

Book review

The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty. By Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. London: Penguin Press, 2019. 576p. \$13.55 cloth.

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Since the dawn of their prolific collaboration in 1998, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson have confronted a plethora of cardinal questions in social sciences: Which institutions support long-term growth (Acemoglu et al., 2005)? What economic conditions facilitate the consolidation of democracy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006)? Does modernization induce democracy? (Acemoglu et al., 2008)?

Drawing on this accumulated knowledge, *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*, evaluates “how and why societies have achieved or failed to achieve liberty” (p. xiii). This recent book serves as a spiritual successor to Acemoglu and Robinson previous volume, *Why Nations Fail* (2012), recognizing the limitation of solely using economics to explain political development. Accordingly, *The Narrow Corridor* is a cogent, trans-disciplinary project combining historical, political and economic theory to unearth the roots of human liberty.

The first two chapters contain a diligent attempt at apprehending the elusive notion of liberty. Acemoglu and Robinson wander through historical snippets illustrating liberty as the absence of “dominance, fear, and extreme insecurity” (p. 26). However, the authors shift from a negative definition of liberty, as *freedom from*, towards a positive interpretation of liberty, as *freedom to*, since “liberty requires not just the abstract notion that you are free to choose your actions, but also the ability to exercise that freedom” (p. 31).

In this respect, throughout Chapters 3-14, the concept of liberty is used lithely, with its ontological status contingent on the socio-political conditions embedded in different environments. This definitional variation is deliberately pursued by Acemoglu and

Robinson to facilitate the comparison of markedly dissimilar cases: Classical Greece, Merovingian kingdoms or Saudi Arabia. Following this eclectic comparative cases, the authors reach a daring conclusion: liberty flourishes in a *narrow corridor* (p. 17), where a “state with the capacity to enforce laws, control violence, resolve conflicts and provide public services” meets a well-organized society (p. 24).

Borrowing Thomas Hobbes’ terminology, the authors label the state residing in the narrow corridor of the *Shackled Leviathan*. By contrast with this model, Acemoglu and Robinson define two other archetypes: the *Despotic Leviathan*, and the *Absent Leviathan*. The *Absent Leviathan* represents the natural state of human societies. To manage anarchy, these societies develop a rigid *cage of norms*, stipulating “what is right and wrong in the eyes of others [...]” (p.53). On the other side of the corridor lies the *Despotic Leviathan*, where a powerful and unaccountable state “provides no means for society and the regular people to have a say in how its power and capacity are used” (p. 52). Constant threat of repression, either driven by the *cage of norms* or by the repressive state apparatus, inhibits the sustenance of liberty. However, poignant issues of variable measurement (e.g., the relative power of state or society) are mostly ignored. While Acemoglu and Robinson make sparse references to existing literature, such as to Tilly’s *Popular Contention in Great Britain*, they fail to provide a coherent account of how the strength of the society or of the state should be measured, especially in non-European contexts.

Having established this tripartite classification, Acemoglu and Robinson argue that political development is a messy tussle between state and society (p. 136), where liberty is rarely the outcome. In an original turn, the authors argue that this struggle is path-dependent (p. 137). The two are nevertheless careful to avoid establishing a teleological theory, which they believe is a problem with theories of scholars like Francis Fukuyama or Yuval Noah Harari.

Without specifying an explicit causal relationship, the struggle of state-society relations is treated as the explanatory variable determining the type of Leviathan present at any given moment. The authors argue that staying in the *narrow corridor* is possible only when “the state’s role and capacity is advancing to meet new challenges while society also becomes more powerful and vigilant” (p. 466). Drawing from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*,

the authors label this phenomenon as the *Red Queen Effect*. While this term is bound to stick in the reader's mind, it is likely to also be the subject of criticism for minimizing the impact of international relations on regime transition, consolidation and diffusion.

The Narrow Corridor presents an argument that has been previously put forward by researchers such as Ragurham Rajan, Andreas Wimmer, or Peter B. Evans, about the need to simultaneously develop the state apparatus and civil society. When looking for the novelties within this book, we should bear in mind that the theoretical framework employed in *The Narrow Corridor* was already being used by Acemoglu from 2017 for his lectures on the *Political Economy of Institutions and Development* (Acemoglu, 2017). Therefore, the origins of the theory reflect its innovative scope of application: as a tool for understanding why similar institutional circumstances and contexts lead to vastly different development trajectories (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020).

Acknowledging this scope of utilization, some chapters are stronger than others in explaining this divergence. For example, when describing the *Red Queen Effect* in the USA (Chapter 10), Acemoglu and Robinson manage to be precise and scrupulous with their evidence. This contrasts with the less meticulous application of the framework in Yemen (Chapter 11), where a new category, the *Paper Leviathan*, had to be introduced to patch their theory. While patching, as an expression of improvement, is quintessential for modern research, a book whose theoretical framework is inherently fragmentary might impede academia from fully engaging with the innovative framework designed by Acemoglu and Robinson. In their defense, many points raised in the book can be strengthened when complemented by previous papers that paved the way for *The Narrow Corridor*, which have presented more rigorous mathematical models that could serve as appendices to this volume (Acemoglu et al., 2012).

Overall, Acemoglu and Robinson deliver a timely book that serves as a reminder of how fragile liberty is. Despite lacking the traditional structure that a book of this breadth would ideally embrace, *The Narrow Corridor* has already permeated into mainstream. While this book is likely to become a must-read for political scientists, the main contribution is making debates surrounding liberty accessible to the larger audience – not different from the impact of *Why Nations Fail*.

References

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