty and then a little while later he says we are going through a new birth of freedom, he is using these words more or less the same way. English is a wonderful language, because it has more words than any other language, I am not a linguist, but I read somewhere English, it absorbs words from everywhere, this is what makes it great to be a writer in English, but also daunting, because there are multiple ways to say almost anything...certainly there is a Latinate way and a Germanic way of saying almost anything, and liberty goes back to the Latin and root of *libertas* and freedom goes back to the Germanic root of *freiheit*, but that is just the English language, that we have these two roots merging into one language, so there is more than one way of saying almost anything and this is just one little example of that.

AH: I mean although both words are used interchangeably would you accord any significance to the fact that freedom seems to increasingly supplant liberty, or would you share in that view that it does...

EF: Well... I think that has happened since the Cold War actually...since World War Two really, the notion of the United States being the leader of the free world, originated really in the fight against Nazism, and then was carried over into the Cold War... the

United States being the exemplar of freedom, the Soviets lacking freedom, of course liberty was used also, but it seems like freedom became the central rallying cry or the central short-hand for what the difference was between us and them, we had freedom, they don't have freedom. Now of course, saying that opened the door to people in the United States to claim that they lacked freedom, and as I said the civil rights revolution, they called themselves the freedom movement, right, free at last, free at last, freedom schools, freedom marches, freedom rides, freedom songs...

AH: Let freedom ring...

EF: Let freedom ring, now to some extent that is a reference to the emancipation of the slaves, but it is more than that, it is a very broad concept which includes, equality, and dignity, and rights, and recognition by the society...so it seems that in that context the word freedom was utilised both by the government, but by authorities and by the critics at this same time, so liberty seemed to be less, you know less prominent. I think it has become more prominent again lately, because the radical right in the US has really adopted liberty not freedom as their rallying cry and their critique of Obama and their critique of government and of taxation and of regulation, all sorts of things, all that seems to come under the rubric of liberty, for them.

AH: This is of course an area in which you have thought about deeply and published extensively, but I would be interested to know whether you think that liberty was somehow tainted by its association with a slave-owning republic and then freedom becomes a way of transcending this? For example, in the Gettysburg Address which you mentioned above, Lincoln speaks about 'a new nation, conceived in liberty' that shall have 'a new birth of freedom'...

EF: I mean Jefferson did call it an empire of liberty, Paine as you said, an asylum for mankind, people seeking liberty from other countries who come to the United States, whether slavery tainted American liberty is an interesting question, a fellow called John

McKivigan years ago wrote an article called 'Monarchical Liberty and Republican Slavery'. It was about how the abolitionist movement contrasted British devotion to liberty and the American republic's devotion to slavery, in other words turning around the normal association of a republic with liberty and a monarchy with despotism. They said in fact that it was the monarchy that was promoting liberty after emancipation in 1833,¹ so liberty was used in conjuncture with the American form of government. The emancipation of the slaves I think did elevate freedom to a more central place, and not just in terms of issues related to race. One of the themes of my book [was that] long after the end of slavery, aggrieved groups would pick up the example or the mantle of abolitionism to promote their own causes, so labour talked about economic freedom, chattel slavery has been abolished, but industrial slavery still exists, we need industrial freedom or economic freedom, by linking their plight with that of the slaves, metaphorically, they sort of again emphasise again the word freedom.

*AH: Obviously a lot of people from these islands in which we are sitting went to America and were therefore important in terms of the development of ideas about 'American freedom'. However, do you think that it could be argued that in terms of the ways in which the subject has been studied and understood there has been a degree of Anglo-centrism? I am thinking, for example, of David Hackett Fisher's *Albion's Seed*² where he speaks about four British 'folkways of freedom' in America.*

EF: Yes. Fisher is continuing to write that series, but even in colonial America there were a lot of people who were not English or British, the largest group that came to the colonies in the eighteenth century were Germans, what were their concepts of liberty...and then of course there were Africans in large numbers that were brought in, they had their own understanding of what liberty was or should be, given that that they were slaves, so there is a certain Anglo-centrism, but to some extent that is understandable given that the people who created the American nation were very Anglo-centric in a sense.

