“It was universally understood as a revolution.” An Interview with historian Matthew Stewart on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

Tom Mackaman
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The WSWS spoke to Matthew Stewart, a historian and philosopher whose work explores the philosophical roots of American history. Stewart is the author of The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World; Nature’s God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic; An Emancipation of the Mind: Radical Philosophy, the War over Slavery, and the Refounding of America; *and* The 9.9 Percent: The New Aristocracy That Is Entrenching Inequality and Warping Our Culture.

The interview is lightly edited for clarity.

Tom Mackaman: Matthew, I’d like to begin with a question we posed in our recent webinar marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. It’s a very broad question, but a surprisingly important and topical one: was this a revolution? It’s attacked in odd ways, from both the right and the so-called left. What made it so—what made it a revolution from the vantage point of your work?

Matthew Stewart: That’s a great question. What I find interesting is that it seems to be a question posed in modern times—or one that perhaps came up a century ago. If you take the trouble to look at what people at the time said, not just in the new republic but in the rest of the world, I don’t think there would have been any doubt that it was a revolution. It was universally understood as a revolution; it inspired people as a revolution, and it went on to inspire further revolutions that no one really questions as being revolutionary—for example, the 1848 uprisings in Europe.

So, my short answer is that there was indeed a revolutionary aspect to the event. But before we latch onto that, I think it’s also important to acknowledge the complexity that all historians have to deal with. When we talk about the American Revolution, we’re talking about a particular conglomeration of events that happened over a space of time. It wasn’t a single thing—it was a whole bunch of different things going on. So, if there is a revolution, that’s only one part of it; it doesn’t have to answer for everything that came after. In fact, a lot of what came after was a counter?revolution, or a rejection of that revolution.

But to finish off—we’re now at the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and I think it’s very important to understand that there is something there worth preserving, something redeeming about the American project. It is this revolutionary aspect of the process—which doesn’t define everything that came out of it, but it is there, and it matters, and it made a big difference in the world.

TM: I agree with you completely, and hopefully we’ll have a chance to return to the point you just raised about the retreat of the American Revolution in the early republic, leading up to the Civil War. Let me read a passage from your book *An Emancipation of the Mind*—which, by the way, for our viewers, I’d recommend without hesitation. There’s a remarkable passage in your preface; I’m going to splice a couple of parts of it together. The Civil War:

> is best understood as a slave insurrection by proxy that evolved naturally into a revolutionary workers’ war, and ultimately into a fight for the rights of all humans against the rights of property. Notwithstanding their appreciation of the imperfections and mistakes of America’s first generation of revolutionaries, Douglass, Lincoln, and [Theodore] Parker saw themselves to the last breath as champions of the American Revolution and Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, because that is what they were.

And then you go on:

> This book takes for granted that ideas matter and that they trace a visible arc through the disorder of human history. The plot starts with a radical philosophical vision that originated in early modern Europe and drew its initial strength from its encounters with the people and circumstances of the New World. This radical vision achieved a limited practical expression in the first American Revolution, and then again in its successor revolutions, notably in France and Haiti. In the early American Republic, its force dissipated under the growing pressure of a counter-revolutionary slaveholding oligarchy. The dream was nonetheless revived and reformulated in the cafés and classrooms of Germany and elsewhere in Europe, in the context of the revolutions of 1848. Having suffered defeat there in the reactionary aftermath, it emigrated back across the ocean, often penniless, but still burning with ambition to reignite the refounding of the American Republic and its second revolution.

An extraordinary passage—a very sweeping interpretation of history. Would you like to describe your approach here?

MS: It’s funny—reading it back, I hear the idealistic strain in it, and the emphasis on the importance of ideas. So, perhaps in anticipation of a rebuttal to that, I want to stress that I’m pretty materialist in the way I think about these things, in my basic approach.

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Let's start with the first part of the American Revolution—I say "part" because I'm also going to argue that the second revolution, the Civil War, was really just a continuation of the project. That first part really begins with a fundamental change in the experience and material conditions of the colonial population on the American continent. What you see is a tremendous amount of land, and a tremendous increase in the value of labor. This is relative—it's obviously not a universal thing, it was still a stratified society—but relative to the European world the colonists came from, it was a new experience. It was also new in the encounter with the native populations, who had different forms and structures, but something materially quite different. So that basic experience of equality and independence, for at least some part of the population, was central to the revolutionary project.

