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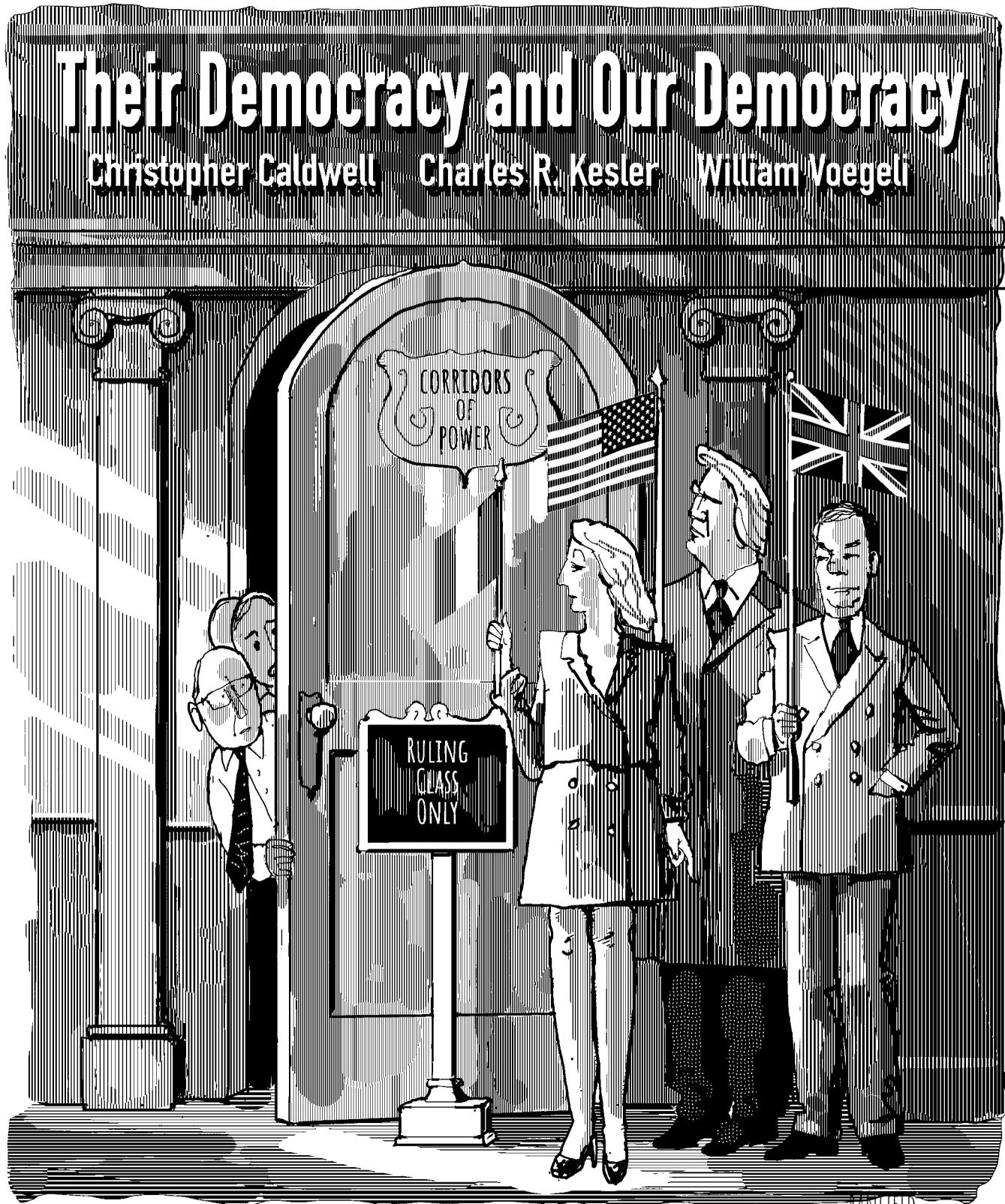
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FROM KÖNIGSBERG TO GETTYSBURG

An Emancipation of the Mind: Radical Philosophy, the War over Slavery, and the Refounding of America, by Matthew Stewart.
W.W. Norton & Company, 400 pages, \$32.50



A BRAHAM LINCOLN WAS BORN AT THE end of what we might call “the long Enlightenment,” and in many ways he remained a man of the Enlightenment for the rest of his life. Remember that when Lincoln was born in 1809 Thomas Paine (of *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason*) and Franz Josef Haydn were still alive, and Thomas Jefferson was still president of the United States. Three decades later, in his Lyceum Address, Lincoln was warning that “the pillars of the temple of liberty” must be “hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.... Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence.”

