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The Unfinished Revolution: The Changing Meaning of Freedom and Equality

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Abstract. A revolution is a fundamental transformation of an existing political or social system, often emerging when groups believe that existing institutions fail to represent their interests or protect their rights due to political oppression or social inequality. Although revolutions may take different forms, from struggles for political independence to social movements built on protest and resistance, they share a common goal: challenging existing systems and redefining the relationship between individuals, society, and political power. However, because revolutions respond to different historical circumstances and forms of injustice, their goals and the meanings of revolutionary ideals may change over time. The American Revolution of 1776 and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s represent two important stages in this development. This study examines how the Declaration of Independence and the Letter from Birmingham Jail define freedom and equality and how these revolutionary ideals changed over time through a comparative analysis of the two documents and their historical contexts. Based on this analysis, this paper finds that although the Declaration of Independence and the Letter from Birmingham Jail were both based on the ideals of freedom and equality, they defined revolutionary goals differently because they responded to distinct forms of injustice. The American Revolution focused on achieving political independence and establishing self-government, while the Civil Rights Movement expanded these ideals by demanding social equality, legal protection, and full citizenship for previously excluded groups.

Keywords: American revolution, Civil Rights Movement, Freedom, Equality, Revolutionary Ideals

1. Introduction

The American Revolution and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement represent two pivotal moments of political and historical transformation in the United States. Existing scholarship on the Founding era extensively examines Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence as a foundational political statement that articulated natural rights to justify independence from British rule [1]. At the same time, critical historians emphasize that the institutional framework established in 1776 was deeply flawed, as it restricted full citizenship through racial and social hierarchies [2]. Conversely, research on the Civil Rights Movement often centers on Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham

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Jail as a landmark of moral persuasion and social protest. Scholars have analyzed how King drew upon natural law to challenge Jim Crow segregation and demand social justice [3]. Broader historical analyses further suggest that ongoing struggles over fundamental rights have continuously shaped American political identity [4]. Although previous literature offers rich insights into these two historical events separately, few studies systematically compare how the core political ideals—specifically, the concepts of freedom and equality—were redefined across these two eras.

To address this gap, this paper presents a comparative textual analysis of the Declaration of Independence and the Letter from Birmingham Jail. It explores how Jefferson's initial emphasis on political self-government was expanded by King into a broader demand for social equality, moral justice, and human dignity for previously excluded groups. This comparative investigation not only reveals the evolutionary trajectory of American core democratic ideals but also helps clarify the connotation and practical value of freedom and equality in different historical contexts, providing a nuanced theoretical reference for understanding the continuous improvement of American civil rights concepts.

2. From political liberty to social freedom

2.1. Political liberty

The *Declaration of Independence* defines freedom as both a natural right and a political right. Jefferson argues that individuals possess "unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness", meaning that freedom is inherent rather than granted by government [5]. Based on this idea, Jefferson argues that legitimate government must exist to secure these rights and derive its authority from the consent of the governed. Therefore, when a government fails to fulfill this purpose, people have "the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it" [5]. Through this reasoning, Jefferson understands freedom mainly as political liberty—the ability of people to participate in their own government and reject unjust authority. This definition was shaped by the American Revolution, as colonists' conflict with Britain centered on political representation and control. The Stamp Act of 1765 intensified opposition because colonists believed Britain imposed taxes without their consent, expressed through the slogan "no taxation without representation." Since their primary concern was the lack of political participation in decisions that governed their lives, Jefferson's understanding of freedom emphasized self-government and consent as the foundation of legitimate political authority. However, this understanding of freedom was limited because it focused primarily on political self-government and resistance to external authority, leaving other forms of restriction beyond the scope of Jefferson's argument.

2.2. Social freedom

Letter from Birmingham Jail defines freedom as the ability to live without the restrictions created by unjust laws and social systems. King argues that freedom cannot be achieved simply through the existence of laws or formal rights, it requires that those laws respect human dignity and justice. He states that "an unjust law is no law at all", suggesting that individuals are not truly free when they are forced to obey rules that violate moral principles [6]. Through this argument, King expands the meaning of freedom beyond political self-government and emphasizes the importance of resisting unjust authority that prevents people from fully exercising their rights. This understanding was shaped by the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement, as African Americans continued to experience racial segregation and discrimination under Jim Crow laws despite their formal

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citizenship. Restrictions in public facilities, voting, and daily social interactions demonstrated that legal recognition alone could not guarantee genuine freedom. Therefore, King understood freedom as requiring the transformation of unjust social conditions rather than merely the absence of political oppression. However, this broader definition of freedom was limited because achieving it required challenging deeply rooted institutions and social attitudes, making freedom a continuing struggle rather than an immediately achieved condition.

3. From declared equality to realized equality

3.1. Declared equality

The *Declaration of Independence* defines equality as the idea that all individuals possess the same natural status rather than being born with different levels of inherent worth. Jefferson states that "all men are created equal", presenting equality as a fundamental condition shared by all people [5]. In this sense, equality does not mean that everyone has identical abilities or social positions, but that no individual is naturally superior to others in terms of basic rights and human value. This understanding was shaped by the context of eighteenth-century society, when colonial Americans were influenced by traditional systems of hierarchy and inherited privilege. By presenting equality as a natural condition rather than a status determined by birth, Jefferson challenged the idea that social or political differences could be justified by inherent superiority. However, this understanding of equality was inherently restrictive. Though the Declaration framed equality as universal, its real-world implementation was bounded by the social and political limitations of eighteenth-century American society. In practice, the political community represented by the Declaration was largely limited to white male citizens, while enslaved people, women, and Indigenous peoples were excluded from full participation in the society that the Declaration claimed to represent.

