



Book Review: *Liberty as Independence. The Making and Unmaking of a Political Idea* by Quentin Skinner, Cambridge University Press, 2025, 320 pages. ISBN: 9781139226677

BOOK REVIEWS

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One prominent theme under which to make sense of the present antidemocratic turn in the West has been that of ‘authoritarian liberalism’, a term coined by the political and legal theorist Hermann Heller during the crisis period in Weimar Germany in 1933. The expression was intended by Heller as a commentary on Carl Schmitt’s earlier proposal to strengthen the separation of the state from the powerful forces of society that were threatening to take over the state in service of the interests of monopoly capital. What was needed to counter this were a strong state and sound economy – the title of Schmitt’s famous 1932 talk to German industrialists and the rallying cry by the emerging Freiburg Ordoliberal School of Economics (Cristi 1998).¹ As a social-democratic advocate of a rule-governed welfare state (*Soziale Rechtsstaat*), Heller (2015) agreed with Schmitt on the necessity for the State to ‘act in an authoritarian way’ but for an altogether different purpose – ‘namely[,] in the spirit of socialism, particularly in the economic sphere’ (Heller 2015). The effort to combine a liberal system of social and economic relations with a more or less authoritarian political order has ever since remained part of the political landscape of postwar Europe and is now visible in the United States. After the 1970s, it has sometimes amalgamated with the finance-drawn priorities of Chicago-type neoliberalism. Ordoliberal themes have also been intensively debated in the context of the history of European integration, understood as an effort to fit together the promise of democratic politics with balanced economic development at home and competitiveness with respect to the outside world.²

The polysemy of the expression ‘liberalism’ has been an important part of its success as a label on countless political movements across Europe, the United States and elsewhere. The same is true of its root concept, ‘liberty’. The meaning of that notion has been closely dependent on its specific local histories and struggles. In the end, something appears ‘liberal’ only in relationship to something else that seems more ‘conservative’, ‘rigid’, ‘reactionary’ or ‘old-fashioned’. Among the many things that have been said about ‘liberalism’ as a political ideology, it is often characterised by

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the tension between its various elements – its apparently simultaneous espousal of individual rights and solidarity with the group, consent and obligation, property and equality, its rigorous legalism and cultural tolerance and so on. Many years ago, this writer, along with many others, suggested that its very success as the underlying justification of modern (international) law is based precisely on its ability to espouse diametrically opposite priorities (Koskenniemi 2006).

The ease with which it is possible to slip between different meanings of ‘liberty’ in political polemic is one reason for which the organisation of Quentin Skinner’s new volume *Liberty as Independence* (Cambridge University Press 2024) seems initially a little schematic. Skinner juxtaposes two meanings of liberty, an ‘older’ one that focuses on *independence*, the status of a person as independent of the arbitrary choice of another person, and a ‘new’ concept of liberty as the factual *absence of impediment* for action. The contrast is both real and significant. The former is much more supportive of republican ideas and critiques of all kinds of hierarchical subordination, while the latter is more modestly limited to the empirical ability that a person may or may not have to act in accordance with their will. The problem with the latter is, as Skinner observes, that it may apply even to the situation of a slave with an exceptionally liberal master, while the former, more ambitious, is incompatible with the very status of a slave. The work reviews a huge number of Anglophone texts from ‘novels, sermons, newspapers, debates in Parliament and above all extensive pamphlet literature’ to substantiate the author’s claim about large changes in political sensibilities during the time dealt with, i.e. from 1688 to the mid-nineteenth century. Each text falls on one or the other side of the barrier: either they encompass liberty in the ‘older’ sense of independence or in the ‘new’ one of absence of empirical constraint. However, in view of the ease of slipping between its different meanings, I wonder if brief quotations do justice to the full ideological frame within which the authors operate. Experience suggests that elite politics often develops into a middle ground that ‘reasonably’ seeks to take account of contextually justifiable aspects of the adverse position as well. The positions appear as prototypes or biases that tend to be diluted or develop into something more complex in the course of the polemic. Described in this way, it might be easier to account for the astonishing ability of a single ‘liberal’ vocabulary to uphold almost any kind of social hierarchy against more basic types of critique.

