

Cowie, Jefferson (2022) *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power.* Basic Books.

Review by Scott Henkel

I think that most people are accustomed to hearing dangerous ideas packaged in the language of idealism. In living memory, we've seen imperialist wars fought in the name of liberty, prohibitions on life-saving medical care justified in the name of saving life, and so on. In U.S. political discourse, one of the most common of these is framing freedom as the right to do and say whatever one wishes, regardless of how those acts and speech limit other people's freedom. It's a cynical and self-interested move, but it's common because it's so often successful.

Three cheers, then, for Jefferson Cowie and his new book *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power*. In beautiful and courageous prose, Cowie charts a careful history of freedom as domination or, as he calls it, "white freedom" (p. 4, 79, 85, 101, for example), by which we might understand how white people, time and again, have used the concept as a cudgel.

Cowie focuses on Barbour County, Alabama, through four eras: early 19th century settler aggression against Indigenous peoples, Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the backlash against the Civil Rights movement. Cowie reveals a consistent use of "freedom" as a tool of repression even if, in each era, the strategy gets adapted by its users to fit new situations.

In Cowie's history, it's not so much that freedom *as a concept* has a throughline in U.S. politics, although that's the case, of course. Like any important concept, freedom's interpretation has been and still is contested. On this point, Cowie cites Orlando Patterson, Aziz Rana, Hannah Arendt, Eric Foner, and others who show the struggle over the term and emancipatory possibilities for it—more on that below. But those contests over freedom's meaning aren't Cowie's primary concern. Cowie's book doesn't so much show that freedom has a debatable meaning over time, but rather that cynical and self-interested definitions of freedom have been consistently useful—in fact, central—for people interested in gaining, keeping, or regaining their power over others.

In that struggle to get, hold, or regain the power to rule or exploit others, the federal government is both a much-maligned monster and the citizen's best protector. If that seems like a contradiction, it is. But imagine a perspective where keeping your power over others is your primary concern. In that perspective, your relationship to the federal government becomes context-dependent. When it limits your power over others, say, by passing civil rights legislation, you say it's tyrannical. When you need it to enforce your power over others, you say that defense of your rights, violently if necessary, is the government's proper function. Telling that story is Cowie's primary concern, and it is a story worth reading. One of Cowie's conclusions is to hope for a different understanding of freedom and how the federal government could consistently enforce the rights of all people within its jurisdiction. That would be a considerable change indeed from the history his book shows.

Cowie brings the receipts, as they say these days, to show how successful framing dominion as freedom has been for white settlers, proslavery planters, bosses, and politicians opposed to civil rights. Cowie brings to light some remarkable moments in this history, including his introduction's example: in George Wallace's infamous inaugural speech after election to Alabama's governorship, after paying respects to his native Barbour County, Alabama, Wallace worked his way up to the sentence for which people remember him: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!" In that speech, Wallace mentions segregation by name only one additional time, but mentions "freedom" twenty-five times. Cowie suggests we'd do well to notice the importance Wallace puts on freedom. As upside down as it seems, Wallace's interpretation of freedom does not contradict his understanding of segregation, but rather is central to it. Of course, Wallace—and many others, as Cowie shows—means freedom for whites, and domination and exploitation for everyone else.

In this review, I've called that interpretation of freedom cynical and self-interested. These are my terms, not Cowie's. He dedicates his book "to those who have kept faith in a better freedom," but it is not his task to theorize what that better freedom could be, even though, as I noted above, he cites a range of scholars who have charted how the meaning of freedom has been contested. Cowie keeps hinting at an emancipatory meaning of freedom, but he never more than hints at it. That Cowie includes these references, but does so quickly, is one of the book's strengths—*Freedom's Dominion* says clearly that its task is to show "the paradox of those claiming freedom for themselves by oppressing others" (p. 5). I'm glad that Cowie sticks to his stated task.

Others have been less impressed by *Freedom's Dominion*, and I hope that these other views are the opening moves to a wide-ranging debate about Cowie's ideas. George Packer, writing a review in *The Atlantic*, criticizes the book as a type of scholarship that makes resistance to oppression seem hopeless. Packer is right about the general trend—too much scholarship peddles a defeatism that makes everything seem irrevocably lost—but he is not correct that *Freedom's Dominion* is that kind of scholarship. Critique sometimes gets a bad reputation for not posing any viable alternatives, but when the object of critique is erroneous or dangerous, critique is the path beyond that error or danger.

I would like to see debates about Cowie's ideas take a different direction. In the service of writing a clear-eyed history, consistent with the conventions in the discipline, Cowie gives too much credence to people who have too dim a view of the concept they cast about with such recklessness. "By the terms of their world" (p. 120), to use Cowie's phrase, I can see how privilege could feel like freedom. Losing the privilege to dominate and exploit others would feel like an infringement if a person had never known any other way to relate to other human beings, but that is no excuse for the injustices that follow in the wake of using a concept of freedom to make others less free. The history that Cowie shows is not merely a history of violent repression, but a history of violent repression masked in idealism. This is violence plus deception, injustice packaged as freedom. My difficulty stems from my sense that the concept Cowie so carefully traces does not deserve the name freedom.

The debate I would like to see now, equipped with the receipts Cowie brings for his readers, would challenge the still-active use of freedom as dominion. As Cowie so persuasively shows, using

freedom to cover for domination and exploitation has confused, and still confuses, many sincere people. I would like to see that confusion dissipated.

Overall, *Freedom's Dominion* is an impressive book, and beautifully written. We need books that show how important political concepts get manipulated for cynical and self-interested ends--they can be a kind of intellectual self-defense against bosses who believe in the so-called freedom to exploit, and white supremacists who trample on others with the premise that they are somehow victims. Bravo for *Freedom's Dominion*, which makes an exemplary case for why we need a better meaning of freedom.

Reviewer Bio

Scott Henkel is the Wyoming Excellence Chair in the Humanities, associate professor in the departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies, and director of the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research at the University of Wyoming. The author of *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*, he is a past president of the Working-Class Studies Association.