



Reflections on Skinner and Pettit

Ian Shapiro

Sterling Professor of Political Science, Henry R. Luce Director, MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, 34 Hillhouse Avenue, P.O. Box 208206
New Haven, CT 06520-8206, USA
E-mail: ian.shapiro@yale.edu

Abstract

This article discusses the concepts of freedom and liberty that Skinner and Pettit identify in Hobbes, and takes issue with them.

Keywords

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These authors share a preoccupation with Hobbes's attack on what Skinner describes as the neo-Roman or Republican conception of freedom or liberty.¹ Both Skinner and Pettit indict Hobbes for regarding freedom as immunity from external interference. In its stead, both champion a republican view in which freedom is an independent status marked by the absence of domination. Both therefore favor Hobbes's republican critics, but, Skinner concludes, in the longer term "we can hardly fail to acknowledge that he won the battle."²

Skinner's claim about Hobbes's victory in the battle is not further unpacked. It could mean one of several things: that Hobbes's view became a dominant ideology; that it became the prevalent way in which people understood freedom; or that it prevailed as political morality. These claims might, if valid, be mutually reinforcing. But they merit individual attention because each is problematic in different ways. As will become plain, attending to these

¹ Q. Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and P. Pettit, *Made With Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

² Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 216. On Pettit's republicanism see also his *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

differences has no bearing on whether we should affirm an ideal of non-domination—which I have argued elsewhere that we should.³

It would be reasonable to interpret Skinner as talking about ideology, given his well-known preference for studying the history of ideas as the history of ideologies. Skinner generally unpacks this by saying that we should ask what authors were trying to achieve. That will not do in this case, however, since on Skinner's own account Hobbes's agenda in *Leviathan* was to legitimate absolutist political arrangements. Hobbes arguably prevailed in this battle between 1660 and 1688; in the larger sweep of history the absolutist state he favored fell by the wayside.

A different reading of the ideology claim, arguably traceable to Rousseau's critique of Hobbes, might be unpacked by reference to its off' alleged elective affinities with bourgeois capitalism.⁴ This seems unlikely to be what Skinner has in mind either, however, given his distaste for those who detach ideologies from the intentions of authors, let alone those who see them as epiphenomenal reflections of underlying material processes.

Nor would the affinity-with-bourgeois-capitalism reading be plausible as a claim about liberal versus republican conceptions of freedom. True, some commentators have found civic republicanism attractive on the grounds that republican ideas are allegedly less friendly to the possessive individualism characteristic of bourgeois orders than the "liberal" ideology inherited from Hobbes. However, Joyce Appleby is compelling that, during the eighteenth century, civic republican ideas were pressed into the service of legitimating market relations just as readily as were liberal ideas.⁵ Counterpoising "liberal" and "republican" ideologies to one another for these sorts of purposes obscures more than it reveals.⁶ Political ideologies that enjoy staying power over centuries contain conceptual resources for attacking and defending the prevailing orders. Liberal and republican ideas have both been championed by conservatives, moderates, and radicals.⁷ If Hobbes won the battle in this sense, there is decidedly less to his victory than meets the eye.

³ I. Shapiro, *Democratic Justice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, trans. F. Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 44; C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁵ J. Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁶ See "Gross Concepts in Political Argument," in I. Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 152.

⁷ On the radical use of liberal ideas, see R. Ashcraft, "The Radical Dimensions of Locke's Political Thought: a Dialogic Essay on Some Problems of Interpretation," *History of Political*

But perhaps Skinner rather has a conceptual point in mind: that Hobbes was an early champion of Isaiah Berlin's "negative" liberty.⁸ Berlin contrasted this idea of "freedom from" with the positive libertarian idea of freedom as "freedom to" that informed the arguments of Rousseau, Marx, and many socialists of Berlin's day. Some of what Skinner has written elsewhere suggests that this might be his concern.⁹ As Skinner notes in *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, while there is some variation in how Hobbes defined liberty in various writings, in *Leviathan* he seems clearly to be operating with a the negative liberty view. By talking of liberty by reference to the absence of external impediments, describing the liberty of the subject by reference to "the Silence of the Law"¹⁰ and what "the Sovereign hath praetermitted,"¹¹ Hobbes seems clearly to be thinking of individual freedom as a zone of action in which the individual is left alone by the state. Despite his soon-to-be-anachronistic absolutism, then, Hobbes won the historical battle, on this reading, by championing the negative libertarian view.