The elites who ended up taking over the revolution—who commandeered and organized it—were working with that. Sometimes they were working against it, but they had to grapple with it. That's why in my book on the American Revolution, *Nature's God*, I chose to center a lot of it on the stories of Ethan Allen and Thomas Young—people who represented what would have been called the middling sort, or the lower economic orders, who had a newfound freedom and who were fighting against what they often thought of as local oppression—the New York landlords who were preventing them from taking advantage of the land that was out there, and so on. So, I think this first American Revolution did have a certain egalitarian foundation that we tend to lose track of.

That's the first part of the story. The other part is that everyone involved, including the elites, really had to search for a new foundation for government. They understood the default political theology of humankind up to that point—that there's a natural order of subordination in the human world mirroring a divine hierarchy—and they knew they had to get rid of that. They knew they needed a new foundation for their political understanding, and they found it. They were informed, well-read, and thoughtful enough to do that. So, people like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, a curious pair, theorized that new equality.

It was revolutionary in a material sense that's not appreciated today—I'll throw out one fact: Karl Marx was a particular fan of America's founders. He thought they'd achieved something remarkable. He was especially fond of Abraham Lincoln, and I think that's because he saw in that revolutionary project something emancipatory for broad segments of society.

TM: I think it's good that you make the point about the material question, the concrete history—because that passage might imply you're only dealing with ideas, but in fact there's a real attention in these books, in *Nature's God* as well as *An Emancipation of the Mind*, around the question of wealth and property. And I'd say that's got extraordinary relevance now, at the 250th anniversary of the founding, given political, social and cultural conditions in the United States and elsewhere.

MS: *Nature's God* was published in 2014, but I really finished it around 2012, and I was aware of and alert to the threat of Christian nationalism in the modern US. To some degree the book was framed as an antidote to that—I wanted to reclaim the American Revolution, take it away from reactionaries who want to see it as a celebration of one particular, frankly bigoted and narrow-minded, supposedly cultural tradition. I wanted to bring it back to a progressive cause—the revolution matters, and it matters as a progressive thing, not a reactionary one. But I have to say I wasn't so prescient—I didn't quite anticipate the extent to which Christian nationalism and reaction would triumph again in the United States over the past twelve years since the book was published. So, I guess that makes it more relevant, but not in a way I would have liked.

TM: Right. And the other element that I think took many by surprise is that the American Revolution has also come under attack from what's sometimes called the American left. The *New York Times*, the major newspaper of American liberalism, spearheaded that—or you could say they assembled a lot of what some self-styled left types had been saying for some time about the American Revolution, synthesized it, and promoted it. The basic thesis was that the American Revolution was a counter-revolution waged to defend slavery. Maybe you could speak to that. One thing that's often occurred to me is that it's, on the surface, a case of strange bedfellows politically—because both sides of that debate, the Christian nationalists and what we call the pseudo-left, agree about what the American Revolution was: that it was a reactionary or conservative event. One puts a plus sign on it, the other a minus sign, but the interpretation isn't fundamentally different—it founded a white, Christian republic.

MS: I saw some of the pieces you put out on the 1619 Project, and I thought they were great—they hit a lot of the important issues with that project, which I frankly think was not a very good idea, and terrible history.

Let me go back to something I said at the beginning: if you go back and try to understand the context the way people at the time understood it, this suggestion would have been quite preposterous. Both the reactionary interpretation and what I think you reasonably call the pseudo-left interpretation are preposterous, because they both say essentially that it's all mere rhetoric, a cover for the existing structure — either you love that structure, the white supremacy or Christian supremacy of it, or you hate it, but either way it's just a continuation of the same thing.

What I find particularly frustrating about that is that in the nineteenth century the United States went through a tremendous struggle—the bloodiest war in its history—and it did abolish slavery. We know it wasn't completely effective, in the sense that it gave rise to other forms of enslavement, but it did go through an emancipatory process, and pretty much every serious player in that process understood the emancipatory forces to be taking inspiration from the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence.