I suppose Skinner would respond that the point is not so much to assess the actual argumentative strategies of individual authors as to lay out the structure of an ideological vocabulary – how the expression ‘liberty’ both hides and reveals the political stakes in the confrontation of adversaries. This is then both a critique of ideology and an analysis of the development of British politics from the revolution of 1688 to the restoration period in the early nineteenth century. The subtitle of the book – ‘The Making and Unmaking of a Political Ideal’ – involves a clandestine reference to a theme that has interested Skinner for a long time – namely, the fate of what he calls Roman concept or republican liberty that he now also associates with ‘English socialism’ and ‘Marxist thought’ (p. 8). In this way, the book intervenes in the debates on how ideas usually associated with ‘liberalism’ may not only help to respond to the present-day democratic malaise.

‘Liberty as independence’ is not identical with ‘Roman’ or ‘republican liberty’ but shares the concern to inscribe the freedom enjoyed by individuals or groups in the context of actually-existing societies. It stresses that people may feel free and their situation

may be described as ‘liberty’ even when, in a larger view of their context, their situation remains precarious and they have little or no means to influence it. Under the narrow empirical view, an illegal immigrant may appear ‘free’ to the extent that they may choose to accept a position as a delivery driver. By contrast, liberty as independence accepts that freedom always has limits but insists that if and as long as those limits depend on the arbitrary power of external authority – an employer, say – a person cannot be described as fully really free. They have no control over their situation. Liberty as independence is not about the empirical expanse of freedom but about self-rule and the status of a person in a social hierarchy. Skinner (p. 2) refrains from associating the narrower view with the rise of capitalism (or ‘commercial society’). I think this is an unnecessary limitation. Many of the writers who figure in this account as well (such as Paine, Spence and Wollstonecraft, for example) were concerned about the way economic exploitation by great landowners and their political representatives diminished the life-choices of large groups of people. By contrast, in her excellent *A False Tree of Liberty. Human Rights in Radical Thought* (2019), Susan Marks reads the Putney debates during the English revolution precisely so as to make the connection with liberty and capitalism quite expressly. That work forms an important complement to Skinner’s volume. But, whatever the provenance of this ‘new’ and limited concept, Skinner, like Marks, does highlight its eventual relationship with the variants of capitalism to emerge both in domestic societies as well as in the relations between nations.

The book’s principal narrative is straight-forwardly chronological. It begins with a focus on the way liberty as independence was adapted by the revolutionaries of 1688 from Roman republican political and legal thought (leaving out the views of the ‘Diggers’ and the Levellers of Marks’ narrative). Writers such as John Locke, James Tyrrell and John Toland recovered older texts by English republicans and French Monarchomachs so as to invoke the ‘ancient rights’ of Englishmen (instead of those earlier English revolutionaries) against ‘arbitrary’ Stuart kingship. Such arbitrariness, they stressed, one after another, reduced the people into the status of slaves – a polemical point repeated over again in Britain but also in the French revolutionary process, often following Rousseau. The twin argument about arbitrary rule and reduction into slavery would then be repeated over again in the subsequent years. Part II of the book surveys the consolidation of this ‘well-established train of thought’ (71) in early eighteenth-century debates over governmental ‘corruption’. The defeat of the Jacobite rebellion (1735–1736) created a sense of national unity so that, whatever the differences between government and opposition in regard to policies of the day, broad agreement existed on the appropriate vocabulary through which they would be debated. Self-rule and independence were based on natural rights, the rule of law and the constitution. Deference to the consent of the governed was needed to avoid ‘tyranny’. According to Skinner, these debates saw the emergence of a Whig ‘free state’ from civil society governed by the natural laws of ‘life, liberty and property’. No doubt peacetime provides a good context for the English gentry to consolidate its rights and social supremacy. With the parliament in the hands of landowners, however, it may be doubted whether the state–civil society distinction had much actual significance. At least from the perspective of the more recent debates on the separation of ‘strong state and sound economy’, eighteenth-century England appears as the paradigm of the opposite case. And this is pretty much the content of Part III – focusing on the ways large classes of people (women and slaves above all) remained utterly subordinated. The ideology of a ‘free

