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Freedom is arguably one of the most cherished American principles and fundamental values. It has inspired American intellectuals, informed the U.S. public debate, shaped American political rhetoric, and affected the development of American society since the days of the Revolution. But, as the first-class contributors of this volume argue, there is something even more genuinely American than the concept of freedom itself. That is the idea of the Four Freedoms, as president Franklin D. Roosevelt expounded it at the beginning of 1941.

Jeffrey Engel’s edited collection aims at revealing the intrinsic exceptionalism of FDR’s Four Freedoms idea, by presenting its quintessentially paradoxical nature. On the one hand, the Four Freedoms were designed to rebrand the U.S. as a beacon of hope for the whole mankind, as the global defender of collective and individual fulfillment. On the other hand, pursuing the Four Freedoms also meant to expose the intimate contradictions of American democracy – with its apparently never-ending quest for social justice and inclusion – and pave the way for a hegemonic, if not imperialistic, U.S. foreign policy.

The book’s structure is straightforward. After a methodological and theoretical introduction, Jeffrey Engel takes on the responsibility of framing the historical context within which FDR delivered his Four Freedoms speech. Then, four eminent authors give their views on each one of the Four Freedoms, following the order in which FDR himself promulgated them: freedom of speech; freedom of worship; freedom from want; and
eventually freedom from fear. In between them, there is a fascinating photo essay that presents some of the most renowned visual renderings of the Four Freedoms, including Norman Rockwell’s famous posters that the authors of the chapters constantly refer to. A final piece explores the global legacies of the Four Freedoms ideal, its controversial application in the U.S., and its discontinuous reception worldwide (p. 6).

7 In his reconstruction of the historical background, Engel punctually details FDR’s varied motivation for delivering the speech and correctly emphasizes the role that it played in the so-called great debate about the U.S. intervention in WWII. While Hitler’s troops had already triumphantly goose-stepped in Paris, Americans were still pondering over the convenience of mingling with European affairs, and many were afraid that this might imply being dragged into another draining conflict just a couple of decades after Woodrow Wilson had promised to wage a “war to end all wars.” FDR’s words, in Engel’s opinion, were primarily meant to debunk this mounting skepticism and convince Congress, and therefore American people, of the inevitability of the fight against Nazism and Fascism. Rejecting this assumption was in FDR’s opinion tantamount to endanger the American democratic system as a whole. Here lies, according to Engel, FDR’s main contribution to that great debate: the president shrewdly embedded the discourse on freedom in a much more pragmatic and comprehensive vision of national security. The historical cogency of the speech rests therefore not in a mere enunciation of principles but in sketching out FDR’s worldviews, his blueprint for the postwar order, his vision for the transformation of the U.S. political system at home, and his design for the future American entanglements in world affairs.

8 Drawing on her professional experience and academic expertise in law, Linda Eads frames her argument on freedom of speech mostly in legal terms. She sees this freedom as crucial to understand a constant tension between individual rights and community needs. In this context, FDR’s invocation of free speech should not be read as the sublimation of an absolute individual right, for FDR’s normative world allowed free speech to be limited so to protect both the citizens and the government (p. 46). The very fact that FDR signed into law the 1940 Smith Act, which legalized the prosecution of suspected Communists in the U.S., testified to FDR’s inmost belief that free speech needed to be somehow restrained. It was, in Eads’ opinion, only with the concurrent rise of the civil rights movement and the mounting Vietnam War protests that American citizens – and jurisprudence – started questioning the validity of any legal limit on free speech. As Eads shows, the debate on the breadth of free speech is still wide open, with hate speech and exploitive sexual speech representing two of the most compelling issues challenging an absolute application of it. FDR had the merit to place this freedom in the pantheon of the most sacred American rights, making Americans proud of it and inclined to promote it worldwide, even though this doesn’t necessarily mean he was endorsing a boundless version of it.

9 To highlight the historical ambivalence of freedom of worship in the U.S., Tisa Wenger relies on the same kind of juxtaposition of individualism and communalism inspiring Linda Eads’ long-term perspective. Wenger provides the reader with an intersectional analysis taking into consideration some of the most intriguing overlaps between religion and racial identity in twentieth century U.S. history. Her essay describes the (partial) achievement of this third Rooseveltian freedom as a result of a gradual – but not linear – process of enlargement of American citizenship. Freedom of worship was, indeed, first and foremost granted to the largely dominant Protestant components of American
society. But, even though FDR’s freedom of worship was meant to primarily support “consensus-oriented models of public religiosity,” its progressively wider safeguard has empowered minorities such as the Jews, Catholics, and African Americans, and it has induced them to positively challenge the socio-political, cultural, and of course religious mainstream (pp. 95-96).

