

WHERE IS SLAVERY?

Emma Kauffman

Jensen Suther, *True Materialism: Hegelian Marxism and the Modernist Struggle for Freedom*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2025, 404pp, £26.99 paperback.

As new forms of fascism emerge in the name of freedom, it is becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle the idea of freedom from the far right. In response to this, there is a growing move across Marxist thought to theorise capitalist freedom in a double sense with the aim of preserving a freedom for the left (Roberts 2016 and 2019; Mau 2023; Heinrich 2012). The intention here is to draw attention to how Marx uses the concept to, on the one hand, designate capitalism as centrally characterised by a historical shift from one form of domination (concrete) to another form of domination (abstract), and, on the other hand, signal an emancipatory potential beyond the capitalist present. These thinkers argue that there must be an incongruence between real freedom under communism and the appearance of freedom within capitalism, which means all preceding freedoms, the freedom of the slave owner, or the bourgeoisie, or the fascist, were not the ‘real thing’ but only the ‘appearance’ of freedom. Jensen Suther’s new book *True Materialism: Hegelian Marxism and the Modernist Struggle for Freedom* rejects this move, arguing instead that while modern freedom might have ‘foundered’ in the face of bourgeois society, this is not because it was not real freedom, it merely signals the incompleteness of the modern project (p15). Engaging a form of ‘historical criticism that will aim to show what remains modernist about the present – and what the possible realization of a true postmodernism (as the overcoming of the problem of modernity) would require’, Suther recovers ‘the modernist novel’ as his primary site of analysis (p119).

The power of the modernist novel, Suther contends, lies in its ability to both concretely present the inadequacy of a universal, i.e., bourgeois, conception of freedom, while simultaneously self-narrating the projection of freedom’s fulfilment (p119). Because the modernist novel both depicts ‘or otherwise engage[s] with the idea of freedom’ and critically affirms ‘the partial success of its socially expressive enterprise’ this makes it the perfect artistic project for the present, unveiling how we might perfect our rational inclination towards life conditions that prioritise the equal betterment of all (p119). The premise here is that with the onset of modernity, we begin ‘to grasp that normative authority lies neither in nature nor in divinity but rather in us: we are responsible for the norms that bind us’ (p17). No longer are certain people born possessing an inherent natural right to freedom that others do not have. Instead, all are born with the capacity and desire to actively

will freedom, as it is through our collective willing of freedom that we render the world intelligible. Freedom, on this view, is not 'an extra-natural property or peculiar power we happen to possess, but a distinctly social and historical way of unifying ourselves as living organisms' that is secured by the capacity to act from rational principles that are grounded in our humanity, which makes the dialectical unfolding of freedom, for Suther, the most 'powerful weapon in the philosophical arsenal against race-based forms of discrimination and subjugation' (p3, p37). Subsequently, modern freedom is primarily positive, giving rise to 'the bourgeois concepts of autonomy and individuality' which produced the condition of possibility for 'the first principled opposition to oppression and domination' (p116). According to Suther, although the ideal of freedom has been disfigured by the capitalist law of value, its inception within modernity nonetheless brought about 'the conditions of genuine self-determination – of the mode of production appropriate to the sorts of creatures that legislate their own requirement for flourishing' which makes it a worthy project deserving of completion (p25).

I share Suther's skepticism towards contemporary analyses of freedom that read modern freedom as merely an appearance of the real thing, because, like Suther, I agree that the idea of freedom (in capitalism) should not be denied but rather ought to be 'grasped as the animating ideal, with real motivational force, for proletariats and capitalists alike' (p93). Where I diverge from Suther, however, is in his attempt to supersede capitalism through rationally revising 'our understanding of what a free life would require', which he argues can be done through the modernist novel (p93). The problem is that his position assumes that the presence of freedom's lack (or partiality) in the modernist novel is evidence of its need as that which overcomes the 'problem of modernity' (p119, p124). Ample theoretical evidence to the contrary, much of which is either absent from Suther's book or read in bad faith, informs my divergence. Against Suther, then, I argue that our continued commitment to freedom will always contain within itself the 'problem of modernity', i.e., the desire to dominate and exploit (p119). Consequently, it is not simply that certain material conditions disfigure our ideals, but also that our ideals involve their own disfigurement. In my view, freedom is not 'the most powerful weapon in the philosophical arsenal against race-based forms of discrimination and subjugation' because freedom can be neither temporally nor ontologically disentangled from domination (p3). Suther's book, however, cannot attend to how freedom always-already involves its own disfigurement because the book unproblematically assumes that the ideal is inherently rational and thus, with the perfecting of the rational subject, can be severed from both power and desire.

