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Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015)

Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage* is a welcome addition to a growing body of work that is challenging Western political theory and Western political philosophy from the perspective of a decolonial agenda. The book can thus be seen as part of a broader Global South intellectual movement whose aim is a decolonization of knowledge (or what is taken to be knowledge)—a shifting of the “geography of reason,” to cite the slogan of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, of which Roberts has been an active member since its founding more than ten years ago. His title references a subject (“freedom”) of great, indeed seemingly boring familiarity, while simultaneously disturbing and undermining the reflexivity of this judgment by linking freedom to what will be (for the average Western reader) a radically unfamiliar concept: *marronage*, the African flight from slavery in New World societies.

As a series of recent books has documented (vindicating, of course, work from many decades ago by two other Caribbean theorists, C. L. R. James and Eric Williams), Atlantic slavery was central to the making of the modern world, both materially and ideologically. Examples of such work include Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013); Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014); and Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Yet this very centrality has been an obstacle to the political transparency to which liberalism—the dominant political theory of modernity—classically aspires. Precisely because African slavery and other systems of racial subordination were foundational to the creation of the modern liberal world-order they can no longer (in a nominally postcolonial world) be acknowledged to be such. Instead, in modern Western political theory, slavery is far more freely invoked and explored as a metaphor for *other* kinds of subordination (for example: wage slavery, domestic slavery) than it is in its own literal form. But if *liberalism* as a term ultimately derives from the Latin *liber*, free man, then shouldn't the narrative of the millions of unfree black human beings be part of the overall story?

One of the most valuable features of this book, then, is its self-conscious and explicit drawing on the black slave and post-slave experience—New World African enslavement, marronage of different varieties, the Haitian slave revolution, post-emancipation racial oppression in conditions of nominal freedom—as a resource for political theory. By taking this subaltern history as his archive—“dread history” in the coinage of the Jamaican Rastafari—Roberts demonstrates what rich political raw materials lie waiting for the theorist with the courage to stray beyond the bounds of the Western estate: marronage in theory, so to speak. Or perhaps more accurately—if we take the metaphor seriously—the courage to investigate those parts of the estate which are now mysteriously fenced off, with NO TRESPASSING signs prominently posted above chained doors.

For Roberts’s decolonial mission is twofold. It is not merely that he wants to challenge the denial that an intellectual political tradition derived from the experience of African slavery exists, or (if its existence is conceded) exists as a worthy entry in global political thought. He also wants to contest and redraw the Western conceptual topography that has excluded this tradition from the map in the first place. Writing with unapologetic partisanship as a black scholar of Caribbean ancestry, he is contributing—within the broader framework of decolonial theory—to that specific strain which is increasingly being termed “Afro-modern political thought” (Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), the political theorizing of Afro-descendant peoples in a modern world shaped by black racial slavery and its legacy. And what this means is that a critique of the white Western tradition and the way it has drawn the terrain becomes a crucial part of the agenda since it is, of course, this very community that are responsible for New World African enslavement and post-emancipation black racial subordination. The “West” has chosen to erase as a political theme worth investigating the implications of the central and most blatant *unfreedom*—African slavery—on which the modern Western world was constructed. Roberts’s mission is to confront mainstream political theory with that historic and current evasion, and to explore the ways in which slave marronage in its different dimensions necessitates a rethinking of standard taxonomies and cartographies of the concept.

He carries out this enterprise over an ambitious landscape and timescape—Western antiquity; the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions; the postwar French Caribbean; the Jamaican Rastafari movement from the 1930s onward—and with a dizzying cast of characters—Frederick Douglass, Samuel Coleridge, Orlando Patterson, Hannah Arendt, Ralph Ellison, Isaiah Berlin, Philip Pettit, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Dessalines, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, Édouard Glissant, Angela Davis, Sylvia Wynter, and others. His basic goal is to argue that “freedom” as characterized by Berlin as divisible into negative (Hobbes, Pettit) and

positive (Arendt, Rousseau) variants is impoverished because of its implicit limitation to the white Western experience. The black slave experience of the West—which is certainly “Western” in its own way—needs to be taken into account in order to generate a concept sufficiently multi-dimensional to accommodate slave flight in its different varieties. But Roberts challenges conventional categories from the literature here also, arguing that the traditional distinction between *petit marronage* (temporary, individual, episodic) and *grand marronage* (collective flight) is insufficiently informed by a political sensibility. He recommends that we develop additional distinctions and categories—sovereign marronage and sociogenic marronage—to capture the political realities of large-scale revolts and revolutions.

