**The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty**

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“This book is about liberty, and how and why human societies have achieved or failed to achieve it.”

The opening line to Acemoglu and Robinson’s *The Narrow Corridor* (hereafter *TNC*) suggests both its breadth of scope — many diverse societies — and its purported focus: liberty. Their sweeping and largely narrative account spans much of recorded human history and five continents, providing valuable content and stimulation to academics, people of good will, and Christian economists. Their readers, and perhaps the readers of this review, will disagree about how successful they are in modeling the achievement of liberty and whether “liberty” is actually the correct word.

The book is mostly socio-political history told through an impressive number of detailed narratives. Many of the stories traverse countries, span generations, or condense centuries of a people group’s experience. Others are selective individual accounts. They are all powerfully compelling and many, where liberty is unattainable, are heart-wrenching.

The explicit economic analysis of *TNC* is relatively sparse — largely concentrated in two chapters of the 15-chapter text — and still narrative-heavy. It demonstrates basic economic principles — that uncertainty discourages investment and inhibits growth, for example — so the logic will be familiar and straightforward to economists. Still, even the most historically literate economists might find some new inspiration for economic interpretation or application in the diverse scenarios presented. The main argument of the book is political, however, and the connecting political theory is at times less clear than the economic content.

The essence of *TNC* is that there exists a corridor, a path or process, within which nations can “achieve liberty.” The corridor is “squeezed between the fear and repression wrought by despotic states and the violence and lawlessness that emerge” in the absence of a capable state (p. xvi). Remaining in the corridor requires a constant process of balancing state and societal power. State capacity, or the “ability to achieve its objectives” (p. 12), is necessary to keep society, especially the elite, in
check, Acemoglu and Robinson argue. At the same time, a “mobilized society” keeps the state “tamed” (p. 24). Nothing about being in the corridor predicts a people will stay there, however. And more — or less — state power, either one, can be counterproductive to liberty as can either an overactive society or an under-“mobilized” one.

More Metaphors

Acemoglu and Robinson advance their argument with a plethora of metaphors and some catchy labels. Early on they present an analogy adapted from a scene in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* in which Alice and the Red Queen race but end up nowhere different, despite their exertions. The authors dub the balance between state capacity and the power of society that is necessary to remain in the corridor the “Red Queen Effect.” Just to stay in one place in the corridor requires constant effort on the part of both the state and society, they argue. And adopting Hobbes’ language of Leviathan, they clarify the Red Queen Effect, writing: “the more powerful and capable the Leviathan is, the more powerful and vigilant society must become” (p. 41).

Acemoglu and Robinson refer to a state that is sufficiently tamed but still powerful as a Shackled Leviathan. To be in the corridor is rare, and liberty rarer still, but they offer multiple detailed examples of movements into and along the corridor. Among them, some are predictable (a well developed treatment of the kingdoms that become the UK, for example) and others are perhaps less well known (e.g., the “good governance” of the northern Italian communes of the 9th and 10th centuries, and postcolonial Costa Rica). For a Shackled Leviathan, the United States garners from the authors a notable amount of criticism and some incredulity at its ability to remain in the corridor. While they argue that liberty is not unique or limited to nations with European roots, one of their most effective metaphors is the “The European Scissors.” They argue that a confluence of path dependencies, democratically motivated social forces (or, “Germanic shackles”), state institutional structures, and hierarchy of the “Roman bureaucracy” and the Christian church, were all necessary for the prosperity and liberty enjoyed by much of Western Europe.

Alternatively, if a state possesses more power than society can shackle, in TNC language it is a Despotic Leviathan. Notably, the
Despotic Leviathan is not defined by what it does or how, as much as by the fact there are “no means for society and the regular people to have a say in how its power and capacity are used” (p. 18). Acemoglu and Robinson dedicate an entire fascinating chapter to China, which starts in at least the 6th century BCE, characterizing the eras and dynasties since that time as both “fusion of and oscillation between” Confucianism and “legalist precepts.” That the former emphasizes the role of a virtuous emperor and his ultimate concern for his people, and the latter prioritizes extreme order through total power of the ruler, means China has little history conducive to the social capacity necessary for the Red Queen Effect. (In other words, China lacks what the Germanic shackles provided European society.)

To states that lack capacity, Acemoglu and Robinson assign the label Absent Leviathan. They argue that Lebanon and the Tiv (a stateless ethnic group in what would become Nigeria under colonialism) have/had underdeveloped states because of the people’s fear of a slippery slope to despotism (p. 53). Indian society, on the other hand, dominates the state with its strict and long-held caste system, despite political democracy since 1950 (p. 240). In these cases and others, TNC rightly bemoans the inability of the state to provide basic protections to its citizens.

