

Spectres of Freedom in Stirner and Foucault: A Response to "Solitude and Freedom"

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I am grateful to Caleb Smith for his response to my essay "Stirner and Foucault: Towards a Post-Kantian Freedom," and I particularly like the way he links my discussion of a post-Kantian freedom to strategies of resistance against contemporary forms of incarceration. Already, back in the early 1970s, in response to a series of prison revolts in France, Michel Foucault was talking about the emergence of a "carceral archipelago"—a network of punitive institutions, discourses, and practices that had been progressively spreading throughout the social fabric since the late eighteenth century (297). It was as if the prison had become a metaphor for society as a whole—with the same techniques of surveillance and coercion appearing in schools, hospitals, factories, and psychiatric institutions. Today, unprecedented technological developments have made possible an intensification of social control to levels beyond what even Foucault could have imagined—the proliferation, for instance, of surveillance cameras in public spaces indicates a blurring of the distinction between the institution and life outside. Indeed, in light of the new forms of incarceration that are appearing today—the extra-legal detention facilities in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for example—perhaps we should take note of Giorgio Agamben's disturbing insight that what is paradigmatic of modern life is not the prison, as Foucault believed, but rather the /camp/ (20). The slogan posted above the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay—"Honor Bound to Defend Freedom"—is chillingly and ironically reminiscent of another infamous slogan, the one posted above Auschwitz: "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Makes One Free").

Given this proliferation today of spaces of incarceration and detention—which are, at the same time, becoming virtually indistinguishable from everyday life—questions of freedom and emancipation, always central to political discourse, are perhaps more crucial now than ever before. It is here that Smith raises some very interesting questions about how Stirner's and Foucault's emancipatory strategies might be useful today in challenging contemporary institutions, and practices of incarceration, particularly solitary confinement. As Smith shows, solitary confinement has been employed as a punitive tool since the inception of the modern prison in the early nineteenth century, and is now undergoing a massive resurgence in prisons in the U.S. It was originally believed that if prisoners were isolated within their own individual cells, not only could they be more easily controlled and supervised, but their very "souls" could be redeemed through a process of self-reflection. Solitary confinement thus served as a sort of moral experiment upon the subjectivity of the individual inmate—an experiment in which the criminal's soul was constructed as a discursive object to be corrected and reformed. A similar approach can be seen in contemporary practices of solitary confinement in detention camps, where the psyches of inmates are carefully monitored in an effort to unlock their "secrets." Smith is right in suggesting, moreover, that this has become a "postmodern" form of punishment—one that relies on sophisticated and subtle techniques of psychological manipulation, rather than clumsy physical coercion (though of course, as we have been amply reminded by events in Iraq, the latter has by no means been expunged from contemporary carceral practice).

However, the question remains as to what sort of strategies of freedom are effective in resisting these new postmodern regimes of punishment? Smith suggests that the post-Kantian or "postmodern" notion of freedom that I have theorized in my paper—one that is derived from the interventions of Foucault and Stirner—is not only somewhat limited in resisting "concrete" practices of incarceration, but, because it is based largely on a notion of individual autonomy that may be achieved even within oppressive conditions, may actually sustain these very practices. There are three separate, yet related, points that Smith is making here: /firstly/, that, despite my emphasis on concreteness and particularity as opposed to abstract universals, I have to some extent

ignored concrete practices or institutions—like the prison—and have thus remained within the very abstract world I am attacking; /secondly/, that my attempt to theorize a notion of freedom and individual autonomy—“ownness”—that can be realized even in conditions of oppression is of limited use against the practice of solitary confinement, and may even sustain it; and /thirdly/, that this notion of individual autonomy, developed from Stirner and Foucault, has ignored a very important dimension of their thinking that supports the idea of collective insurgency—one that would be more relevant to the question of prison revolt. I think Smith raises some very interesting points here, and in answering his criticisms my aim is not simply to defend my own argument but rather to expand the terms of the discussion so that it may develop in new theoretical directions. In this sense, I shall approach Smith’s intervention in the spirit of /agonism/, rather than antagonism—that is, as a theoretical challenge that opens up new ways of thinking, new “lines of flight.”