I'll name three examples I focus on in my book. Abraham Lincoln—he famously didn't like Jefferson, but when he writes to Republicans in Massachusetts in 1859, he says, "All honor to Jefferson"—because he came up with this stumbling block to tyranny. So, Lincoln's part in the antislavery movement is emphatically grounded in the American Revolution. Frederick Douglass—exactly the same story. We're all familiar with his "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July," but if you actually read the speech, it's a criticism of American hypocrisy. It appeals fundamentally to the ideals of the Declaration, which he calls the "ring-bolt of American liberty." And then Theodore Parker, less well known today, but I think a pivotal figure of the time. He starts off as a fairly apolitical, arguably even reactionary figure, but comes around to become a militant antislavery advocate. He says very clearly: America was founded on this principle of equality, on this declaration that grants us all equal rights, and it became clear later that it was hypocritical and only meant freedom for the white man—until we recognize that it's freedom for everybody, we won't succeed as a nation.

Those are the people who fought against slavery, who gave a tremendous amount to fight it and who won. Now, if you turn around and say the American Revolution was all just a perpetuation of slavery, you're throwing out the best part, the most redeeming and most inspiring part of American history—the part we really need to turn to now, in the ongoing struggles for liberation. Why would you throw that away?

In terms of contemporary politics, I like to think I'm writing history, philosophy—these subjects are interesting in themselves—and I want to bring out the facts for people to draw on. I'm not simply engaged in political polemic. But the way I see the history mapping onto the present: you have reactionaries on the right attempting to co-opt this revolution as just another golden-age myth for a reactionary, race-based republic. And then you have people who call themselves left but are in fact safeguarding some kind of identity-based privilege, ignoring the part of the revolution

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that could actually make a difference for their own causes. I get kind of heated about this, because it's frustrating to see so much of American history thrown away with this casual "it's all just slavery and race-based struggle, so there's no hope." And we should just throw it all away. I think that's a huge mistake—and that was, in a way, the contemporary motivation for tackling this topic.

TM: The points you just made open up some big questions. One thing that strikes me is that everyone who today rejects the American Revolution, for one reason or another, has a real problem with the Declaration of Independence, because of its text—it proclaims equality, and it also proclaims the right to revolt against tyranny. I think your book on the American Revolution captures the radical philosophical origins of this content.

One way to take the discussion—I know you have a special interest in philosophy—I understand, for example, that J.D. Vance's billionaire patron, Peter Thiel, is a figure in something called the Dark Enlightenment. They're actually taking aim at the Enlightenment and at the idea of human equality once again. And on the other hand, you have currents in philosophy that present themselves as radical, but that also reject reason and the Enlightenment.

Let me read another passage that struck me, from *An Emancipation of the Mind*:

> Extreme inequality, as in so many other contexts throughout history, generated a profound instability that could only be resolved through aggression. The rise of the new aristocracy and the resulting expansionism were the driving force of American politics during the first nine decades of the American Republic.

And you go on:

> The slaveholders, like their ideological heirs today, talked a good game about limited government, but when it came to enforcing the claims of the species of property they favored, they demanded public subsidies and government without limits… [C]ontrol over the southern economy, and by extension over national public life, rested in the hands of the top 0.1 percent of an extremely skewed distribution of wealth. The new oligarchy rapidly acquired the habits of mind and body that have characterized aristocracies since the Bronze Age—a clique notorious for its arrogance, recklessness, violent tendencies, fatuous honor codes, and so on.

Somewhere you make the point that inequality, in the end, is hostile to reason. I think that's a really important point—maybe you'd like to elaborate and draw out the connections from this earlier period to the present.

MS: I wrote another book, *The 9.9 Percent*, and even though the title suggests it's focused on one segment of American society, it's mainly an argument about the impact of economic inequality on the human capacity for reason, for thinking. It's an argument that came up for me in considering American history, and it connects very much with your previous comments on the race-based interpretation of history.

I want to emphasize the economic-inequality side of the struggle over slavery—not because race isn't relevant, but because I, along with people like Frederick Douglass, see the economic questions as deeply interconnected with the racial questions, and in a way more fundamental. What I want to emphasize is that the rise of a slave republic in nineteenth-century America is mostly a story of the rise of an oligarchy—a group of people with a set of financial interests, who use government as a tool to concentrate those interests, which in turn gives them disproportionate power, which in turn distorts the thinking of everybody in society, and creates these terrible, destructive dynamics.