**Main Contributions and Strengths**

The chief contribution of TNC is the scope and detail of analysis, which is both chronologically and culturally diverse. The authors apply their framework to contemporary issues (e.g., Ferguson, Missouri, Chinese communism, and the most recent rise of populism) But they also use America’s founding, Medieval England, the Roman Republic, the Arabian Peninsula during the life of Muhammad (as well as in the late 20th century), the Spring and Autumn Period and Confucius, and Bronze Age Greece. The impressive number and diversity of times, places, and people groups will likely pique the interest of many readers in some time or place they haven’t thought much about before. The book is especially compelling in its accounts of lesser known oppression and hardship and in its degree of human-level detail for more commonly known history, societal successes, and tragedies alike.

The economic implications of the different Leviathan types that the authors identify will be of even more use to economists. Where
the authors make economic arguments, the reasoning is clear, concise, and convincing. (Unfortunately, their policy prescriptions with which they conclude the book are not completely or economically argued.) Chapter 4 focuses on the economic detriments of Despotic and Absent Leviathans, namely, that incentives for productivity and innovation are weak in a context of uncertainty, conflict, violence, and fear. In fact: “Secure property rights on the fruits of [people’s] investments and on what they produce” are critical to economic growth (p. 99). Chapter 5 considers the Shackled Leviathan, providing numerous illustrations of financial, merchant, and trade innovations that have emerged in different historical contexts and the many benefits: literacy, development, technological advancement, and economic growth.

One of the most resonant economic statements of this more than 500-page book comes in the discussion of the so-called “despotic growth” manufactured in China:

Diverse and ongoing innovation in a range of fields, essential for future growth, depends not on solving existing problems but on dreaming up new ones. That requires autonomy and experimentation. You can provide massive amounts of resources…., you can order individuals to work hard, but you cannot order them to be creative. (p. 234)

Below I raise concerns about Acemoglu and Robinson’s conception of liberty, but where they are writing explicitly as economists, they clearly reject the prospects for the central planning of an economy.

**What the Metaphors Miss**

The imagery of the corridor and the monikers of the Red Queen Effect and the various Leviathans are descriptively useful and help guide the reader through a lengthy argument. However, the tidy metaphors, multi-faceted as they are, are abstractions that neglect some essential details. *TNC* does not sufficiently address two elements that are key to its central argument: the nature of state capacity and in what cases norms constitute a harmful “cage.”

In addition to the necessity of a consistently balanced Red Queen Effect, it is essential that the state build *increasing* capacity if it should wish to enjoy liberty, Acemoglu and Robinson argue. They characterize capacity as what gives the state the ability to accomplish its goals. Taken
with their definition of liberty, which requires “the absence of dominance,” (p. 7) one might ask how capacity is related to power and at what point it becomes dominance. Unfortunately, TNC provides few principles related to the proper means or scope of state intervention. (One notable exception is that state action should be transparent so as to come under the gaze of an overseeing society.)

Rather, their metaphors emphasize the counter-capacity of society, which keeps the state tamed. (Admittedly, the significance of society’s capacity is an intended contribution and focus of TNC, which, the authors explain, distinguishes this newest book from their emphasis on “inclusive” political institutions in Why Nations Fail (p. 146).) Still, the authors give the reader little by which to determine whether a state has good or liberty-enhancing objectives. One possible explanation for this is that the authors may not share the “skepticism of centralized authority” or quite as much “desire to avoid the fearsome face of the Leviathan” that they assign to various people groups in the book. In practical terms, though, the simplification of the metaphors of TNC may be at fault. Personifications of state and society are unhelpful when it comes to considering objectives, agency, and design. The overall corridor metaphor also lacks a representation of the principles of motion within the corridor or without. This is especially curious given the authors’ emphasis on processes (hence, the term corridor and not door, they say) and insistence that there is no guarantee that a nation will remain in the corridor or others will converge to it.

One additional confounding aspect that, in the view of Acemoglu and Robinson, makes the nature of appropriate state capacity hard to discern comes from the disparate treatment of some of the Shackled Leviathans. In historical examples and developing world contexts, the authors celebrate capacity as the state’s ability to uphold the Rule of Law and protect life and property. In wealthier and more developed countries, however, and especially in the United States, increased state capacity is not just an option that the Red Queen Effect could enable, a possibility some cultures might appreciate, or one trajectory that could follow for some institutional arrangements and local history. TNC characterizes ever-increasing state capacity as a requirement, such that Rule of Law is hardly worth mentioning in the United States context; rather, plentiful public services and universal benefits are in order. They write that the state must have the ability “to meet society’s needs” (p. 473), but what constitutes a need, ironically, seems to expand with “progress.”
Overall, the metaphors are descriptive of the known and many-but-still-selected examples in the book and are thought-provoking. However, they are less helpful at illuminating causal mechanisms or thinking out of sample, especially hypothetical, state-society relationships that could evolve.