There is some plausibility to this,¹² but, by missing what is problematic in the negative/positive distinction, Skinner draws the wrong moral and political conclusions. It is conventional to distinguish negative libertarians, who focus primarily on impediments to action, from positive libertarians who are centrally concerned with what the agent is able to do. Writers like Rousseau and Hegel are seen as positive libertarians because they conceive freedom as what Charles Taylor has described as an "exercise" concept rather than an "opportunity" one. For them, freedom consists in exercising human capacities to achieve our potential. We are unfree when this possibility is attenuated or blocked by

Thought, 13:4 (1992), 703-72, and "Liberal Political Theory and Working-Class Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century England," *Political Theory*, 21:2 (1993), 249-72. On their libertarian use, see R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1974). On moderate uses, see R. M. Smith, *Liberalism and American Constitutional Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). On the ideological variety of republican ideas see my *Political Criticism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), Chapter 6.

⁸ I. Berlin, "Negative and Positive Liberty," in I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁹ Q. Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives," in R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 193-224.

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2nd revised student edition, ed. by R. Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 152.

¹¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 148.

¹² I. Shapiro, *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 39-40, 276-277.

deleterious social arrangements.¹³ Positive libertarians generally link freedom to participation in social and political institutions—in ways that lead people to realize their potential. Berlinites criticize positive libertarians for thinking that we can know human potential and design collective arrangements for its attainment, so that people can, as Rousseau said, be “forced to be free.”¹⁴ It is hard to see how people are free if they are forced to realize a particular conception of the good life.

Skinner agrees with Berlin in rejecting the positive conception. Yet Skinner believes that the Machiavellian, or neo-Roman, view of freedom that he champions has been misclassified as “positive” because it requires active participation of citizens—in military and civic life. But, for Skinner, Machiavelli requires participation of citizens to protect themselves from the aggressive neighbors and power-hungry domestic elites—articulating a better “negative” conception than Hobbes’s.¹⁵ Freedom is the antithesis of slavery on the neo-Roman account; we are free when we are independent beings and public service is necessary to secure that status.¹⁶ By accepting the negative/positive dichotomy to defend a version of the negative view, Skinner misses what is really unappealing about Hobbes’s account. The debate between negative and positive libertarians is really a fruitless opposition of gross concepts. It diverts attention from what is at stake in arguments about freedom, perpetuating a debate that can never be resolved.¹⁷

Gerald MacCallum has pointed out that any assertion about freedom minimally involves reference to agents, restraining (or enabling) conditions, and action. It always makes sense to ask of any use of the term: *who is free, from what restraint (or because of what enabling condition) to perform which action?* My suggestion is that we endorse MacCallum’s account but modify it by noting that when we talk about *political* freedom a fourth term enters, concerning legitimacy; it answers the question *why*, because of what authority, is the agent free? Whereas freedom as MacCallum described it is a triadic relation ranging over agents, restraining (or enabling) conditions, and actions, political freedom

¹³ C. Taylor, “What’s wrong with negative liberty,” in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 179.

¹⁴ Jean-Jaques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin Classics, 1968), 64.

¹⁵ Skinner, “The Idea of Negative Liberty,” 204–19.

¹⁶ As Skinner puts it, “the paramount distinction in civil association is between those who enjoy the status of those who enjoy the status of *liberi homines* or ‘freemen’ and those who live in servitude.” Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 211.

¹⁷ Shapiro, “Gross Concepts,” 152–176.

or liberty is best thought of as a quadratic relation—ranging over each of these three and authorizing conditions as well.¹⁸

Skinner contends that MacCallum's account is really a version of the doctrine of negative liberty. "[I]nsofar as MacCallum's analysis suggests a negative understanding of freedom as the absence of constraints upon an agent's options (which it does), this ["that the only coherent account that can possibly be given of the concept of liberty is the negative one"] is also the implication of his account and of those that depend on it."¹⁹ But this misses MacCallum's point that *all* accounts of liberty have both negative and positive elements, and that negative libertarians focus mainly on constraints while positive libertarians concern themselves with enabling conditions.