More specifically, to make his argument, three main assumptions are required: First, Suther must assume that there is a universal normative equality shared between subjects that remains immune to colonial aporias, liberal antinomies and racial atrocities. This echoes Robert Pippin's argument that

1. Robert B. Pippin, 'What Is the Question for Which Hegel's Theory of Recognition Is the Answer?', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8:2, 2000, pp155-72, p162.

2. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Borderlines, 27, University of Minnesota Press, 2007. (Hereafter *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.)

we come to realise freedom's normative authority through the 'concrete real normative equality in interactions'.¹ Second, he assumes that our universal subjective capacity to actualise freedom pre-exists its actualisation. To become free, we must first be able to, and ultimately want to, freely, collectively and rationally determine the norms that ought to bind us to each other. According to Suther's reading of Hegel, this is what separates natural teleology from rational teleology; it is because our genus-being is bound to freedom that our lives are meaningful (good infinity) as opposed to meaningless (bad infinity). This leads to the third assumption: it is in our mutual interest as rational agents to strive for universal freedom, which we have the capacity to actualise through a collective recognition of freedom's normative authority. Freedom here is taken for granted as a necessary future good; an antidote to slavery and domination that through our shared rational faculties will eventually be recognised by all as our highest human value. Moreover, the subject is taken for granted as having full control over themselves to the point that they can over time become completely free from their more libidinal investments: that part of us that loves power and desires that which dominates and exploits.

Suther's subject, in other words, is the 'transparent I' that Denise Ferreira da Silva locates at the epicenter of western thought, whose purpose as a living being is to maintain and reproduce themselves as the kind of being they are, i.e., the kind of mind that is able to know, emulate and control powers of universal reason.² Left unacknowledged is the affectable other; who, although absent in Suther's analysis, nonetheless forms the basis for it; the 'transparent I' cannot maintain and reproduce itself without the affectable other constituting the modern lexicon of rationality, self-determination, self-consciousness and freedom. However, because Suther's position is premised upon a progressive view of history that assumes with every formal freedom won, a state of abjection is lost, modernity is understood to mark the beginning of the affectable other's unproblematic assimilation into the 'transparent I'. Put in casual terms, the increased centrality of freedom as a highest human good, equals a corresponding decrease in both conditions of domination, our desire to dominate and the racialisation required to justify both. But this ignores a crucial insight that da Silva's work makes clear: the racial is not outside of modernity but rather constitutive of it. It is not, as Suther would have us believe, the 'theory of organic form Hegel inherits from Aristotle [that] is the key to exploding any such race-based essentialism and to developing a non-mechanical, historical-materialist account of human activity' (p3). Quite the opposite; it is precisely this organic form that underwrites the 'arsenal of raciality [that] secures post Enlightenment Europe's mind and social configuration in [and as] transparency' (*Toward a Global Idea of Race*, p175). While for Suther, racial subjection contradicts modern ethical principles, for da Silva, modern ethical principles are the logical continuation of racial subjection.

Da Silva's insights, however, are completely absent from *True Materialism*,

despite their relevance, because Suther refuses any serious engagement with the central theoretical traditions that have taken the relationship between freedom and subjection seriously: post-structuralism, new materialism, psychoanalysis, black studies and post-colonial theory. While containing a litany of readings from each of these traditions, the book does not attend to any of them on their own terms but rather reads them in service of the argument's forward motion. In the case of postcolonial theory, for example, Suther reduces their claims as 'premised on an Enlightenment idea of self-determination that ... is of value to any community that desires to live out – without interference – its own sense of 'ontic belonging' (p116). Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, fails to 'actually read' novels as novels 'rather than as a literary attestation to their own philosophical commitments' because of its proclivity for desire over reason (p138, p154). Interestingly, these critiques reveal more about Suther as a thinker than they do about the content he is critiquing. Specifically, his absolute fidelity to modernism as an incomplete project relies on a positivist vision of history as a forward march of partial successes (and never failures) that bleed into his prose as well as his concept of literary style. As a result, Suther's book holds no language through which to speak, read or think outside the transparent I.