But for many of his contemporaries, reason had grown boring, bloodless, and overdrawn. These doubters were the prophets of Romanticism, and for the Romantics passion and not reason was the chief pledge of sincerity. This was true not only in art and literature but in politics as well, as the Romantics moved political life into the realm of mysterious, non-rational factors like soil, blood, nationality, or class. “Time, place and national character alone,” declared Germany’s Johann Gottfried Herder, “govern all the events that happen

among mankind, as well as all the occurrences in nature.”

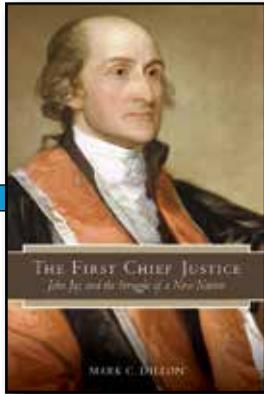
Lincoln could not have disagreed more. For him, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” were neither an American cultural accident nor the residue of British common law but instead rested on a self-evident universal truth which it had simply fallen to Americans to hold up as its best example. That truth, he proclaimed in one speech, “is the electric cord...that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together,” and “that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.” Listen to the voice of reason, Lincoln pleaded on the eve of civil war, and “let us do nothing through passion and ill temper.” At that moment, passion was the enemy, and “though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

A GREAT MANY OF THESE DISCONNECTIONS between Lincoln and Romanticism seem to have escaped Matthew Stewart, who in *An Emancipation of the Mind: Radical Philosophy, the War over Slavery, and the Refounding of America* is convinced that

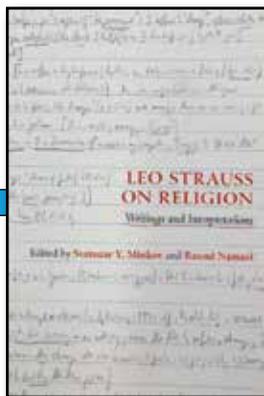
Lincoln and the great campaign that destroyed slavery were the direct products of German Romanticism’s beneficent influence on American abolitionists. Stewart is a journalist and (as he describes himself) “an independent philosopher and historian” with a D.Phil. from Oxford who has spent nearly 30 years writing about the history of philosophy, the inequities of capitalism, and religious unbelief. His real affection in *An Emancipation of the Mind* is for the German Romantics and, for that matter, anything which (as he wrote in an earlier book, *Nature’s God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic*, in 2014) guarantees “an emancipation of the political order from God.”

The difficulty with *An Emancipation of the Mind* is that an acquaintance with German Romantic philosophy does not guarantee any easy entrance into the 19th-century American intellectual landscape. Stewart begins with a striking crossover between Frederick Douglass and Ludwig Feuerbach, in a series of lectures Douglass delivered on photography between 1861 and 1865. The lectures borrow so clearly from Feuerbach “that it raises a question about how the mature

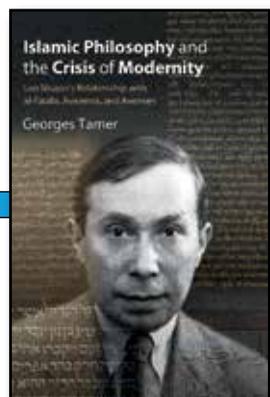
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Douglass could ever have been represented as anything other than an unapologetic Feuerbachian humanist.” And sure enough, Douglass kept a bust of Feuerbach on his mantelpiece in Washington.

But one swallow does not a summer make. Douglass’s commentators, from Peter Myers to Scott Williamson to David Blight, have described a powerful, apocalyptic religious strain in Douglass which cannot be explained away as easily as Stewart might like. Douglass was not a theologian, and we should not be surprised that a man who earned his living, as Douglass did, primarily as a writer and travelling lecturer dipped into sources which did not always sit easily beside each other. But he also declared that slavery “is a direct war upon the government of God,” and D.H. Dilbeck in his religious biography of Douglass, *Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet* (2018), insists that “Douglass held fast to the Christian faith his entire adult life.”