¹ This refers to the UK Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

² David Hackett Fisher, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

They were consciously thinking of themselves within an Anglo-American tradition of discourse going back to Locke or Harrington or wherever you want to find it, or eighteenth century country party ideologies, but they tended to think very much in British terms. When they were thinking intellectually in terms of their own political formation, they were thinking in British terms, whether Scottish or English. The key founding documents, whether it's the Declaration, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, do use liberty in ways that would be very familiar to eighteenth century Britons.

I mean it's interesting, maybe surprising, but maybe not, that a guy like Thomas Paine, who came here, *sorry there*, who went to the colonies in 1774 at the age of 37, within a few months wrote this pamphlet which galvanised everybody. I mean he was an outsider, he was not like Jefferson or Adams or any of these people, or Franklin who had grown up in that world, he was a total outsider, what he was writing as much reflected his British experience, but none the less it was completely understandable to vast numbers of colonists. That suggests something about the dominance of the British tradition of liberty in the discourse of that time. I think as we move through American history though, we must move away from that, as immigration fills the country from all over the world, from Ireland, from Germany, from Eastern Europe, from China, from Mexico, all these people are bringing ideas with them, they may come for liberty but their idea of what liberty is shaped by the world they are leaving. So it needs to be a multi-cultural view of American freedom.

AH: I remember reading an admiring poem by the poet Robert Burns entitled 'An Ode to General Washington's Birthday', and being a Scot I also think of figures like James Wilson and John Witherspoon, so it has always been fascinating to me that this was almost a transatlantic debate, a transatlantic discourse...

EF: Very much so. But of course, very quickly thereafter the French Revolution introduces a whole new set of ideas about freedom and fears about freedom, and so very quickly one has to start thinking beyond the British Isles to think about American influences on American ideas about freedom, because the French Revolution really

shakes things up enormously in the 1790's, and then and although not studied nearly as much, the Haitian Revolution also affects a lot of people, both in terms of fear and in terms of inspiration in the United States, particularly as the slavery issue becomes more central to debates about freedom.

AH: One of the frequent arguments that I come across is that all this talk of freedom, all this study of culture, concepts, values...

EF: It's just rhetoric...

AH: That is right, it doesn't matter. It is just propaganda, hypocrisy, or epiphenomena. This is not what really matters, it is a distraction...

EF: The answer to that is yes sure freedom is used for propagandistic purposes all the time. When...the 9/11 attacks took place President Bush went before Congress and brought the whole thing within the realm of freedom, that they hate our freedom, we love freedom, they hate freedom, I think that there is a combination there of genuine belief and propaganda. When President Truman gave a speech to Congress announcing the Truman Doctrine, and calling for aid to Greece after the British said in '47 we don't have the money anymore, we can't support Greece against this internal rebellion...and that there is a danger of communists taking over there and the US has to step in...Vandenberg [a Republican in Congress] said to Truman you better couch this as a worldwide battle for freedom, because if it is just aiding a bunch of Greeks no one is going to want to spend the money. So it is not that Truman didn't believe this, but it became a way of selling a policy, the Truman Doctrine was to promote the free world, and so forth.

I think that the question I would ask to people who say it is just propaganda, 'why did they choose *this* for their propaganda, of all the values, of all the words, of all the concepts, why is *this* the one that keeps coming forward. In other words, the very value

of it as propaganda tells us something about its deep roots in the culture, because it wouldn't be useful as propaganda if that weren't the case...So basically...there can be a number of different things. I think it displays an unsophisticated view of politics to think that some things are propaganda and some things are real belief and that these are two separate categories. Peoples motives are *always* complicated, the use of language is *always* complicated and serves many purposes at once, so [...] there are partisan political national interests, all sorts of interests at stake, but the way people choose language tells us something about what values they feel are most appealing to most people and that itself is a revealing thing. I would say...[that] when the American people stop thinking of freedom as a central part of their culture, politicians won't talk about freedom any more, they will find something else to talk about. It does not mean that one should not be alert to cynical uses.

AH: That's my response. I am trying to say, of course, that it can be used instrumentally, hypocritical, whatever, but that doesn't exhaust its uses...

