

F(r)ee Country

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As a lifelong foreign student of English I've been intrigued, if at times confused, by the magical power of certain words to conceal as well as to reveal. For example, after twenty years in this free country, I have finally come to learn about the true meanings of the word "free."

In the land of America Inc., corporate is, of course, free – even if it plays by the rules – to do what it wants to fatten its profit. It can slap on a fee when it sees an opportunity, or simply invent one. In air travel, for example, we've quickly gone from being charged for in-flight food to \$20-25 fees for a checked bag, another \$5 for headphones, and more. The latest I've encountered was a \$25 "seat assignment fee" by the now-bankrupted American Airlines, when I called them to ask for a seat after Expedia.com sold me a ticket without assigning one.

Banks have been master of this nickel-and-dime sting for decades, and they have reenergized it, ironically, right after Congress cracked down on a few of their obvious excesses last year. Although Bank of America's recent move to impose a \$5 monthly fee on debit-card users has backfired, even more bank fees are actually rolling out as we speak: noncustomer fees, check fee, convenience fees, maintenance fees, mobile fees, you name it... and if this makes you want to quit, wait – there is a \$25 fee to close your account (PNC Bank does that.) I bet soon you will have to pay a fee to avoid a fee!

I wonder if there is a typo – "free country" should spell "fee country."

Another meaning of "free" has come to light in my study of the American Civil War. After all, it was a fight over "free labor" between slavery and capitalism. Confederates battled to keep their chained laborers *free* – slaves' work was never paid and essentially free. Northern industrialists also wanted *free* labor but they meant workers who could be readily deployed to sweatshops in different locales when needed, and conveniently disposed of when the usage exhausted, as opposed to slaves tied to land for the whole life.

Many freed slaves later became the new *free* laborers, only to find themselves still trapped as before, in the lowest rung of society. They worked for long hours in factories, lived in squalors in industrial towns and didn't get paid much. Despite emancipation, without political rights and many social and economic rights, they faced legalized segregation and discrimination, and, inevitably, were subject to super-exploitation. In the National Museum of American History three blocks away from the White House, an exhibit tells of two types of "free labor" in American North and South, seen in the eyes of a South Carolina planter: "Your whole hireling class of manual laborers... is essentially slaves."

“The difference... is, that our slaves are hired for life and well compensated... yours are hired by the day, not cared for, and scantily compensated.”

If there is a shred of truth in the planter’s assertion, I wonder if those “wage slaves” should be called “unfree laborers” as well.

Today, this free country is also often contrasted to the not-so-free China, where there is a residence registration system deciding where you can legally live. In post-civil rights America – of course – you are *free* to pick wherever you want to live. You must be quite a fool to have chosen to live in a crime-ridden slum in the inner city. Unless, you have only a dismal job or no job, and no car, no bank account, and often, even no photo ID necessary to vote.

As the song goes, “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” So goes too my journey of learning an interesting English word.