THAT STEWART DRIFTS PAST THIS complexity in Douglass is a sign of how easy it will be for him to miss the other complexities of American ideas in the 19th century and how much they remained largely immune to the influence of German Romantic philosophy until well past the Civil War. Stewart believes that “the encounter with German thought was like opening a giant bay window by the sea” whose breeze “fanned out across the American continent with surprising impact.” But impact on *whom*, exactly? Stewart makes passing mention of Henry Brockmeyer’s little reading group of “St. Louis Hegelians” and drops a few other names (Karl Heinzen, August Willich, Friedrich Kapp). Even then, he seems unaware of the unpredictability of the German influence: Henry Villard, a “revolutionary-minded” teenager who fled the revolution of 1848 in Germany, originally aligned himself with Stephen A. Douglas and the Democratic Party, not with the abolitionists.

It is true enough that the Germans were being read. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “transcendentalism” was borrowed from Immanuel Kant, and mediated through one of Kant’s first American admirers, James Marsh of the University of Vermont. But there is some question as to how much influence Emerson actually had on American philosophy (his longest treatise, *Nature*, in 1836, was all of 64 pages), while a transcendentalist like Henry David Thoreau was more indebted to William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and the English-speaking Romantics (who, in Carlyle’s case, “idealized the condition of the Negroes in the South-

ern States,” as one abolitionist put it). If there was an American national philosophy at mid-century, it was the Scottish common-sense realist tradition, whose roots were wrapped solidly around the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment, and its most popular textbooks were Francis Wayland’s *Elements of Moral Science* (1835) and *Elements of Political Economy* (1837), Archibald Alexander’s *Outlines of Moral Science* (1860), Joseph Haven’s *Mental Philosophy: Including the Intellect, Sensibilities, and Will* (1857), Mark Hopkins’s *Lectures on Moral Science* (1862), and Noah Porter’s *The Human Intellect: With an Introduction Upon Psychology and the Soul* (1868).

“WE PAINSTAKINGLY STUDIED ‘Mental’ and ‘Moral’ Philosophy,” recalled Jane Addams of her senior course at Rockford College. But far from being “dry in the classroom,” it “became the subject of more spirited discussion outside, and gave us a clue for animated rummaging in the little college library.” Andrew Preston Peabody recalled that the teaching of Harvard College president James Walker, who superintended (as most college presidents did before 1869) the senior instruction in moral philosophy, was “collectively and individually...intensely stimulating to industry, ambition, high moral resolve, and religious purpose.” None of these showed much trace of German ideas—and no wonder, since the basic task of the “moral philosophy” writers was to reconcile natural law philosophy and Protestant Christianity in the same way the so-called “moderate Enlightenment” had struggled to do a century before. And, significantly, it was Francis Wayland’s *Elements of Political Economy*, and not Ludwig Feuerbach, which William Herndon recorded “Lincoln ate up, digested, and assimilated.”

The line Stewart wants to draw from the German Romantics to Lincoln and the Civil War lies mostly through Theodore Parker. Grandson of the famous captain of the Lexington Minutemen, Parker was a Boston Unitarian minister who was one of the few prominent American converts to German ideas; the man who aspired to build a bridge between Lincoln and Parker was Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner and an unabashed admirer of Parker’s. Herndon considered Parker “his ideal theologian, reformer and orator.” Lincoln, who never joined a church and never made any form of religious profession, was in Herndon’s estimate “a theist somewhat after the order of Theodore Parker.”

Whether that made Lincoln into a Parker-channeling German is another problem, first, because Lincoln (unlike Herndon) never



seems to have met Parker, corresponded with him, or quoted him, and second, because nobody—not even Herndon—could quite pin down the shifting shape of religion in Lincoln. When Lincoln’s longtime friend David Davis, a circuit judge in Illinois, was quizzed by Herndon about Lincoln’s religion, Davis responded, “I don’t know anything about Lincoln’s Religion—don’t think anybody knew. The idea that Lincoln talked to a stranger about his religion or religious views—or made such speeches, remarks &c about it as published is absurd to me.” That agnosticism lays as heavy a skeptical hand on Stewart as it does on the well-intentioned divines who, after Lincoln’s death, claimed he had years before experienced a secret conversion.