Second, the metaphors of TNC allow a significant role to norms both inside and outside the corridor. I would argue a primary function of norms is self-governance that could avert some “need” for state capacity. However, Acemoglu and Robinson offer examples of norms that seem to fall in to two other types, defined by their outcomes: the kind that enable society to shackle the state and those that the state necessarily eliminates. Again, there is little in TNC by way of principles to understand what norms are desirable and when they are contra liberty. Acemoglu and Robinson admit that norms have “evolved to coordinate action, resolve conflicts, and generate a shared understanding of justice” (p. 19) and, thereby, provide the capacity for society to uphold its role in the Red Queen Effect. But the authors also repeatedly refer to the “cage of norms” that restricts liberty. One of the most troubling examples of a cage of norms is India’s caste system. But other cages are observed in the form of traditional labor patterns and practices, threats of ostracism from one’s tribe, witchcraft and divination, and the economic requirements of kinship bonds. While all these examples are clearly counter to contemporary smell-tests for liberty, Acemoglu and Robinson fail to provide a more generalizable distinction between acceptable and unacceptable norms or assert a more fundamental reasoning why these cages should be scorned.

Readers of Faith & Economics will likely appreciate that the authors do not equivocate when it comes to despotism, culturally permitted or required class, race, ethnic, or sex-based oppression, or state-imposed poverty. But the overall tone of TNC around norms, including the repeated use of the term “cage of norms,” might be less comfortable for Christian readers or at least raise some additional questions about the abstractions of their metaphors. To be clear, TNC does not make much of Christianity in its overall narrative of liberty and prosperity in the world. What is mentioned of the church is fairly balanced between negative and positive, in the authors’ assessment. (They mention that church teaching on usury was, for a time, “a major problem for the development of an effective financial system” (p. 138) and at some points that
church hierarchy was an undesirable cage. In other parts of their analysis, including the European Scissors metaphor, church hierarchy is praised for socializing people toward centralized authority.) Still, the authors seem skeptical of societal norms, and TNC gives little attention to broader civil society (beyond labor unions and associations resulting in political movements), despite the Red Queen Effect requiring society with capacity.

Though economists, Acemoglu and Robinson never employ the idea of crowding out in describing the effects of state capacity on society’s private functions. Rather, they appreciate the Shackled Leviathan’s ability to break down a cage as its capacity grows and equate it to bringing more liberty (pp. 26, 64). We might, too, in many cases. But in other instances, Christians might have mixed emotions or even discontent about the effects of secularization and shifts in social norms on families, communities, churches, etc. Again, the authors admit important purposes for some norms but they do not offer examples of where norms have facilitated liberty outside the scope of politics and outside the relationship between society and the state. This raises the question of whether Acemoglu and Robinson’s characterization of the narrow corridor is reconcilable with the narrower gate and more difficult way of biblical Christianity that can overlap and interact with the political sphere, but also exists well beyond it.

They Hold These Things to Be Self-Evident

"On the economic front, the nature of the challenges makes it evident that a multipronged expansion in the responsibilities and the capacity of the state is necessary" (p. 485).

In a book of such scope and extensive metaphor, details will be neglected. But there are a number of bold claims that Acemoglu and Robinson make, as if they are logically self-evident or unsurprising, despite the fact that they are far from it.

One repeated claim throughout the book is that a more complex world requires states to develop more capacity. But other than correlating more state involvement with contemporary, prosperous societies, TNC makes no argument for why complexity requires state involvement. (In fact, an economic understanding of the local knowledge problem
might suggest the opposite.) Standard concerns about market failure apply certainly, but Acemoglu and Robinson do not discuss whether, in a time when markets are global, multifaceted, and even virtual, market failure is necessarily more prevalent, or if the variety of failures is of the sort that the state can remedy. While they argue against a determinacy of regimes (or, “end of history”), they seem quite certain that our times warrant more intervention. Furthermore, in addition to the market failures they imagine government can ameliorate, they add social insurance, redistribution, “coordinat[ing] bargaining between employers and employees” (pp. 473-474), and universal benefits (p. 485).