EF: I wish Obama would talk about it, I wish he would try to incorporate, to defend his health care plan using some concept of what freedom is, can you be a free person if you lack various kinds of security, whether its economic or medical or others. Roosevelt talked about that, the free person cannot be economically impoverished, you can't really enjoy freedom if you are in that condition, of course the right rejects that completely...I say the left should battle for possession of the idea of freedom, but they never listen to me. Obama won twice anyway, but I told that to a friend of mine who is writing speeches for Hillary Clinton so watch when she runs, let's see if anything happens.

AH: That is really interesting. You mentioned Reagan there and I was lucky enough to interview some of Reagan's speechwriters and I was asking them about this word freedom and how he was so successful as you point out, in reappropriating the term. Why were Reagan and Roosevelt so skilled at changing the meaning of this term, what qualities did they have...

EF: Reagan was a great actor of course. I don't say that to denigrate Reagan, I respect great actors, it is a wonderful talent to have. Roosevelt wasn't a professional actor you know, although he did seem to have this ability to communicate with people in a way that was very personal, very homespun even although Roosevelt was a rich aristocrat...I guess their speechwriters must get a lot of the credit too...Also, this goes back to the thing of propaganda, if you are selling something that people don't want, I don't care what language you use, I don't care how great an actor you are, I don't care if you have the best propagandistic language, it is not going to get very far. Look at Jimmy Carter, he used the term freedom a lot and it didn't get very far, because people didn't want what he was conveying through that. Ultimately, Reagan and Roosevelt were successful because people wanted what they were giving them.

AH: So, skilfully and adroitly using this term freedom is only going to get you so far?

EF: It is very valuable to do and it is certainly in a presidential campaign in a speech here and there but as you are governing you can talk about freedom all you want and if the economy is going down the drain, people...are going to find that very appealing.

AH: In January 2001, you gave a presidential speech to the American Historical Association entitled, 'American Freedom in the Global Age'. In this speech you say that: 'in the global age the forever unfinished story of American freedom has to become a conversation with the entire world, not a complacent monologue with ourselves'. Indeed, I guess in my own small way I am trying to take part in that conversation. Later that year, however, the momentous events of September 11 transpire. I'd be interested to know what went through your mind when you heard the attacks framed in terms of a battle between freedom and its enemies, and of course the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were entitled Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom respectively?

EF: Historians are often the killjoy in the party. Everyone is having a good time, enjoying themselves and then the historian comes and says no, no it is not like that at all,

you misunderstand all this, it is much more complicated, sorry. It is the historian's job to just not allow people to be swept up in this fervour of Iraqi Freedom, without again reminding people that freedom is a contested idea, and that our history is not just a simple one of freedom forever and for everybody. That spreading freedom by the sword is usually not a very effective way of doing it.

I wrote some essays which were widely reprinted at the time about civil liberties in wartime and then the danger of getting swept up into a war fervour and that how individual liberties...we must remind ourselves of WWII Japanese internment, WWI the suppression of freedom of speech, the Civil War Lincoln himself suspension of Habeas Corpus, the danger of suppressing liberty in the name of liberty, and the USA Patriot Act and things like that. To me the role of the historian is to say what a minute, let's just think through everything, let's remember the lessons of history which are not as simple as they government is conveying. But I also think that, as you now say, it put freedom right back on the agenda of discourse.

AH: One of the things I found very interesting recently, with the whole Snowden/NSA affair, is that the government will say that this is ultimately for a greater freedom. It is for the freedom of the state, it is for the freedom of the country, so we have to suppress your individual freedoms, this back and forth is very interesting...

EF: Well, it illustrates what we know, which is that freedom is not a unitary thing and some freedoms cut against other freedoms, and that is where a lot of the conflict comes from. The freedom of the slave-owner was premised on the slavery of the slave. Slave-owners said and believed it honestly, we, the slave-owner, is the freest person, free from manual labour, free for intellectual pursuits, whatever. Slavery is the basis of freedom, slavery for some is the basis of freedom for others, so what does that tell us about the concept of freedom, who are we talking about, who was entitled to freedom that is another big, big issue in American history...It pops up today in the question of illegal immigrants...they are not really entitled to be here, they are not entitled to the same

rights as other people, there is always some kind of boundary around freedom, and who draws it and why is another major issue throughout American history.

