



discussions for students to read. I would like to get my students more interested now in practical discourses through which we can see the workings of sovereignty, and to use Prokhovnik's work to set their findings into a larger framework, richer in history and theory.

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Hobbes and republican liberty

Quentin Skinner

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In this elegant extended essay, Quentin Skinner returns to his familiar concerns with the character of republican liberty (with a rather wistful recognition that his own preference for the label 'neo-Roman' has now been overwhelmed by popular usage) and the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Having briefly outlined the core component of the republican conception of liberty as 'non-domination', Skinner turns his attention in the rest of his essay to Hobbes's position as perhaps the single greatest critic of this republican view. He seeks to show how Hobbes's view of liberty changed from the *Elements of Law* (in 1640) to *Leviathan* (in 1651), indeed so significantly that the account in the latter could be considered a 'repudiation' of his earlier view. This change must, in its turn, be understood in terms of Hobbes's continuing and passionate engagement with the supporters of constitutional or limited government and his insistence upon the need to resist radical and republican reformers in the name of social peace.

In discussing the nature of liberty in the *Elements of Law*, Hobbes sets out his own very distinctive (radically anti-Aristotelian and anti-scholastic) account of the passionate nature of the will as 'nothing other than the name of the last appetite or fear that brings deliberation to an end' (p. 25). In the state of nature, we are free to act 'at will' but at the same time we have a natural tendency to do that, which will contribute to our self-preservation. The state of nature is characterized by 'a right of every man to every thing' and there are no limits upon what any man may do (to any other) in order to secure that which he wills. Of course, according to Hobbes, this is a



state of liberty but one which is profoundly undesirable. We may exit this undesirable state of affairs either by being enslaved or by covenanting one with another to relinquish as much of our natural liberty as is necessary in order to realize peace and security. In doing this, we (have to) establish an absolute sovereign power which is ‘no less absolute in the commonwealth than before the commonwealth every man was absolute in himself to do, or not to do, what he thought good’ (pp. 50–51). According to Skinner, Hobbes’s ‘fundamental aim is to stress that, when we covenant to subject ourselves to a city or body politic, we basically relinquish and grant away the liberty characteristic of the state of nature’ (p. 54). When constitutionalists spoke of ‘free men in a free state’ or of ‘free men under a government of laws’ (the republican ideal), this was, for Hobbes, just so much talk. It was of the nature of effective government that it embodied ‘absolute and indivisible sovereignty’ (p. 56).

Much the same account of freedom and its destiny is encountered in the *De Cive* (of 1642) until in Chapter 9, Hobbes attempts a definition of liberty that he now styles ‘the absence of impediments to motion’. Upon Skinner’s gloss, this definition ‘marks an epoch-making moment’ (p. 109). In part, such a clarifying definition is required by Hobbes’s general materialist ontology – that the world is simply comprised of bodies in motion, and nothing else. But it also enables Hobbes to give his account of liberty a more conciliatory though still unambiguously absolutist edge (at a time when Hobbes feared a more assertive parliament might hold him to account for the extremity of his views). An absolute sovereign is still required, for all the reasons Hobbes has already identified in the *Elements*, but subjects are required to give up only so much of their natural liberty as is necessary to secure such sovereign rule. Subjects may confront two sorts of impediment – the internal, where fear constrains what they can choose to do, and the external, where they are physically prevented from undertaking certain actions – but where they are unimpeded, they are free. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes crucially amends this definition so that only *external* impediments count as a limitation of our freedom: here, ‘liberty is the absence of external impediments’ (p. 130). One of the key reasons for this further change, so Skinner attests, is Hobbes’s desire to refute the republican claim that we are unfree when we fall under the discretionary power of another (even if that power is never exercised). Indeed, only where we face an external impediment to bodily motion can we be truly said to be unfree and thus in an almost infinite number of decisions, even when we choose to break the law and even under the most arbitrary of governments, we remain substantively at liberty.

Throughout this story, Skinner seeks to relate his account of the changes in Hobbes’s aetiology of freedom with the stresses and strains of his encounter with his (mostly constitutionalist) opponents. Hobbes is driven to re-describe



what counts as liberty and where the limits of liberty lie, in order to be better able to confront what he believes to be the monstrously misguided appeals of his opponents to the integrity of freedom and freemen. Throughout the text, the arguments of Hobbes and his opponents are graphically illustrated through the use of *emblemata* and their influential sub-genre, the frontispiece, of which the cover-page of *Leviathan* is only perhaps the most famous. Besides these, Skinner also shows how contemporary authors combined image and text to reinforce their political message (with the frontispieces of Hobbes's translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and his own *Elements* proving to be almost as instructive as the more famous image of the monstrous *Leviathan* itself).

This is exemplary essay writing. It is compact, thoughtful and very readable. It advances an original and provocative thesis and then seeks to marshal the evidence to support this. Its scholarship is clear, but lightly worn and its anecdotes are well chosen and to the point. And Skinner ends with a provocative question. In the light of the subsequent history of liberalism and the idea of liberty, we may judge that Hobbes won the battle with his republican opponents. But did he also win the argument?

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