

Down and Dirty Freedom

Apio Ludd

2014

Thaddeus Russell

A Renegade History of the United States

Free Press, 2010

For Thaddeus Russell freedom doesn't come from a political system, a social order, a station in life or any other such institutionalized relationship. It is the practical ability I have to do what I want in my daily life. To the extent that such freedom exists, it is not because of "our free democratic system," nor because of political protests against those who rule that system, but because selfish, non-conforming, flagrantly hedonistic and egoistic *renegades*¹ insisted on living as they wanted against all the odds.

The book is a good contrast not only to mainstream history, but also to the various leftist histories that tend to make activists into martyred heroes, and the oppressed into blameless victims. It is not at all a politically correct history. This is appropriate since political correctness is a *puritanical* moral attitude, and that is precisely what the renegades Russell writes about refuse to accept.

I appreciate the premise of the book. The argument that freedom in any meaningful sense, *my* freedom to live, enjoy and create my life as I see fit, is never granted, but is rather taken in spite of whatever authority may be in power, is a basic part of my egoist and my anarchist perspective. And it is a pleasure to read this history of the fierce and playful battles of so-called degenerates to maintain their pleasure against the attempts of authorities, reformers, radicals, etc., to suppress them.

At the same time. I am convinced Russell tweaks his history leaving out parts that don't fit his view. This view definitely challenges status quo history. (He lost one teaching job because of his ideas.) Some portions of the book would have been helped by foot-notes (or endnotes) for quotations, so readers could more easily track them down in the sources to give them context. This would be particularly useful in chapters 2 and 3 where he quotes extensively from interviews with former slaves.

In addition, he almost makes heroes out of syndicate and mafia mobsters, who may indeed have played a significant role in providing space (at a price) for various outsider pleasures and ways of life, but who also ran extremely authoritarian organizations that often worked hand-in-

¹ Russell uses this word in the sense of intentional "outsiders," non-conformists.

glove with the authorities, including cops. For their profit, they'd work both sides of the fence, and Russell doesn't bring this out.

In addition, though many of the scandalous enjoyments Russell's renegades fought for were not products on the market, Russell seems to use this history to promote a kind of pro-market stance. I don't think that the market has any inherent connection to either the enjoyment of life or the refusal of constraints on one's enjoyment. In fact, the market as I've known it in my lifetime has been one of the institutions limiting my freedom to enjoy my life, not only by putting price-tags on more and more pleasures, but by turning them into fixed products – identities that can be marketed, as free relations cannot. I'm not going to get into the relation of the market to the work ethic, one of the most oppressive products of puritanism, here.

So the book is flawed. Despite this, it is a fun to read. It exposes how authorities, reformers and radicals use democracy, reform and even the idea of revolution to suppress the actual experience of freedom and enjoyment. And it provides abundant evidence that no one can grant you "freedom" (or better, ownness) in any practical sense; instead you have to take it, and you don't take it by sacrificing yourself to it, but by doing what you want regardless of laws or morals.

My Own is a publication of anarchist, egoist, individualist ideas, literature and analysis coming from an explicitly anti-capitalist, non-market egoist perspective aimed at encouraging the interweaving of individual insurrections against all forms of authority, domination and enforcement of conformity.

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