Marronage for Roberts is characterized by four “interrelated pillars”: distance (spatial separations), movement (control over motion), property (private, collective, or common), and purpose (the justificatory rationale), with movement being the central factor (9-10). Through appropriate variation in these constituents, marronage is able, Roberts claims, to explain the entire range of human activities, from micro- through meso- to macropolitics. On this basis, Roberts sees his book as making contributions to the study of freedom in six main areas: (i) the critique of problematic treatments of the historic link between slavery and freedom, such as in Arendt’s and Pettit’s republicanism, as against Du Bois’s empirically informed documentation of slave agency; (ii) the analysis of Douglass’s detailed delineation in his second autobiography of slave experience and slave psychology, and the challenges his account poses for Patterson’s well-known “social death” depiction of slave consciousness; (iii) the exploration of the Haitian Revolution’s significance as the only successful slave revolution in history, more radical and consistently universalist than both the American and French Revolutions, yet not acknowledged as such by Western historiography; (iv) the inquiry into one of Martinican poet/novelist/activist Glissant’s novels and one of his essay collections for their insights on creolization and a revisionist historicism; (v) the drawing out of the implications of marronage for neoliberalism, which in recent decades has become the globally dominant version of liberalism (though we are now seeing a shift the other way); and (vi) the mapping of unfreedom as an important reality deserving examination in its own right, rather than being merely a category residual to freedom (23-26).

In sum, Roberts is not merely bringing to mainstream attention the work of figures who need to be recognized *as* political theorists, grappling with problems that are “Western” insofar as slave and post-slave Atlantic societies are creations of the West and undeniably (though denied in our political textbooks and guides) part of the West. He is also, as emphasized at the start, seeking to contest and rewrite orthodox terms, categories, and framings. Thus his project aims at both a revision of the political canon—

who should be seen as populating its halls—and a remapping of its standard cartographies—what terrain should be seen as “political” and how it should be divided up. He is seeking to articulate “a new political vocabulary” that will be adequate to a political experience not even recognized in the canon, let alone seen as worthy of theoretical investigation by political scholars (12).

This book offers a very rich and innovative discussion of crucial political concepts, and their possible rethinking. Whether one agrees with Roberts’s analysis or not, it is a text certainly very much worth engaging with. But I want to close by raising some questions I had about his claims, specifically a concern that perhaps he was being too extravagant in his suggested revisionism.

By definition, marronage is about the escape from coercion and domination, a new way of thinking about freedom as a concept and ideal. Yet in the introduction to his book, as earlier cited, Roberts speaks of the four elements of marronage as being able to “explain the spectrum of human activities from individuated micropolitics to mass collective revolution” (10).

But insofar as marronage is about flight and freedom, how could this be correct, considering that historically a great deal, indeed the majority, of human political activity has *not* been about freedom at all, but rather the imposition by the privileged of formal and informal structures of domination on the rest of humanity? The emancipatory political projects of the subordinated are only one variety of politics, and, given the unhappy realities of recent (post-hunting-and-gathering) human history, a minority element. Freedom is such a precious value precisely because unfreedom has been the norm, whether in ancient and modern slave societies, medieval Western feudalism, absolutist European monarchies, Asian despotisms, twentieth-century Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, trans-epochal patriarchies, or capitalist, racist, and theocratic dictatorships. Collectively, these political regimes occupy a large chunk of the “spectrum of human activities,” but they are certainly not exemplifications of freedom, whether conceptualized through marronage or not. So greater caution in the declared scope of the concept would seem to be called for. Marronage may offer a valuable new perspective on the way we should think about freedom, but it cannot be an all-purpose political signifier precisely because of how limited the realm of human freedom has actually historically been.

But even for the liberatory projects of the politically subordinated, I wondered whether this four-fold listing really works as a generally valid revisionist framework. Would it apply, for example, to first- or second-wave mainstream white feminism? Lesbian separatism fits the designation of “flight” most closely (establishing gay relations and gay communities away from the heteropatriarchal gaze). But what about mainstream heterosexual feminism, that was and is agitating for the reform of marriage as an institution? I don’t see that this counts as “movement” or “flight”; rather, it

is a demand for gender justice and a change of rules in an institution that (at least until recently) many straight Western women still aspired to enter. And similarly for the struggles for access to birth control, the right to vote, to run for office, to end mass media sexual objectification, to have rape recognized and punished as a pervasive crime, and so on.

Or consider class politics, social democratic or Marxist. Is organizing for a larger share of the social product, or for socialist revolution, tantamount to “spatial” movement? It is certainly seeking change, reformist or revolutionary, from one kind of system to another. But if this counts as “movement” through “distance” (and Roberts later glosses “flight” as “directional movement in the domain of physical environment, embodied cognition, and/or the metaphysical” (9)) I worry that we have so diluted the concept of marronage that it loses its distinctiveness and originality as a contribution to political theory, and becomes a vague metaphor that can be extended to just about everything. People simply changing their mind, for example—by rejecting (or, for that matter, accepting) oppressive ideologies—could count as an alteration of “embodied cognition,” and thus “flight.” So I suggest that Roberts would be strengthening his case if he retracted these extreme, open-ended, and ultimately self-negating claims, and made more limited and precise the scope of marronage. Nonetheless, with that said, I applaud Roberts’s provocative first book and look forward to the many more I am sure we will be getting from this talented young political theorist.

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