“Lines of flight” are exactly what we want here, after all. How to construct new lines of flight, new strategies that will liberate people from institutions like the prison, and, more broadly, from the carceral/bio-political society we are living in today? Concrete practices and institutions of coercion and surveillance are all around us—not just in the prison, but, as I have suggested, at all levels of the social network. Why, then, resurrect Max Stirner, the thinker who was obsessed with ghosts, “spooks,” and ideological apparitions, and who claimed that we can be dominated and oppressed as much by an abstract idea as we can by a “real” institution or social relation? How useful is Stirner’s critique of the abstract world of universal ideals—the spectres of humanity, rationality, and morality—in combating very real practices and institutions of domination? How is Stirner’s diagnosis of a spectral world relevant to a world that seems ever more frighteningly /real/?

Many people, including, most famously, Marx, have suggested that because the target of Stirner’s critique is the abstract world of idealism, he neglects the “real” material world of concrete relations and institutions. Indeed, Marx and Engels devoted the largest part of *The German Ideology* to attacking Stirner, accusing him of the worst kind of naïvety and idealism. They repeatedly parody Stirner as “Saint Max” or “Saint Sancho”—as one who mistakes illusions for reality. Stirner, Marx and Engels argue, attempts to overcome religious alienation by condemning the dominance of abstract “fixed ideas” but, in doing so, overestimates the importance of these ideas in the real world, thus falling into the idealist trap himself. In other words, Stirner, in focusing on the way that abstract ideas dominate our lives, sees these ideas as all-determining, thus neglecting their basis in real material and social conditions. Stirner is therefore characterized as an ideologist /par excellence/—one who ignores the concrete material world and conjures up instead a world of illusions and apparitions.

This idealist illusion is most apparent, Marx and Engels argue, in Stirner’s understanding of the State. Stirner sees the State as itself an ideological abstraction, much like God—it only exists because we allow it to exist, because we abdicate to it our own authority, in the same way that we create God by abdicating our authority and placing it outside ourselves. What is more important than the institution of the State is the “ruling principle”—it is the /idea/ of the State, in other words, that dominates us (Stirner 200). The State’s unity and dominance exist mostly in the minds of its subjects. The State’s power is really based on /our/ power, according to Stirner. It is only because the individual has not recognized this power, because he humbles himself before authority, that the State continues to exist. As Stirner correctly surmised, the State cannot function only through top-down repression and coercion, as this would expose its power in all its nakedness, brutality,

and illegitimacy. Rather, the State relies on our /allowing/ it to dominate us. Stirner wants to show that ideological apparatuses are not only concerned with economic or political questions—they are also rooted in psychological needs. The dominance of the State, Stirner suggests, depends on our willingness to let it dominate us, on our complicit desire for our own subordination. Therefore, the State must first be overcome as an idea before it can be overcome in reality—or more precisely, they are two sides of the same coin. According to Marx and Engels, however, this ignores the economic and class relations that form the material basis of the state: Stirner’s “idealism” would absurdly allow the state to be dismissed by an act of “wishful thinking” (374).

Now this critique of Stirner’s “idealist” approach to the State goes to the heart of the debate between me and Smith. Indeed, Smith’s suggestion that I, in my critique (via Stirner) of abstract universal ideals, fail fully to acknowledge or account for the concreteness of institutions like the prison, uncannily resembles Marx and Engels’s attack on Stirner for not recognizing the concreteness of institutions like the State. As with the critique of Stirner, it is objected that my thinking in effect proposes the existence of “abstract” prisons from which there can only be “abstract” forms of escape. Like the unfortunate Saint Max, who stumbles foggily through the world of illusions, I am said to be gesturing toward the concrete world “as if toward something half-real.” Now my response to this is as follows: Smith’s objection, which so closely parallels Marx and Engels’s materialist critique of Stirner, is itself based on a sort of illusory separation between discourse and reality, in which “reality” is privileged as “concrete” and as having an immediacy that ideas and theoretical concepts do not. However, I would suggest here not only that “concrete” objects and practices are meaningless outside discourse (that is, the linguistic, symbolic, and ideological networks within which they are constituted) but, more precisely, that these institutions and practices themselves have a sort of spectral ideological dimension that gives them consistency. In the same way, for instance, that Stirner argues that the State cannot be understood, let alone resisted, without an understanding of the abstract ideological systems that legitimize it, I am suggesting that “concrete” institutions and practices cannot be separated from the spectral ideological and symbolic systems that give them meaning—and that, in order to resist these institutions and practices, we have first to attack their spectral underside. For instance, Foucault shows that the “abstract” concept of the soul—which Smith himself has drawn upon—has very real material effects, allowing a sort of discursive cage to be constructed for the prisoner: as he expresses it in his famous inversion of the traditional formula, “the soul is the prison of the body” (30).

