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A Book Review on The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty by Daron Acemoğlu and James A. Robinson[1]

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Liberty has two important components: the state and society. It is, however, neither granted by just the state nor just the society. It rather emerges and flourishes only when both of them coexist and balance each other out. In *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*, Acemoglu and Robinson discuss this state-society relationship and its importance to achieving liberty. To this end, they provide a comprehensive framework to address the questions of where liberty comes from, why only some societies are able to achieve liberty, while others are not, and what the possible outcomes of liberty are especially in terms of prosperity. The main argument of the authors is that both state and society should be strong and run together as the evolution of the state-society relationship over time is directly connected to the emergence of liberty, and an imbalance between them is detrimental to it. A strong state is required to resolve conflicts by enforcing laws, guarantee the rights of its citizens, and provide public services. A strong and vigilant society, in turn, acts collectively, participates in politics, and controls the state to promote liberty. For that purpose, they build a new theory about liberty and support their ideas by providing examples from world history, including China in the 1950s, the Nazi regime in Germany, recent conflicts in the Middle East, state-building efforts of Athenians and Americans, and experiences of many Latin American countries.

The theory proposed by the authors relies on three different types of states: the Despotic, Absent, and Shackled Leviathans.[3] If the society is too weak, compared to the state, it leads to a Despotic Leviathan. If the state, on the other hand, falls behind, the society ends up living with an Absent Leviathan. Only Shackled Leviathan, which emerges if there exists a balance between the two, uses its power to protect and promote liberty. Chapter 1 introduces and compares these concepts.

In Chapter 2, the authors present their theory, which has mainly two crucial features: the slippery slope and the Red Queen (p.64). The former refers to a situation that the Despotic or Absent Leviathans get established even more firmly over time and this, in turn, leads these Leviathans to less likely be shackled, while the latter is used to describe a

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[3] The state and Leviathan are used interchangeably throughout the book as the starting point of the authors is Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan.

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situation where true liberty emerges and flourishes as the state and society run at equal speed in the narrow corridor.

The following chapters mainly discuss these different types of states, especially in terms of the economic, social, and political development of societies. Chapter 3 explains how the process of state-building in the Absent Leviathans yields to political hierarchy and leads to emerging a Despotic Leviathan due to will to power and nonexistence of the norms and institutions in the society.[4] Chapters 4 and 5 compare the economic consequences of the Absent, Despotic, and Shackled Leviathans. The authors argue that the Despotic Leviathan creates better economic opportunities compared to the Absent Leviathan. It is, however, unsustainable as innovation and productivity improvements under despotism are limited. On the other hand, an entirely different set of economic incentives and broad-based opportunities under the Shackled Leviathan enable society to obtain a higher level of economic prosperity.

In Chapter 6, the authors discuss how some European countries manage to create vital conditions for a Shackled Leviathan to emerge and whether these conditions are only confined to Europe or not. Chapters 7 and 8 contrast this European experience with the Chinese development path under the Despotic Leviathan and show how despotism in China and the caste system in India create less liberty.

Chapter 9 augments the theory with structural factors, which have a very different impact on the subsequent path of the states and societies even though any two countries initially have the same underlying characteristics. Based on structural factors, the authors seek to explain why there exists diversity among European countries, how it shaped the paths of Costa Rica and Guatemala in the 19th century, why the collapse of despotic Soviet rule influenced new countries at different levels. In Chapter 10, the authors examine the path of the American Leviathan and argue why the prosperity in the US is not equally distributed among people, like other Shackled Leviathans. Chapter 11 introduces a new type of state: the Paper Leviathan, which has little state and social power, but is still despotic and uncontrolled by society. The Paper Leviathan largely ignores liberty and has limited capacity to achieve many things, such as liberty and prosperity.[5] In Chapter 12, the authors show the relationship between uncontrolled despotism and intensified cage of norms, with paying particular attention to the political strategy of Middle Eastern countries to undermine citizen's liberty. While Chapter 13 examines the conditions under which the Red Queen effect is unstable (the zero-sum) and more likely to get out of control, Chapter 14 discusses various factors that shape the corridor. Finally, the authors reveal the challenges to keep Leviathans shackled in Chapter 15.

Overall, the main implications of the theory discussed in the book can be summarized as *(i)* as the conditions for the Red Queen effect significantly vary among nations, all countries will follow their own paths. Therefore, we should not expect convergence in the path of the Despotic or Absent Leviathans toward the narrow corridor over time; *(ii)* as the balance between the state and society is fragile and cannot be easily designed, both building a Shackled Leviathan for a transition into the narrow corridor and main-

[4] For example, the Islamic state established by Muhammad in Medina falls into this group.

[5] Many countries in Latin America and Africa, like Argentina and Liberia, are grouped in the Paper Leviathan.

taining this position take time and are not easy to achieve; *(iii)* a Shackled Leviathan requires a mobilized society and a responsive state. The cooperation and contest between them enable the Shackled Leviathan to reach even higher state capacity than the Despotic Leviathan.

This smart and timely book on liberty provides comprehensive theory and many well-organized historical illustrations. It is a significant contribution to the debates on the relationship between the state and society. However, there are a few issues that need to be explained in more detail. First, the authors mostly ignore the critical impact of international relations on the state-society relation. This issue is only and partially discussed in Chapter 9 from the structural factors perspective. As the major changes in international relations are highly crucial for moving in or out of the narrow corridor, this chapter needs more explanations from an international relations perspective. Second, the authors fail to provide variables on how to measure two key variables of the book: the power of the state and society. As the definitions of them go one step further than the classic definitions, the authors should also discuss the corresponding indicators of them for comprehensive understanding. Third, a number of terms, such as the will to power, Red Queen, Leviathans, or cage of norms, are used intensively in the book, which can be regarded as the pillars of the theory. As these terms are under-defined and most readers have not already been familiar with them, more definitions or using a straightforward vocabulary are needed. To sum up, I strongly recommend this book, especially for those who are interested in understanding the evolution of people's liberty.