MacCallum did acknowledge that intelligible concepts of freedom involve some notion of constraints or their absence, but just because *this* element could never amount to *an account of freedom*, talk of freedom from constraint or restraint did not make an account "negative." The opposition itself should be eschewed, on his account, because constraints and enabling conditions can easily be redescribed as one another. Arguments between negative and positive libertarians are analogous to arguments over whether a prisoner is unfree because of the *presence* of a locked door or the *absence* of a key. It is thus misleading to think of negative or positive language as indicative of any significant conceptual difference.²⁰

Hobbes and Republican Liberty makes it clear that Skinner has not appreciated MacCallum's point. In terms of my modified version of MacCallum's schema, by focusing on the independent status of the agent, Skinner reduces liberty to the first and fourth terms in the quadratic relation—the status of the agent as a freeman or slave depends on the prevailing legitimating authority. That this is an incomplete view of freedom becomes evident when we reflect on its silence about the second and third terms in the relation—the actions to be performed and the restraints (or enabling conditions) that hamper (or facilitate) their performance.

Why does it matter? Because what is consequential in arguments about freedom is not reducible to matters of vocabulary. Rather it concerns what people are able to do, or prevented from doing, in the world. True, a slave is unfree partly because of his compromised status even if a benign slave-owner

¹⁸ Shapiro, *The Evolution of Rights*, 14–19.

¹⁹ Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty," 196n8.

²⁰ G. MacCallum, "Negative and Positive Freedom," in P. Laslett, W. G. Runciman, and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 4th Series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 182n9.

permits him some latitude.²¹ By the same token, however, a non-slave might confront such enormous obstacles to performing a range of actions routinely enjoyed by others that we do not regard him as free. Hence Anatole France's quip that "the poor are free to sleep under the bridges of Paris," so often hurled at negative libertarians, might also apply to the neo-Roman account. That the poor citizen in France's example is not a serf does not render him free. In recent decades, corporations have often fired employees, only to rehire them as independent contractors at reduced salaries and without employment benefits. Their status as independent persons might have been enhanced, but this scarcely means that their freedom has been enhanced.

MacCallum's point was that, instead of trying to reduce freedom to one or another of its relational components, we should embrace his antireductionist account. His hope was that, by embracing his account, we would stop endless debates about "kinds" of freedom and focus instead on the conditions in the world that shape not only the status of agents, but also the actions they might aspire to perform, and the resources and constraints affecting those aspirations. Hobbes's nascent negative libertarian view is impeachable from this perspective, but the deficiency is not remedied by a neo-Roman alternative that reduces freedom to claims about the status of agents.

I wonder whether Pettit's illuminating discussion of Hobbes's view of language underplays aspects of Hobbes's account that have been central to the development of modern individualism. Ultimately this grows out of Hobbes's epistemology.

For Hobbes, the vital distinction was not—as post-Kantians think—between definitional knowledge and knowledge derived from experience. As Hobbes put it in *De Homine*, the pure or "mathematical" sciences can be known *a priori*, but the "mixed mathematics" such as physics depend on "the causes of natural things [which are] not in our power."²² He spelled this out more fully in the Epistle Dedicatory to his *Six Lessons to the Professors of Mathematics*, when he distinguished "demonstrable" fields, as "those the construction of the subject whereof is in the power of the artist himself," from "indemonstrable" ones "where the causes are to seek for." We can only know the causes of what we make. So geometry is demonstrable, because "the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves" and "civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth

²¹ This is not an exact analogue of the Hobbesian account, in which the subject, though dependent for his freedom on the sovereign's silence, is not owned by him.

²² Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, tr. by C. T. Wood, T. S. K. Scott-Craig, and B. Gert (New York, NY: Anchor, 1972 [1658]), 42.

ourselves.” But we can only speculate about the natural world, because “we know not the construction, but seek it from the effects.”²³

Pettit misses something important when he says that Hobbes “casts geometry as the a priori study of what is implied in notions like those of line and point, square and circle,” and that for Hobbes causal propositions about the civil world are “a priori demonstrable—demonstrable just on the basis of the meanings of the words used in the claims.”²⁴ For Hobbes these propositions are knowable with certainty *not* because they follow from the meanings of the terms, but because they are the product of human wills. To escape the war of all against all we need a science of the human will, not a theory of language.

²³ Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols., ed. by Sir William Molesworth, (London: John Bohn, 1966), VII, 183-4.

²⁴ Philip Pettit, *Made With Words*, 20-21.