What I am suggesting here is that, paradoxically, in order for us to perceive what is concrete we must go through the abstract, or at least the symbolic. That is to say, we can only grasp institutions and practices in their concrete materiality through an “abstract” symbolic and ideological framework which constitutes their meaning. They cannot be seen as somehow outside or separate from this. As Slavoj Žižek argues, there is nothing more /ideological/ than the belief that we can somehow step outside ideological systems and see things for the “way they really are” (60). The world of abstract ideas and ideological systems does not somehow stand apart from and opposed to the world of concrete, material practices and institutions, as Smith seems to suggest; but rather, each can only be articulated through the other. While it is true that I have not referred in my paper directly to “concrete” institutions and practices, my contention is that they can only be grasped through their spectral, abstract, “half-real” dimension—and it is this dimension that I have focused on in discussing Stirner’s critique. It is a mistake to believe that Stirner’s critique of abstract universals implies that they can be simply dismissed, and that a new

world of reality and concreteness will be revealed to us—it is more sophisticated than this. Just because this world is spectral and ideological does not mean that it is not, at the same time, very /real/—on the contrary, ideology is all around us, materially present and deeply entrenched in our psyches. And what Stirner is interested in unmasking is the way that these abstract ideals, such as morality, rationality, and human essence, find their logical expression in concrete practices of domination—for instance, in punishment, which Stirner sees as a form of moral hygiene (213). It is precisely the abstract notions of morality and humanity that make this new system of punishment intelligible—that form the ideological and discursive apparatus that gives it meaning. That is why the State, for Stirner, is as much ideological and spectral as it is “real.” Indeed, it is constituted in its materiality precisely through this abstract, ideological dimension. This is what Marx and Engels did not understand—and it could be argued here that in neglecting the State’s ideological dimension, and by reducing it to the “materiality” of economic relations, they have themselves failed to grasp its reality—that is, its political specificity and autonomy. To suggest, as Smith seems to, that my focus on abstract structures of idealism has obscured or neglected the real, material world, is simply to repeat Marx’s and Engel’s error.

The second point that Smith makes is that Stirner’s idea of “ownness” as a form of radical freedom that is possible even in oppressive conditions may actually contribute to the practice of solitary confinement. This is because solitary confinement is based on the notion of a “cellular soul” that can be self-correcting, and Stirner’s notion of ownness, though it seeks to throw off repressive moral constraints, nevertheless sustains the idea of a soul that can be redeemed—this time in egoism rather than morality. Smith raises an interesting point—that because the egoist, for Stirner, creates his own forms of freedom, he can maintain a Buddhist-like spiritual detachment from the real conditions of restraint and coercion that he is subjected to, and that this may actually sustain, or at any rate allow to be sustained, the practice of incarceration in solitary confinement. In other words, the implications of Stirner’s theory of ownness would seem to be that the egoist can be free even in a prison cell. It is certainly the case that ownness is largely based on the individual seizing for himself a radical autonomy through the rejection of universal essences and fixed ideas. Moreover, Stirner does indeed say that this form of autonomy can be experienced even in the most oppressive conditions: “under the dominion of a cruel master my body is not ‘free’ from torments and lashes; but it is /my/ bones that moan under the torture, /my/ fibres that quiver under the blows [...]” (143). What Stirner is suggesting here is that even in conditions of abject slavery, in which the concept of freedom as an ideal becomes meaningless, there is nevertheless a more immediate form of autonomy or “self-ownership” available to the subject. Moreover, this internal autonomy is something upon which the concrete act of resistance and liberation can be based: the egoist, Stirner says, bides his time while submitting to punishment, and “as I keep my eye on myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slaveholder into the dust” (143). So what Stirner is trying to develop here is similar to the notion of positive freedom—a form of /internal/ freedom or autonomy that goes beyond simple freedom from external constraint. While it is usually the case that positive freedom presupposes a basic negative freedom, in the case of incarceration or slavery, there is no possibility of this prior condition of negative freedom. Positive internal freedom must therefore form the a priori condition for any act of resistance. An example of this strategy of ownness in action might be found in the film *Cool Hand Luke*. “Cool Hand” Luke, played by Paul Newman, is a convict on a chain gang. In one scene the prisoners are building a road with picks and shovels, and they are working at a slow, monotonous pace that is regulated, not only by the enforced