state' was undermined by ubiquitous inequality and by the incompetence in the administration of justice across the realm. While the injustices of social life were the topic of a wide and influential satirical literature, the more significant backlash was received from the North Atlantic colonies. Arbitrary government by the king and the Parliament would eventually prompt the colonists to decisive action in defence of their independence. To tax them without representation in Westminster, they insisted repeatedly, was to reduce them to servitude.

The new view for which liberty is the 'only' absence of restraint entered the British debates as a reaction to the revolutionary period through adaptations of Hobbes and translations of Pufendorfian natural law. The contractual absolutism that was the intellectual heritage from the continent left no room for self-rule and independence. Subordination would be the cost of the royal promise to see to everyone's security and welfare. Liberty in such conditions would be what the legislator chooses to leave unregulated. According to Blackstone, we leave our 'absolute' rights behind in the natural state as we choose to live in society under a beneficent legislator. Nor did Bentham find room for a liberty that would be opposable to the algorithm about optimal utility. Conservatives insisted that a well-governed polity could not tolerate the kinds of ideas about self-rule proposed for the American colonies by writers such as Thomas Paine or Richard Price. Liberty, some held, was even independent of constitutional form, as each alternative could legislate for both more and less extensive areas of free choice.

In more recent periods, ideals of independence and self-rule found their home in the revolutionary doctrines of the British socialists, Thomas Spence and Marx and Engels, with the marginal influence they have had on British politics dominated by conservatives and liberals. Religious conservatives kept stressing the virtues of obedience and subordination that they (oddly) related to following the path of Christ. But most political writers in the nineteenth century remained liberals, committed to the understanding that liberty should be what a wise legislator, in search of the subjects' welfare and happiness, would choose to grant them. They remained sceptical about democracy and universal suffrage. For lawyers and the legal world, Austinian scepticism about rights and 'morality' would consecrate the understanding of liberty as simply 'nothing else but the exemption from restraint' for a very long time ([Austin 1995, 273](#)).

The book ends with utilitarianism and Austin's reliance on Hobbes. In comparison to security and wealth, liberty as independence has had few protagonists, though, as Skinner observes, it provides a 'morally preferable account of the relationship between government and the governed' than any of the alternatives. However, it lacks institutional presence and a clear representative, even in the declining number of liberal-democratic states today. It has a hard time expressing itself in a political world, where the sphere of politics itself has been limited to struggles over abstract rights, constitutional review and the 'rule of law', items that tend to be quite toothless against political polemicists advocating the values of security and productivity as not really 'political' at all. Skinner writes that the religious reactionaries who stressed subordination to faith as the proper form of liberty remained marginal actors in late eighteenth-century Britain. We may indeed have learned to think of the Orwellian satire about 'constraint as freedom' as a pertinent critique of a certain type of political ideology. However, this has not prevented us from happily reading as our freedom the choices offered to us by electoral politics and the structures of the market.

NOTES

- 1 See also A. Rüstow's 'Freie Wirtschaft, starker Staat' published in *Tagung des Vereins für Socialpolitik* in 1932. A good short introduction is Hubert Gabrisch's article 'Neoliberalism, Strong State and Democracy'.
- 2 For an excellent discussion, see Michael Wilkinson's *Authoritarian Liberalism and the Transformation of Modern Europe*.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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