AH: When you were speaking there about the way that freedom is not a unitary thing, it made me think of Lincoln's speech at the Sanitary Fair in Baltimore in 1864 where he talks about different conceptions of liberty and the relationship between the wolf and the sheep...

EF: Lincoln had a somehow amazing way of taking commonly held ideas and expressing them in a way everyone could understand, succinctly: Gettysburg two minutes, Second Inaugural, another brilliant speech, seven or eight minutes, the Sanitary Fair, very brief remarks, but he had this way of encapsulating peoples ideas, including their ideas about liberty and giving them back in a way that made people think about them in a different way...I wrote a book about Lincoln a few years ago, I have taught nineteenth century American history for forty years, I have written about that period many times, but reading the works of Lincoln, really carefully for the first time, I mean *really* carefully, was an amazing experience. It increased my admiration for him, his amazing command of language, brilliant, logic, rhetoric, clarity. You can learn a lot about writing from just reading Lincoln's letters and speeches.

AH: Another objection that I have come across, and the Sanitary Fair speech would be a case in point, is that if there are so many different understandings of freedom, does this not mean that freedom is meaningless?

EF: Well, that is a interesting question. People asked me that after my book, which is somewhat based on the notion of freedom as a contested idea, an evolving idea. I would say, right in the sense in that there is no one abstract definition of freedom that we should go about applying all of the time in time and place...freedom is very frequently contextual, that is why it requires historical analysis, but when I lecture about this people say, just tell us what freedom *is*.

I say, well I'll give you my idea of what freedom is or what it ought to be, but it is mine, I am not saying this is what you or anyone else has to believe. I think there is a middle course between saying freedom is just an empty vessel into which you pour whatever you want, because over time there have been strands which have existed throughout American history. There is a difference, there is a middle ground between that and between saying, well here's what freedom is folks, I am telling you what it is and that is it, we can now, now that I have my five points of freedom we can go around judging. Ok, well the progressive era had three of them and the new deal had two of them and the Reagan era had four, no I don't think that is the way to do it, it is not an abstract *a priori*, it doesn't exist outside of history. Freedom has a history, and therefore fifty years from now people's concepts of freedom, they will still be talking about it, but they may be rather different than what we think about, in ways we can't even anticipate. For example, to the founders, freedom was primarily a public set of entitlements, you know they said the British were trying to reduce the colonies to slavery, why, were they putting George Washington in chains? No. By taking away our right to representation, having taxation and other policies agreed to by people you have chosen, is the essence of freedom, that's a public entitlement... Today more than two centuries later I think most Americans think about freedom in personal more privatised terms, freedom is living your life in the way you want to live it, whatever areas of life, certainly these guys back then were not talking about sexual freedom, the intimate kinds of freedom which are very much on our agenda nowadays. That is something different and new, so should we go back and judge the founders and say well they didn't believe in gay marriage, so what kind of freedoms did they have...well that is absurd, obviously, that was not a political question at the time. That is a good example of how concepts of freedom have evolved and will continue to evolve, so I would be very hesitant to give an *a priori* definition of freedom

AH: In the field of international relations, diplomatic history perhaps a little less so, it seems to me that there is a pronounced materialist bias. I guess what I am saying chimes with what you have just said, which is that freedom is not something outside of time, something outside of international politics, it is inside the world, it is here with us, it is

actively involved in shaping the world around us in greater or lesser ways depending on the context...

EF: Well exactly, I want to go back to one thing you were asking me when coffee arrived, when I said in that speech this has to become a dialogue with the world. To some extent that speech was a critique of an idea you mentioned very briefly that is so dominant in America and I think pernicious in many ways, which is American exceptionalism. Now of course American exceptionalism goes back to our revolution, if not before. Paine in *Common Sense* puts it out there, the birthday of a new world is at hand, we have escaped from history, the revolution cancels history and things start anew. That is a deeply held view in the United States, that the history of the rest of the world is irrelevant to us, we are so different...American exceptionalism homogenizes the rest of the world, there's all those people out there and then there is us, and we are outside of history. Therefore, the trouble is that is a recipe for parochialism, we don't have to know anything about them, because it is irrelevant to us, we don't have to engage in any kind of dialogue because we have our own premises and our own ideas and history and there is nothing to learn from the rest of the world...freedom of course is at the core of American exceptionalism, we are exceptional in our devotion of freedom, our understanding of freedom and that gives us the right to go around telling other people what freedom is and I mildly put forward the idea that we might also ask other people what they think freedom is, and we might learn something from that. That is a sub-theme in this freedom debate, but it is certainly deeply rooted in American culture.