3.2. Realized equality

Letter from Birmingham Jail defines equality as the realization of justice in people's actual lives rather than merely the recognition of equal rights as an abstract principle. King argues that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere", showing that equality cannot exist when any group is denied justice [6]. Through this argument, King presents equality as a condition in which all people can fully experience the rights and dignity promised by society. This understanding was shaped by the Civil Rights Movement, as African Americans continued to face racial discrimination despite legal promises of equal rights. Although constitutional protections such as the 14th and 15th Amendments established principles of equal protection and voting rights, practices such as the "separate but equal" doctrine allowed segregation and inequality to continue. Therefore, King argued that equality required more than legal recognition, it required removing discriminatory systems that prevented people from exercising their rights in practice. Compared with Jefferson's definition of equality, which was limited in practice by the exclusion of many groups from the political community, King expanded the scope of equality by arguing that African Americans and all members of society should fully enjoy the rights and dignity promised by American ideals. However, this broader understanding of equality was also limited because achieving it required challenging deeply rooted institutions and social attitudes, making equality an ongoing process rather than an immediate outcome.

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4. The incompleteness of American Revolutionary ideals

4.1. The first revolution's inherent defect

To understand why the American Revolutionary ideals required continuous redefinition by subsequent social movements, one must first examine the historical and institutional limitations embedded within the 1776 Founding itself. The American Revolution was fundamentally a movement driven by the pursuit of political independence and self-government rather than a social revolution aimed at establishing thorough structural equality. Although Thomas Jefferson famously proclaimed in the *Declaration of Independence* that "all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable Rights," this assertion was primarily articulated as a moral justification to resist British political tyranny [5]. As historian Joseph J. Ellis emphasizes, the Founding generation was characterized by a fundamental contradiction: it framed freedom in terms of political liberty and national sovereignty, while leaving existing social and economic structures largely unchallenged [7]. Consequently, the ideals established in 1776 defined freedom in a narrow political sense, creating a foundational gap between the rhetoric of universal rights and the reality of social governance. This structural gap was explicitly manifested in the severe boundaries imposed upon citizenship, which restricted the political community strictly to white, property-owning men. While enslaved African Americans were reduced to chattel property, women were deprived of independent legal status through coverture, and Indigenous populations were entirely excluded from the sovereign polity [2]. Ultimately, leaving these structural defects unaddressed left the American Revolution as an "unfinished promise," cementing the oppressive "separate but equal" doctrine and systemic racial segregation, which rendered the 20th-century Civil Rights Movement a historical necessity.

4.2. The Civil Rights Movement's partial success

While the Civil Rights Movement successfully dismantled the institutionalized segregation embedded in the legal system and secured *de jure* equality through landmark federal legislation, its achievements represented only a partial fulfillment of American ideals. In practice, this legal transformation failed to eradicate deeply ingrained social prejudices and structural economic inequalities. Obtaining the formal right to enter integrated facilities did not automatically translate into de *facto* equality in housing, employment, or social prestige [4]. Formal legal protection guarantees access to the system, yet it does not automatically dismantle the long-standing socio-economic structures that dictate who actually controls social resources. As King himself recognized, the persistence of societal bias and economic stratification meant that the promise of true freedom remained incomplete in the everyday lives of Black Americans [3]. In essence, while the Civil Rights Movement successfully secured legal equality, the enduring gap between statutory rights and lived reality underscored the partial nature of its success.

4.3. Why the revolution can never be fully finished

Crucially, the ultimate incompleteness of American ideals stems from the reality that freedom and equality are not static concepts, but dynamically evolving standards. As Eric Foner demonstrates, American freedom has never been a fixed set of rights, but a continuous arena of struggle that is perpetually redefined as marginalized groups challenge new boundaries of exclusion [4]. As society advances, institutional oppression moves beyond formal legal disenfranchisement into subtle economic stratification, structural racism, and modern technological divides. According to Rogers

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M. Smith, inegalitarian dynamics within American citizenship constantly adapt to new historical contexts, creating persistent hierarchies even after older forms of bias are dismantled [3]. Thus, achieving true equality requires the revolutionary framework to continually iterate alongside these evolving societal challenges. In the final analysis, the perpetual emergence of new social inequalities means that the American revolutionary project can never be fully completed. Its inherent structural incompleteness creates a continuous imperative for ongoing democratic renewal and social progress.

5. Conclusion

The comparison between the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* demonstrates that revolutionary ideals are not fixed but continue to evolve as societies confront new forms of injustice. The American Revolution established the importance of natural rights, political liberty, and self-government, while the Civil Rights Movement expanded these principles by demanding that freedom and equality be fully realized for groups previously excluded from their protection. Therefore, the Civil Rights Movement did not reject the ideals of the Declaration, instead, it continued the revolutionary process by broadening their meaning and application. The history of these two movements reveals that the pursuit of freedom and equality is an ongoing process, making the American Revolution not a completed event, but an unfinished revolution.

While this study provides a qualitative and historical analysis of how American political ideals evolved across the Revolutionary and Civil Rights eras, it is not without limitations. Methodologically, the current analysis primarily relies on a select set of foundational texts and historical narratives. Future research could broaden the analytical scope by incorporating discourse from other key transformative periods, such as the Reconstruction era. Furthermore, given that revolutionary ideals are continuously reinterpreted over time, future scholarship could explore how modern social movements respond to contemporary realities by further expanding and redefining the core concepts of freedom and equality.

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