Instead, his analysis, while not advancing a blatant form of race as a biological inferiority that blames slaves for their enslavement, is based on a colour-blind depiction of racial subjection as 'an unfortunate condition that contingently befalls [different] individuals, groups, and generations', one that can be overcome through the gradual eradication of tyrannical political, social and/or economic infrastructures that infringe on our ability for rational thought and collective self-determination.³ On this view, the continued position of Blackness on the wrong end of socio-political and economic measures is interpreted as an unfortunate blip, a failure of our collective rationality, overridden by their eventual inclusion into 'the bourgeois concepts of autonomy and individuality' (p116). After all, it is the idea of individual liberty at the heart of bourgeois society that, for Suther, marks the first principled opposition to domination that would later establish and secure the universal demand for self-determination (p116). Freedom's future self-realisation, in other words, depends upon modernity having already become post-racial, or at the very least, as marked by a time that encompasses all the central tenets required to oppose oppression and domination. On this view, it becomes unthinkable that racial difference, and more specifically anti-blackness, have anything to do with the global power configurations that constitute freedom's normative authority.

Take Suther's communist urban planner who is 'alienated neither from her work nor from the means of production' (p70). In this imagined scenario, the urban planner is finally able to live a 'truly free form of ethical life', taking language lessons and training for a marathon, all while still having time to be part of a local commune where she makes free, rational and

3. Sara-Maria Sorentino, 'The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx's Method', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 96, 2019, pp17-37, p632. (Hereafter *The Abstract Slave*.)

4. Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

5. *The Abstract Slave*; Tapji Garba, 'On Materialism, Freedom, and Self-Consciousness', *Philosophy Today*, 67:4, 2023, pp833-50; Anisha Sankar, 'Revolution (The Hand of God at Work)', *Political Theology*, 11 June 2025, pp1-22.

collective decisions about how to ethically allocate resources and 'limit the environmental impact of human industry' (p70, p71). To keep this fantasy alive, Suther must implicitly reduce race to the anthropological and social register as a historical problem of our subjective failure to rationally self-determine our own criteria for success, a failure that we gradually overcome through coming 'to know things as they are' (p307). As a result, freedom becomes an antidote to a confusing amalgamation of two analytically distinct conditions of domination: relative/political slavery, which mainly consists of political, economic and/or social restraints imposed on our collective capacity for self-determination, and chattel slavery, which is the ontological condition of actual bondage, reducing the latter to a largely spectral position, as relic, anomaly, contradiction being gradually overcome with the onset of the formal emancipation of modernity.⁴ For Suther, any persistence of domination, slavery or otherwise, is not indicative of freedom's dependence on domination but of the incompleteness of our rational faculties towards freedom's actualisation.

But, as Suther's book unintentionally demonstrates, to maintain freedom's power of universal reiteration, certain conditions must remain unspeakable, relegated to a past that exists only in service of freedom's future promise, one that cannot help but seep into our present structures and future imaginings. Contrary, then, to Suther's originary position, that freedom is the strongest antidote to racism, the centrality of freedom in the philosophies of Hegel or Marx do not mark a decisive historical moment for slavery's overcoming. Rather, they represent slavery's most successful repression.⁵ As such, Suther's theory of freedom encounters a limit when pushed against the concept of actual chattel slavery, which is notably (although not surprisingly) absent from his book, an absence that exposes Suther's actual position: subjection to political, social, or economic factors pose a bigger threat to freedom in that they prohibit us from being rational agents of our will; subjection to a master, on the other hand, brings the slave into a relation that enables them to at the very least mirror or approximate rationality in the name of freedom. Consequently, to say that our ability to self-narrate the conditions of our lives as agents is dependent on willing freedom as our highest end is to simultaneously say that our ability to self-narrate our lives is worth slavery. Ironically, this ends up revealing the impossibility of his project: our rational pursuit of freedom does not overcome the disfiguration undergone by the capitalist law of value, it simply masks the fundamental relationship between the two.

Emma Kauffman is a PhD candidate in Political Science at York University.