To be even more sweeping—and I apologize for the grand gesture—I think this is the story of human history for the most part. Since the Bronze Age, human beings have had a lot of trouble governing themselves, mainly because they generate systems, laws, structures meant to create equitable distribution and social cohesion, but which are easily gamed, and always are gamed. That leads to excessive concentrations of power, and that concentration of economic or material power always, throughout history, produces unreason. It does so for two simple reasons. First, you have a small group of people with a tremendous amount of power who have a huge vested interest in disinforming and misinforming everybody—you can see that right now in our present world, so I don't need to belabor it. Second, you have a population whose experience of life is driven by fundamentally irrational material conditions, engaged in competitions that are notionally tied to the social good but in fact are counterproductive or absurd. They're also exposed to experiences that lead them to misunderstand human nature. When some people are a thousand times richer than others—and by the way, we're way past that point now—people also come to imagine that some people are a thousand times smarter than others and draw inferences about how easy or hard life should be.

All of this produces a deep irrationality, a source of conflict. It creates a population that's easily manipulated, and a smaller group that's very keen on manipulating. This happens throughout history—plenty of analysts have made this point; I'll throw out Karl Marx again: consciousness arises from material conditions, not the other way around. That, I think, is at the center of the story of American slavery.

You had a slave system which many of the founders thought was not going to continue—some of that may have been self-serving talk, but I think most of them genuinely believed it was on its way out. Then you had a couple of crucial developments—technological, the cotton gin, new cotton species—but also the Louisiana Purchase and westward expansion, which radically changed the economics. Suddenly you go from tobacco and rice and other crops to a monocrop of cotton. That was something they didn't anticipate, but those changes created the oligarchy, and the underclass beneath it—the white underclass, the enslaved population and the northerners—all caught up in conflicts they couldn't resolve except, in the end, through an incredibly bloody conflict.

TM: Fascinating presentation. I need to ask you about the influence of German radical philosophy, which I think is one of the most surprising aspects of this book—quite a list of names: Hegel, Feuerbach, von Humboldt, Marx, and many others, even George Eliot and Ottilie Assing. You're making an argument that, as far as I know, I'd never read before—that German radical philosophy influenced Frederick Douglass. And you make a case for Lincoln as well. Could you tell us about that?

MS: First let me disclaim any great claim to originality—there's scholarship out there that has looked at some of these influences; I'd just say it hasn't received anything like the attention the subject deserves, so I hope I'm bringing it to light.

One point I want to make about the First and Second Revolution is that America's political leaders were philosophically quite rich—widely read, drawing on a tremendous range of sources, and incredibly thoughtful. It's really important for Americans to look at what Jefferson was reading, what Lincoln was reading, and figure out where their thought was coming from, because it's incredibly rich and interesting.

On the German influence specifically: German philosophy was coming out of a very convoluted, quasi-revolutionary situation. Germany at the turn of the 18th-19th century had lots of hopes when the French Revolution broke out, hopes that were quickly dashed as reaction triumphed—but there were still enough people around trying to think their

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way to freedom. What comes out of that Central European context is incredibly complex thought but also thought that's incredibly radical once you peel back the layers meant to disguise it and let people get on with their lives.

What's really interesting is that Americans at the time were fascinated by this—they saw the Germans as deep, radical, profound and—this will probably surprise a lot of people on the left—emancipatory, incredibly progressive. A key figure here is Feuerbach. Hegel is generally regarded as the centerpiece of German philosophy at the time, but interpreting his legacy is difficult because it's so ambiguous and dialectical—he presents one side and the other, and it all fits together into some sort of happy whole. Feuerbach is unambiguously on the left—unambiguously saying we need to emancipate ourselves from the superstitions that have limited us and made it impossible to establish a genuine democratic republic. It turns out that was hugely influential for Frederick Douglass—who knew, right? But some people did know. I mention this in the preface—I knew from other sources that he had read Feuerbach, and that some of his thoughts on Feuerbach showed up in his lectures on photography, which is itself an interesting development. But when I read them, I was really shocked, because it wasn't just that he picked up some vague ideas, Feuerbach says God is the species-essence of man, and Douglass says something similar—no, he picked up specific metaphors and turns of phrase. That's when I realized this really mattered to him; it wasn't that he read a magazine article and picked up an idea.