WE ARE ON MORE CERTAIN GROUND concerning Lincoln and political economy. Lincoln embraced much the same classic market liberalism as we find in Adam Smith, the early John Stuart Mill, and the Manchester School. “I don’t believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich,” he said in 1860, “It would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else.” Only the year before in another speech, Lincoln had made clear what he regarded as the natural form of an economy: “Men who were industrious and sober, and honest in the pursuit of their own interests, should after a while accumulate capital, and after that should be allowed to enjoy it in peace, and if they chose, when they had accumulated capital, to use it to save themselves from actual labor and hire other people to labor for them, it was right.” It bothered Lincoln not at all that the results of such labor and accumulation would not be shared equally. “If any continue through life in the condition of the hired laborer,” he remarked in Wisconsin that same year, “it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune.”

But this is exactly where Stewart steers into strange waters. For Stewart, German Romanticism is exclusively the Left-Hegelianism of Feuerbach and Karl Marx; it is concerned with freedom not as the exercise of “the individual mind” but a corporate and organic affair “through which the individual transcends itself and arrives at something universal.” Capitalism is the chief bar to that consciousness because it glorifies not just the individual but the individual’s appropriation of private property and unequal wealth. That inequitable wealth can only be achieved by expropriating the value a labor force generates, and the more oppressed that laboring force, the more wealth is generated. According to Stewart, what Americans liked to call democracy only served to protect “the rights of property.”

The ultimate expression of capitalist wealth in the 19th century is, for Stewart, American slavery, and the ultimate justification of slavery arises from American Christianity since the Christian Bible exudes a spirit of “malign” indifference to human slavery and human dignity. After all, Douglass’s own master, Thomas Auld, was converted in a revival meeting, but came home a more devilish slaveowner for it. Prominent American theologians (James Henley Thornwell is Stewart’s prime exhibit) defended slavery; even slavery’s evangelical critics “were all bark and no bite.”

HAPPILY, IN STEWART’S TALE, GERMAN Romanticism intervened in American life to strike the blow that killed slavery, and struck it through Abraham Lincoln, who was as much a religious infidel as Feuerbach or Parker and who had come to share Marx’s “labor theory of value.” “If all this makes Lincoln sound vaguely Marxist,” Stewart coyly observes, “well, maybe that’s because that is how it sounded to Karl Marx.” But coy or not, it’s enough in Stewart’s judgment to crown Lincoln “America’s first Marxist president.”

If so, then it is worth asking why Lincoln didn’t succeed in confecting a proletarian paradise once he became president. Stewart’s

answer relies on the power of the two primary villains of his story, religion and “monopoly capitalism,” the former dolling up Lincoln after his murder as a righteous believer and the latter overthrowing Reconstruction so that “the propertied” could once more “dominate the propertyless.” But the *real* story of Reconstruction, of course, is how capitalism in the old South was actually strangled in its Reconstruction cradle by the unbowed oligarchs of the Lost Cause, condemning the old Confederacy to a century of economic stagnation and racial hierarchy which can only be understood as the Romantic blueprint for an ideal society. After all, George Fitzhugh had defended slavery in the 1850s as “the beau ideal of Communism.” Now, in the form of Jim Crow and sharecropping, they got it again, as Henry Mencken might have said, good and hard.

Matthew Stewart is right to be skeptical of the many efforts to bend Lincoln’s words to the shape of some form of Christianity (or, in the case of one 19th-century Cincinnati rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise, to Judaism). Lincoln does not bend well. His Second Inaugural, with its invocation of the judgment of God, falls well short of any conventional creed in his day. And yet a God of judgment is a personal God, and Lincoln defended his inaugural not through the abstractions of Theodore Parker, but by recognizing that “there has been a difference of purpose” between God and the American people. Such a difference arises only out of a contest of real, living beings. “To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world.” That, purely on its own, is a reflection which undermines the entire premise of *An Emancipation of the Mind*.

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