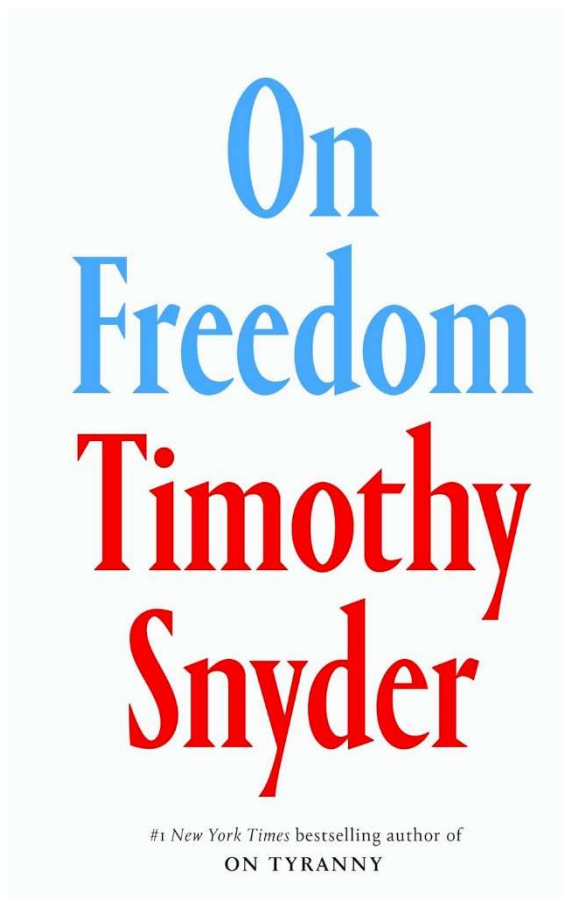


‘On Freedom’ very important, relevant

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“On Freedom” by Timothy Snyder. New York, NY: Crown (an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a Division of Penguin Random House), 2024, 368 pages, \$32.00.



“How does freedom figure in our lives?” Timothy Snyder asks near the beginning of “On Freedom,” his latest foray into a facet of both our personal lives and political systems that permeates virtually every aspect of our existence. “The connections between freedom as a principle and freedom as a practice are the five forms of freedom. The forms create a world where people act on the basis of values. They are not rules or orders. They are the logical, moral, and political links between common action and the formation of free individuals.”

“The forms resolve two apparent conundrums: a free person is an individual, but no one becomes an individual alone; freedom is felt in one lifetime, but it must be the work of generations,” the author continues. “The five forms are sovereignty, or the learned capacity to make choices; unpredictability, the power to adapt physical regularities to personal purposes; mobility, the capacity to move through space and time following values; factuality, the grip on the world that allows us to change it; and solidarity, the recognition that freedom is for everyone.”

“On Freedom” is one of the more philosophical literary journeys I have had occasion to navigate in recent memory. Snyder is both an accomplished essayist as well as a seasoned storyteller. The way he weaves historical anecdotes into his explanation of how the idea of freedom, both at the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic level, has evolved during the course of human history is truly amazing. At many points, I found myself completely caught up in the examples Snyder provides to illuminate and illustrate his primary thesis. And there were more than a few insights that only became apparent upon closer inspection.

Stay with me here. As many readers know, Václav Havel was the last president of Czechoslovakia (1989-1992) and the first president of the Czech Republic (1993-2003). Before becoming one of the most successful democratic transformational leaders of the Twentieth Century, Havel was a dissident who had to escape the communist regime in which he found himself embedded. A celebrated author, poet and playwright, he wrote a very influential essay that is still studied by political scholars and historians today. Now that you know the backstory, consider the following passage from “Unpredictability,” the second chapter and one I found especially thought-provoking:

“On a sunny day in August 1978, Havel eluded the secret police, made for the Czechoslovak-Polish border, and hiked to the top of a mountain. There he and other Czechoslovak dissidents met (Adam) Michnik and other Polish ones. They built a fire, ate, and drank vodka. In the photographs, they look happy. Michnik asked Havel to write. Three months later, an underground courier delivered Havel’s manuscript to Michnik in Warsaw. From a moment of contact at a border on a mountaintop arose Havel’s ‘The Power of the Powerless,’ a profound meditation on freedom.”

Like his previous contributions, “On Freedom” is extensively researched, with 51 pages of source notes supporting the Introduction: Freedom, five relatively comprehensive chapters (Sovereignty, Unpredictability, Mobility, Factuality, and Solidarity) and the Conclusion: Government, that form the main text. I even found the Appendix, in which Snyder lists the different types of positive and negative freedom, to be enlightening and helpful in understanding many of the core concepts that form the primary architecture of Snyder’s narrative. The writing is crisp and engaging, always with an emphasis on getting the reader to contemplate the deeper connotations lurking just under the over-arching subtext.

Once you start making your way through “On Freedom,” it does not take very long to see why it ended up on the New York Times bestseller list. The subject matter is directly applicable to the often charged discourse currently taking place about the future of our country – a dialog that shows no sign of slowing down since Trump was elected for a second term. Take the following passage from “Factuality,” the fifth chapter and one I found to be particularly cautionary:

“If the American nation endures, it must be a land of the free. For this, we will need free speakers. Not all rhetoric about ‘free speech’ is meant to protect free speakers. Oligarchs claim to be ‘canceled’ (Putin) while they are invading countries, or crown themselves ‘free speech absolutists’ (Musk) while using their platforms to censor. If freedom of speech is treated as negative freedom, as removing barriers for those who already control countries and information spaces, free speakers will not have much of a chance. As Simon Weil put it, those who ‘most deserve to express themselves’ will not in fact have the freedom to do so.”

“It is worth being very attentive when oligarchs talk about free speech. The issue is not just that they are insincere or hypocritical. It is that they seek to traduce freedom of speech by making it seem senseless. Oligarchs pretend to be the victims, even when they own social media platforms or are presidents of countries. We are meant to conclude that freedom of speech is just the removal of any remaining impediments to the caprice of those who already control conversations. Debating the latest instance of oligarchical whining, we forget that the purpose of freedom of speech is to speak truth to power.”

Snyder is the Richard C. Lewis Professor of History and Global Affairs at Yale University as well as a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. He received his Bachelor of Arts in European History and Political Science from Brown University in 1991 and became a British Marshall Scholar at the University of Oxford, where he completed his doctorate in 1997. He completed fellowships at the Centre Nationale des Recherches Scientifiques, Paris (1994-1995) and Harvard University’s Olin Institute for Strategic Studies (1997). His previous books include “Nationalism, Marxism, and Modern Central Europe: A Biography of Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz” (1998); “The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999” (2003); “Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist’s Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine” (2005); “The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke” (2008); “Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin” (2010); “Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning” (2015); “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” (2017); and “The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America” (2018). The author’s works have been translated into 40 languages; personally, he speaks five and can read ten European languages.

“On Freedom” is a very important and exceptionally relevant book that needs to be widely read by all Americans who are concerned that the freedoms they have enjoyed throughout much of their lives. It is obvious we are at an inflection point. Those freedoms may not be there in the future if we do not become much more savvy to the ways the powerful among us are manipulating the discussion to their advantage. Kudos to Snyder for sounding the alarm in a clear and unambiguous manner. Now it’s up to us to turn awareness into action. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.

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