In his beautifully penned essay, Matthew Jones intertwines the domestic and international implications of FDR’s freedom from want. By adopting a transatlantic perspective – or rather a circumatlantic one – Jones explains the emphasis that FDR placed on this positive freedom as the result of a contemporary redefinition of the role of the government, a process that paved the way for the emergence of the modern welfare state. Jones, however, pinpoints all the obstacles that hindered the long-term success of FDR’s project of reform: a reluctant Congress where many across the political spectrum were eager to dismantle the safety net created by the New Deal; the rise of the cold war confrontation, which imposed an agenda conflicting with the full development of this freedom both on financial and on ideological terms; the social, racial, and economic inequality structurally affecting the American capitalist model throughout the 1950s and the 1960s; the economic turmoil of the 1970s and the progressive affirmation of a neoliberal thinking fiercely opposed to any form of government-based solutions to social, political, and economic problems. By the 1980s, Jones concludes, free individual entrepreneurship completely overshadowed freedom from want in the American scale of values, and this put an end to FDR’s dream of readjusting the socio-economic distortions of the American democratic system.

To assess FDR’s last freedom, Frank Costigliola devotes his analysis to the long-lasting use of fear as a powerful political tool. FDR’s magnitude, in Costigliola’s eyes, rests in his ability to master such a political use of fear, for the president fully understood that fear, if well managed, does not paralyze but rather stimulates certain desired reactions. Costigliola explains that FDR used fear adroitly in order to mobilize consensus for the unavoidable showdown with the Axis powers. FDR’s intentions were therefore primarily political and not social, as Norman Rockwell’s portrait of this specific fear may wrongly lead to assume: the president wanted to prepare the nation to fight, and he needed to scare American citizens so to convince them to embrace the collective war efforts. This strategy, Costigliola shows, did survive FDR. The whole cold war set up and the unprecedented enlargement of the national security state in the U.S. was justified mainly on the base of fear. In particular, Costigliola argues that fear of nuclear holocaust was the one that provoked the most intense, the most pervading, and the longest lasting consequences in the United States. Poignantly, however, Costigliola states that securing freedom from fear has been the greatest failure in contemporary U.S. history. Pursuing freedom from fear “everywhere in the world,” indeed, has implied the reinforcement and reiteration of American exceptionalism, has stimulated an imperialistic engagement in world affairs, and has eventually sparked a “hatred intense enough to motivate terrorist attacks on the United States” (p. 186).

In the last chapter, William Hitchcock sketches out the most important legacies of the Four Freedoms. To him, the Four Freedoms idea has not only been able to generate wide enthusiasm and revamp American nationalism, but it has also allowed FDR to achieve his most immediate political goals. More specifically, the Four Freedoms have helped FDR to substantiate the main pillars of the American democracy vis-à-vis the emerging threat of totalitarianism. At the same time, they have renewed American global moral mission and
have paved the way for human rights to be included in the U.S. foreign policy agenda. However, as Hitchcock argues, the path to achieve the Four Freedoms has been filled with contradictions. Their safeguard has entailed and fostered governmental intervention, something that has not only attracted bipartisan criticism in the U.S. but it has also been financially unaffordable, both at home and abroad. Furthermore, exporting the Four Freedoms has also implied the reiteration of colonial rules over the most underdeveloped parts of the world. For these reasons, Hitchcock invites the reader to focus on the historical cogency of the Four Freedoms rather than on their normative or prescriptive nature.

Given the breadth of these essays, very few elements have fallen outside of the light cone. One of these is the leverage played by those liberals surrounding FDR, who helped him shaping, refining, and, perhaps even more importantly, popularizing his Four Freedoms idea. In this latter regard, the role of Eleanor Roosevelt and her constant promotion of the Four Freedoms through her editorials, columns, speeches, and radio addresses has been largely overlooked by all the authors. In addition, the authors could have better explained the correlation between the Four Freedoms and the progressive globalization of the New Deal, thus going along the lines of inquiry recently proposed by such scholars as Elizabeth Borgwardt and Kiran Patel. Apart from these details, however, the book surely remains a milestone for those, students and scholars, who intend to dig deeper into FDR’s rhetoric, political acumen, and complex worldview, but it also represents a good source for those who are interested in the origins and development of the American century, as well as in the rise and fall of the American empire.