AH: *I remember reading, I think it may have been Felipe Fernandez Armesto, who said that the only thing exceptional about America...*

EF: Is the intensity of their belief in their own exceptionalism, right. Don't run for office saying that, you have to say America is exceptional if you run for office, I mean it is, I think even among historians, that it is inbred so to speak, we sort of accept that idea without even thinking of it, and one of the things that you could homogenize Europe, there is American history and then there is European history.

AH: You think that that being the case it is important, to go back to your presidential address, that people from other countries become involved in this debate about American freedom...

EF: Well, in a sense they *have* to be involved, because we are the dominant power in the world. Maybe we won't be forever, but we have been and are, and therefore what the people of the rest of the world need to know what the US is doing in a way that we don't need to know what everyone else is doing, because it is not affecting us in nearly the same way...I think the American experience has highlighted the importance of certain ideas about liberty which are very important, individual liberty, a sense of personal entitlement against outside oppression, things like that. I think other people can learn from that and how it evolved in the United States, so yes, a dialogue goes both ways and it should.

AH: I know you have a meeting, if I could ask just one final question. After we had arranged our conversation I said to a friend who is also a fan of your work, what one question would you most like to ask Eric Foner? He said, why is he so successful? I realise that it a slightly uncomfortable question to be asked, so allow me to rephrase it. There will be a lot of early career scholars who will read this article who are embarking upon an academic career, ambitious, who want to get involved in these important debates that we have been speaking about. Is there any guidance or advice you would give them, any strategies that you have utilised over the course of your very successful career?

EF: Yes, there is advice. This may sound odd, number one, do not be a perfectionist. Try to do the very best work you can, obviously, but then *finish*. I am not a perfectionist, I obviously try to make my writing very good, but I stop. I know, I have friends who will hold onto a manuscript literally for ten years, they are never satisfied, it is never perfect. Yes, it will never be perfect, nothing created by a human being is perfect, if you are looking for perfection, you will never write anything, so don't just slap-dash anything off, but don't have a closure problem either. Especially when you are starting

out, you are nervous that you have missed something, or you have made a mistake, or you want this to be as good as it possibly can be, but don't be afraid to stop and move onto something else...And you know, the other thing, I am just going back to my own career. I learned to write here in Oxford, after I was an undergraduate in the US, I was lucky enough to get a fellowship to come here for two years...I learned to write in the tutorial system, that is I learned to write fast, and not be afraid of writing, you've got to produce a paper every week and there is no excuse for not doing it. I learned to write, to research and write quickly, clearly, and not be overwhelmed by the difficulty of the thing, so I never have a problem starting, just as I don't have a problem stopping...And then the other thing, is an adage from my mentor Richard Hofstadter who supervised my doctoral thesis and who was a brilliant writer, great, great writer, who said 90% of writing is rewriting. It is in the rewriting that you've kind of shaped it into something that is literary as well as historical, again you are not worried about your first draft, the purpose of a first draft is to just sort of get your ideas in order, and then the real process of writing and shaping takes place. So, that is how I write, I am not afraid to start. I am not worried if I do not think it is all that great to begin with, I go back over it, and over it, and over it, till I am satisfied and then I stop and if you can manage to do it that way you will be able to produce a lot of scholarship over the course of your career.

AH: Thank you very much for your time.

I enjoy talking about 'American freedom'. I have become semi-obsessed by the term. I take notes of every instance that the term arises – whether in work-a-day political debate or abstract philosophical speculation; whether on television, in people's tattoos, or on their t-shirts. If there is one person I would have wanted to speak to about American freedom, meanwhile, it would have been Eric Foner. I learned a lot through our conversation from someone who has spent much of his working life thinking hard about the term and how it relates to American history. At this stage, however, I would like to encourage the readers of this article to take part in this conversation. For the ways in which 'freedom' gets conceptualised in the United States and the ways these

understandings play out matter to us all – politically, economically, culturally, and historically.