The books had a tremendous influence—they also influenced people like Theodore Parker and Abraham Lincoln. The other part of the story, which I describe in the book, is the immigrants. There was a huge wave of immigrants from Germany—immigrants who, by the way, played a key role in the first part of the American Revolution too. The Pennsylvania Revolution had a significant cast of characters from the German community—if you read the German-language newspapers of the time, you'll find them debating independence and what to do about the struggle with Great Britain. But it was much more significant in the middle of the nineteenth century, when there was very large German immigration—skewed toward the educated elite. There was a large chunk of economic immigrants, but also a disproportionately large group of intellectual refugees, who played a substantial role in intellectual life. They published abolitionist newspapers, and they got heavily involved in the Union Army. They're a really big part of the story, and it's curiously forgotten.

Going back to the contemporary relevance—these people who go around talking about some original America where it's all a bunch of white Englishmen going about their white English ways seem to be completely ignorant of American history. If you actually look at the history, you find all kinds of people from all kinds of places involved in what we think of as key American events.

TM: Their conception is probably closer to what the Tories were in 1776 in the colonies—many of whom were..

MS: Yes, that's right. In the first American Revolution, there were some ministers and preachers supporting the revolution, but on balance, if you were a minister of good standing in a nice town like New York, odds are you were a Tory, and odds are you were going to get on the boat and leave. So, this idea that it was a Christian revolution is kind of nuts.

TM: One other thing I think your work challenges, as it relates to the antislavery question—it's typically presented that the northern churches were the seedbed of abolitionism, of antislavery thought, and you paint a very different picture, particularly in your focus on Theodore Parker, who I think is a very important figure not much studied these days.

MS: One of the most successful pieces of propaganda in modern historiography is the tissue of claims that the abolitionist movement was powered by, organized by, and driven for the greater glory of the American Christian church and religion. That's such a misrepresentation of the facts. There absolutely were people motivated by abolition from within these churches, and some of the early evangelical churches did have abolitionist declarations, and some early abolitionists constantly appealed to religion as a source of abolition. But in the broad sweep of things, the abolitionists themselves will tell you, if you read what they wrote, that the greatest obstacle they faced was the American church. The various religions all—including those that initially opposed slavery—ended up coming to an accord with the slave system, and not only that, they ended up as enforcers of it. So, the abolitionists realized early on that they had to break from the churches. Their initial project was to try to use religion to convince people slavery is wrong, and then they realized it just wasn't working—not only wasn't it working, but when they went to churches to make these claims, they'd be greeted with bricks and stones and hounded out of town.

So, the church turned out to be essentially a supporter of, or collaborator with, the slave system by and large. The early evangelical abolitionists mostly peeled off—sure, they played a role in the 1830s and '40s in getting some of the abolitionist movement going, but then many lost interest, or pursued other spiritual projects. By 1860, Frederick Douglass—at that point one of the clear leaders of the movement—says the church-based evangelical wing of abolitionism is basically dead. On the other side, these abolitionists, having realized the Bible doesn't help them, the churches don't help them, appeals to religion don't help them, become infidels—they openly declare themselves not followers of Christianity, or looking for a kind of liberal Christianity that lets them reinterpret the Bible to suit their moral ideas. Unfortunately for them, that makes things worse, because the power of religion is such that, branded as infidels, they become persona non grata—condemned everywhere. Abolitionism becomes identical with religious infidelity.

So, the story of the abolitionist movement, as most Americans understand it—a bunch of nice people who believe in Jesus and the Bible saying slavery is wrong—is a completely inaccurate picture. It's a picture of a small part of it, missing the truth about the bigger picture. Then there's the role of pro-slavery theology in supporting the slave system. Two quick points, to avoid belaboring it: first, it's not North versus South. A lot of people imagine pro-slavery theology as just southern preachers getting paid by slave masters to propagandize. No—the leaders of the northern churches were overwhelmingly in favor of slavery, or at least in favor of reconciliation, getting along with our brothers in the South—meaning their white brothers—and perpetuating the system.