Relatedly, federalism, in their view, “hobbles” the “American Leviathan.” Not only is it detrimental to the Red Queen Effect, it is something like fruit from a poisonous tree. It was primarily, they contend, due to a “Faustian bargain” made by the federalists at the time of the constitution’s ratification (p. 307). Therefore, it has no redeeming value or even trade-offs. More specifically:

...the architecture of the Constitution, to the extent that it has been important, has had a dark side too. The compromises it introduced have made the federal state unable and unwilling to protect its citizens against local despotism, enforce its laws equally on all, or supply the type of high-quality and broadly available public services that other rich nations routinely provide to their peoples. (p. 336)

(It is worth noting that “the dark side” is juxtaposed to a previous back-handed compliment to the Constitution, that it is “clever” and that, without a “mobilized society,” its “protections wouldn't be worth much more than empty promises” (p. 336).) No other Shackled Leviathan in the book gets more one-sided criticism nor the stated surprise at its ability to remain in the corridor. Though Acemoglu and Robinson do not neglect the topic of federalism, for economists they seem to ignore the inherent trade-offs. For example, it is remarkable that, in discussing local provision and funding of public education in the US, the authors do not mention one argument for local provision. It is a very non-economic logic they bring to these complex policy issues where, frankly, undergraduate public finance students and parents of school-age children would almost certainly see some upside to local influences on primary and secondary schooling (p. 320). It is acceptable for society to counterbalance
the Leviathan (central government) as part of the Red Queen Effect, but from the way that Acemoglu and Robinson describe it, that individual states might retain some authority has no discernible benefits. Similarly, public-private partnerships are not the kind of cooperation TNC appreciates in Sweden or other favored Shackled Leviathans; rather, these partnerships emasculate a more direct authority of the public sector where society needs it. And because federalism prevents the central government from more effectively dealing with inequality, “it’s no surprise that the United States has a homicide rate about five times as high as the Western European average” (p. 308). Apparently, the “collateral damage of American Exceptionalism” comes in many forms, and so obviously that the authors feel no need to explain the causal mechanisms further.

While they argue that dispersed political authority is emasculating of the federal state and thus not supportive of liberty, democracy, as long as voting is by secret ballot (p. 27), is fully conducive to liberty. They hold as ideals the coalitions of later-20th-century Sweden, and they admit no concern for tyranny of the majority or special interests except when it comes to the economic elite. Coalitions between a workers’ party (post-“shed[ding] its Marxist roots,” of course (p. 468)) and labor unions do not represent power or potential for domination, but rather cooperation. The people can only do wrong if they undermine or are unduly skeptical of central state power. Otherwise, it is the state and or economic elite who are most dangerous to the balance necessary to remain in the corridor and achieve this “liberty” (p. 45).

**Liberty à la Acemoglu and Robinson**

TNC starts with the five words, “This book is about liberty,” and invokes Locke soon thereafter. Acemoglu and Robinson claim to “refine” Locke’s definition (“to order [one’s] actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit” (p. xi)) with a notion of freedom as “the absence of dominance” (p. 7) or unequal power. Though they may not intend to, in the final chapter the authors shatter any remaining illusion that their notion of liberty is, in fact, a Lockean one as they first claim. They relish “the fertile ground” that times of social and economic change provide to instituting universal benefits, for example. They advocate for a more comprehensive social safety net, not by itself illiberal. But they also call for “tighter, bolder, and more
comprehensive regulations for many businesses,” designing labor markets, and “redirecting the path of technological change” (pp. 485-486). These are apparently the next purposes of state capacity as a Leviathan progresses through the corridor. Finally, in the last paragraph of the book, they make an appeal for “human progress” which “depends on the expansion of state capacity to meet new challenges and combat all dominance, old and new.”

For some readers, this will be a welcome revelation after their initial rapport with Locke. For others, this might lead us to question whether liberty is the appropriate term for the focus of this book. It matters what the authors mean by liberty since the book is about how some societies achieve it and why others do not. As the book progresses, it seems clear that their concept of liberty is opposed to a classical (negative) definition of liberty.

As for how their idea of liberty and objectives for the state match up to a Christian idea of freedom or liberty, it is less clear. Since Christian liberty requires living in accordance with truth and accepting the constraints of a Christian walk for our own good, it does not cohere with libertine notions of liberty. TNC does not make this argument, but neither does it celebrate as explicitly the “progress” of rampantly expanding choices that other publications of our time might. That is, they do not explicitly accept libertinism, though their language around “cage of norms” is suggestive. What is much clearer is that they have their own conception of liberty, or at least a vision of what success looks like for Leviathans in the corridor. And that idea is neither a Christian nor classical view of liberty but, rather, a particular distribution of wealth and social freedoms along with a “balanced” allocation of capacity between state and society.