generalized boredom of the task, but also by the watchful gaze of the guards. The prisoners are languidly dreaming of their freedom, of life on the "outside." Luke suddenly urges his fellow prisoners to intensify the pace of the digging, saying all time "Go hard! Beat the Man!" The building of the road becomes a frenetic collective activity that causes profound consternation amongst the prison guards. Here we see the convicts taking a kind of self-ownership over their activity, an activity from which they were hitherto alienated because it was seen as something that had to be done for the authorities, for "the Man." By the convicts owning their own labor, by making it /theirs/, it becomes an act of resistance.

Stirner is also making another, more subtle point here: as well as the act of resistance being based on a radical internal freedom, the reverse of this is that practices and institutions of domination actually rely on an internalized oppression, whereby the subject is not only externally coerced and incarcerated but is also tied, in more profound ways, to this very identity of oppression. That is, institutions do not only oppress and coerce the subject from the outside—they also dominate the subject /inwardly./ In other words, they rely on an active self-domination—the subject is tied psychologically to the very institution that dominates him, and this might continue even after the institution itself has disappeared. The subject is tied to a kind of spectral shadow of the institution, precisely through an internalization of the moral and rational norms upon which the institution is based. This spectral shadow is precisely the hidden "authoritarian obverse" that I have referred to. The State, for instance, relies on certain forms of subjectification, so that the individual comes to willingly submit himself to its authority—so that, in the words of Stirner, "/its permanence/ is to be sacred to me" (161). So, for Stirner, any concrete liberation from the institution must begin with a sort of self-liberation—a liberation of the self from the forms of subjectivity that are tied to the institution. This is what Stirner means by "ownness." My point is, therefore, that Stirner's theory of ownness—although it would seem to mirror, as Smith suggests, a fantasy of "corrective solitude"—can actually be interpreted in another, much more radical way. It can be seen as a way of overcoming the forms of self-domination and servitude upon which practices of incarceration are ultimately based.

Although any act of liberation must begin with a personal individual liberation, it will ultimately be ineffective unless it incorporates a collective dimension—and it is here that I am inclined to agree with Smith in his emphasis on collective insurgency. I believe that notions of collective action and identity are very much implicit in both Stirner's and Foucault's politics, despite the way that they are usually perceived as valorizing only individual acts of resistance. Elsewhere I have insisted on a collective dimension in their thought, drawing on Stirner's important notion of the "union of egoists," as well as Foucault's writings on the Iranian Revolution (Newman). As Smith points out, Stirner himself talks about the way that the prison system, although designed to isolate individuals, actually creates the conditions for a new kind of collective intercourse and identity—one that constitutes a significant threat to the prison system. So while in my article I have focused on the individual—both in terms of the effect of abstract ideals and ideological systems on the individual, as well as on different forms of individual autonomy and resistance—there is no doubt that, for Stirner at least, this can form the basis for a collective insurgency. There is certainly nothing in either what I have said, or what Stirner and Foucault have said, that rules this out. How else can we hope to challenge the systems of power, surveillance, and domination in which we are all increasingly being inscribed?

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