The second crucial point is that the theology was taken extremely seriously, and it was overwhelmingly understood to support the pro-slavery cause. Whereas now we take for granted that religion must be good, that the Bible must tell us to love one another, the learned and popular consensus at the time was that the Bible says slavery is not just okay but probably the way things have to be. It's quite striking if you spend time reading these sources and then compare them with popular culture debates today. And with the people I'd call the pseudo-left, they frame it all in terms of race, leaving out the economic issues and the religion. That's telling a story missing two out of three characters—what are you left with? It doesn't make sense anymore.

I also want to mention the Dark Enlightenment, Curtis Yarvin and people like that. I think progressives today need to understand that there are people opposed to equality, and those are the people to pay attention to. Sure, there are hypocrites who declare that all men are created equal and then go around treating them unequally. But there's also a large group who just say, no, human beings are not equal—and they'll justify a system of oppression on that basis explicitly. These people have been around since the beginning of time—they're part of American history, but there's nothing special about America; world history is full of people claiming they're superior and have a right to rule. They believe what they're saying, and they are genuinely counter-revolutionary. They usually get

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paid by people making more money than they are, and they're a problem.

Someone like Peter Thiel is doing what the pro-slavery theologians of the American South did. He's not waving the Declaration of Independence while carrying on a racist or oppressive project—he's ripping up the Declaration of Independence, saying it's just not true, people are not equal.

TM: That's a really great point, and in your book you have examples of the fire-eating southern advocates of slavery denouncing the Declaration of Independence and the idea of equality.

Why don't we talk about Lincoln a little more. And this connects to what you were saying about the religion of the antebellum period. You assemble evidence, which I agree with, that Lincoln was not religious—called an infidel even by one of his close friends—and you conclude your book with a series of chapters closely examining Lincoln's second inaugural address. Tell us why you did that.

MS: I'd really like people to understand that Lincoln's philosophical thought-world was very close to that of the first generation of America's founders. He was a paid-up member of the Radical Enlightenment—specifically, an admirer and close reader of Thomas Paine, and of Constantin-François de Volney, an important deistic, atheistic philosopher from the French Enlightenment, among other sources that put him in that thought-world. He was also looking for a way to communicate this radical philosophy—which he thought important for the emancipation of the American people—without provoking unnecessary reaction.

In the second inaugural address, I think you have a masterpiece of just that kind of communication. There's one sentence in particular I focus on, and I think I can trace it to its original sources—the things going on in Lincoln's head as he wrote it. To paraphrase: "It may well be that God decided this struggle of the war was the only way to overcome slavery, and that the only way to pay for every drop of blood drawn by the lash was another drop of blood drawn by the sword." He makes a biblical allusion there, so it sounds holy—and if you listen to senators talk about this speech, they'll even say, as Lincoln said, he was a true Christian, a Bible believer, because he also says in that speech, "both sides read the same Bible." But when you excavate the meaning of that sentence, it's clear he's talking about nature's God. The language comes directly from Alexander Pope, whose poem is where "Nature's God" features most prominently in American letters—an English poet whose thought you can trace back through the French Enlightenment, through America's founders, to the seventeenth-century Enlightenment in Europe, to figures like Spinoza. You find ideas and even turns of phrase there essentially saying: we're on our own, it's us and nature. We can talk about a deity, but we have to understand that's a kind of gloss on existence, on nature—and if we're going to solve our problems, we have to do it by working with nature and the laws of nature.

It's a tremendous speech. It situates Lincoln very much within this radical philosophical tradition. I think his project was fundamentally emancipatory—you have to look at him as antislavery, and essentially as a working man's president, which is how people viewed him at the time, and I think correctly. Sure, you can find bits of racism mixed in, as you can with any politician of the time, but we shouldn't lose sight of the crucial role he played, and I think he's deservedly considered the greatest president in American history.

And to close it off—Frederick Douglass, though he sometimes blew hot and cold on Lincoln, in the end, especially in his final autobiography, not only treats him as a great hero but refers specifically to this speech and interprets it pretty much the way I do. To be clear, I'm interpreting it the way he does—I didn't make up the interpretation; it's there in others' writing.

