

The Narrow Corridor

By Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (Viking: Penguin: 2019)

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Introduction and Comments

1. *The book*

The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty is written by two economists based in the USA. It follows on from an earlier study, *Why Nations Fail*, published about eight years ago. Both books have drawn much attention, and both have been reviewed with enthusiasm.

Our purpose today is to set out the main argument of the book and to offer comments, some laudatory, some critical. The book runs to just under 500 pages of text. The authors early on propose a general theory, which is then developed and refined through the course of the book. The authors present an enormous range of historical examples, case studies, from which to draw more general conclusions and which are used to illustrate the theory in its practical operation.

2. *The argument*

The argument proceeds along these lines.

- i) The concept central to the book is liberty. Liberty is defined as having two dimensions: one, the people being free from violence, intimidation other demeaning acts; the other, people must be able to make free choice about their lives and have the means to carry them out without the threat of sanctions. [xii]
- ii) Liberty depends on a strong state. It depends on laws, on state institutions and agencies, on the capacity to control and guide the people. Thomas Hobbes is the champion of the strong state and why it is necessary.
- iii) But a strong state is dangerous. It tends to despotism, which means restricting liberty rather than protecting and fostering it. Hobbes seems to have overlooked this danger. Hobbes is considered the exponent of the *Despotic Leviathan*.
- iv) Liberty depends on a second factor: a strong society, that is, a civil society, sets of social relations among the people, which are capable of restraining the state and ensuring it acts to protect liberty not restrict liberty.
- v) Liberty is best protected when the two positive factors combine: a strong state and a strong civil society. When the two do combine, each influencing the other, a balance

or equilibrium is reached, or has the potential to be reached. This balance is the *narrow corridor*.

- vi) Not a door which once entered can be shut behind you. But a corridor, a continuing process, out of which either party easily slips. Staying in the corridor, which is wider or narrower, is a mighty challenge. The Red Queen of *Alice in Wonderland* has a leading role in teaching Alice that in order to stay in the one place, you need to run fast. The state that manages to run fast and stay in the corridor is the *Shackled Leviathan*. Many cannot keep up the pace and drop out.
- vii) Some societies never manage to enter the corridor. Others enter but, for various reasons, the state loses its power and so becomes the *Absent Leviathan*. Naturally the people want and hope for the Shackled Leviathan. In practice, it is a fairly rare species, occurring from time to time through history but not always emerging; and once emerged often soon disappearing.
- viii) The variable factors needed in order to enter the narrow corridor, to enthrone the Shackled Leviathan, and then sustain it, are identified, examined, and assessed throughout the book.

3. *Who wins, who loses* (as Lear says to Cordelia)

The pleasing imagery of the Leviathan family seems a little strained, since *Leviathan* by nature, at least Hobbes' creature, is by nature all-powerful. The kind of state needed to enter and stay in the corridor has to be restrained in such ways that are incompatible with its being all-powerful. But that need not distract from the main argument.

So which states are shackled, which despotic, and which absent?

- The despots are easily picked-out: China, Saudi Arabia being classic cases.
- The absentees include several South American states and elsewhere.
- The states present in the corridor, and reasonably settled are harder to find historically and geographically.
- Mainly western Europe, the United States being touch-and-go, and other nations which inherited the European approach, such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Much depends on the history of Europe, in particular, according to the authors, the coming together of the legacy of Rome, a well-organized and well-structured state, and the participatory traditions of the Germanic tribes spreading across Europe as Rome collapsed.

4. *Conditions for entering the corridor and staying*

The conditions for entering and staying are many and variable. The main ones seem to be:

- The state having enough power to govern effectively
- Which means being able to make and enforce laws, to secure liberty both within the private sector and the public, to create an efficient public administration, and not least to open up economic opportunities for the people.
- The society, the aggregation of personal and collective endeavour, being strong enough and free enough to influence, check, and hold to account the organs of the state. In short to *keep government under their constant gaze*, as Lady Eleanor warned her husband Duke Humphrey as she was led into exile.

- Or put differently, that the people find a way of both exercising self-restraint and complying with government, *acquiescing* in the words of David Hume, and at the same time making government answerable for its actions. Not an easy combination to master.

5. *Comments*

Liberty Liberty is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down, a difficulty the authors neither fully confront nor adequately resolve.

- i) The authors adopt *domination* as the key idea and give moving examples, including domestic abuse. But non-domination is not the key to liberty. In a sense any restraint on one's freedom to act is domination. Laws preventing you from doing things, no matter how sensible and justified, are still dominating. Yet we think good laws clearly stated and consistently enforced are the route to liberty. Freedom from violence and abuse is condemned on grounds other than freedom.
- ii) A second aspect, according to the book, is a sphere within which one is free to act as one wishes.
- iii) This hints at a third, a critical aspect, the freedom to act, to do things, to improve one's life. In many of the examples given, even if the violence ceased, the domination ended, the lives of the people would still be impoverished. Impoverished because they have no *opportunity to improve their lives*. This positive side of liberty is not an extra, not a luxury, but at the very core of human endeavour.

Although the authors' opening concept of liberty is negative, the more positive sense comes out later in the book when discussing economic incentives. The citizen of 17th century England had liberty in the negative sense of freedom from oppression, more or less. But they lacked the freedom to move freely, to engage in economic endeavour, to assemble and organize with others. That was won slowly and painfully over centuries for men, much longer for women.

A more encompassing model than that proposed by the authors would focus on the common and primary purpose of human endeavour as securing one's needs and advancing one's utilities, from which all else follows. In which the state has no purpose or function other than to help the people in pursuing that common purpose. That is why Adam Smith places 'truck, barter, and exchange' at the centre of social activity. That is why the 'great scramble' as he so evocatively calls it is the mainstream of human activity, the primary purpose.

6. *The state*

A comment on the state. The state is constituted by a few holding power over the many. For Hobbes, unlimited power. Whether unlimited or not, all power has certain propensities. One is to grow, to expand, to escape its boundaries. Another is to be misused, used for ends other than those authorized.

Given the attractions of power, a third feature is the natural desire to have it, especially by the sector of society that is economically dominant, that has most to gain from having power and most to lose from power in the hands of others. An alliance between state power and economic power tends to form and to dominate. The combination of these three features constitute the major obstacle to the Shackled Leviathan.

This alliance has a further consequence. The authors make a sharp distinction between *state* and *society*. But society and the state are loose terms for many and varied social relationships, some among the people, some between the people and officials. The lines between state and society become blurred. The evidence of powerful private interests *capturing* the state or parts of it by forming social relations is a well-recognized feature of contemporary life.

7. *Controlling the state*

This leads to my last point. Just how does civil society contain, confine, and control the state, especially if state agencies are in alliance with parts of the private sector? This raises issues such as:

- What kinds of social institutions are needed to keep the state under the gaze of the people?
- What processes or mechanisms are effective in doing so?
- What role do ordinary people play in this process? Hume's concept of *acquiescence* is too passive; but what does it mean for the people to be active?
- In particular, what sentiments and dispositions do the people need to be active, to devote time and energy to keeping Leviathan under control?

These are the tough questions to answer. Some of the answers we know. But on this we learn little from this book. Perhaps that would be a suitable subject for their next volume, the third part of the trilogy. And by the way the dancers in the streets of Siena celebrating the effects of good government are young men not women.

8. *nnnn*