TM: You're probably aware of the misuse of Douglass's speech at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington years after the Civil War, where Douglass said Lincoln was "the white man's president." That's endlessly quoted out of context, but if you read the whole speech, he works from that point to a very profound and laudatory understanding of Lincoln and his role in history.

MS: Yes, and that shows up in the final autobiography and in that Lincoln Memorial speech, where he's essentially saying: Lincoln had to work within his time. He wanted power, and the way to have power at the time was to play a little bit on both sides, but with the ultimate goal clearly in mind.

TM: Maybe as a final question—I'm fascinated by your interest in radical, rationalist philosophy. In this trilogy, we begin with Spinoza, and you reach back at certain points to Lucretius, whom I know the young Marx was fascinated by. What do you see as the importance of radical philosophy in history and the present?

MS: I think it's important to understand that ideas are ways of understanding—not beliefs, not dogmas, not acts of faith. With that in mind, I'd suggest the role of ideas in history isn't to give people a set of first principles or dogmas they simply have to accept. It's not that Jefferson reads in Locke that all men are created equal and then just accepts that as dogma. Rather, the acts of understanding that come through in those texts serve to clear away illusions and delusions and allow people to understand their own situation and world better.

I think there's often a desire in the history of ideas to treat them as little nuggets passed along from one great mind to another. I'd say rather that they're more like little hand grenades passed around, which someone then uses to blow things up so they can clear away the mess and see more clearly. That's why Frederick Douglass went to the German philosophers—he developed a better understanding of the conflict he was facing in the United States. I think the same is true for Lincoln and Jefferson: the ideas helped clear away obstruction.

I suppose I have a kind of secular understanding of history—secular in the temporal sense, not the anti-religious sense—in that for most of human history, up until the nineteenth century, the default political theology of humankind—that all authority comes from above, and that we can only be moral if we act on fixed beliefs we simply take on faith—was so dense and universal that it took a tremendous amount of philosophical work to clear that away. Epicurus did it in the ancient world—I think Marx wrote his thesis on Epicurus, or rather on Lucretius and Democritus, for that reason, because he was drawn to that emancipatory process in the ancient world. I think that is the real role of philosophy.

I suppose I've become less secular in the sense of believing there's a direction to history, in recent years, because we've gone backwards so fast that we probably need a bit more emancipatory logic going on now as well—so I'd turn to philosophy for that too. Philosophy doesn't codify absolute truths for all time—there's no world of ideas as Plato describes it; that's nonsense. But what it does do is help free people's minds, and that in turn has revolutionary implications.

TM: I'll ask what you're working on now, but first I wanted to mention that I read *The 9.9 Percent* a few years ago as well, and I wanted to say—our publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, has for some time identified a fundamental problem in American politics, really world politics, but especially in countries like the United States and Western Europe, rooted in what we call "the 10 percent." That standpoint came in response to the "one percent" framing from the Occupy protests, which fizzled after a while. Part of the problem was that concept jumped over a larger layer of the population—what we call the 10 percent—which is really the base of what, in our view, drives pseudo-left identity politics on one hand, and far-right politics on the other. It's a privileged layer, not the oligarchy of the 1,200 or so billionaires we have, but this influential layer beneath it. Anyway, it was an interesting book, because it identifies some of the cultural and intellectual problems that emerge with this layer of the population—as prominent and influential as it is in politics.

MS: Just to be clear—that project actually grew out of the American

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history work I was doing. I started work on *An Emancipation of the Mind* just after finishing *Nature's God*, around 2013. As I was developing my understanding that it really was much more about economics and economic conflict at multiple levels, I realized this is deja vu all over again—this is what's happening now. So, I set aside *An Emancipation of the Mind* and the Civil War/antislavery material, wrote *The 9.9 Percent*, and then came back and finished the other book. It's a funny process, but I say that to point out that, at least in my mind, these things are deeply connected.

You asked what I'm working on now. Coming out in November is *Everything You Need to Know: How Philosophy Can Set You Free*. It pretends to be an introduction to the history of philosophy, but—because that would probably be too boring for me—it ends up being a bit different. The argument is connected to what I was just saying about the emancipatory role of philosophy, that it's a way of breaking free in the mind, and that there's no single approach to it, but a great deal in the history we can draw on and make use of as we continue these projects into the future. It has pictures too!

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