

The Narrow Corridor — the fine line between despotism and anarchy

Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson ask: how do we balance protections with liberty?

Martin Wolf SEPTEMBER 26 2019

“Getting to Denmark” is a widely used metaphor for the task of transforming countries into prosperous, stable, well-governed, law-abiding, democratic and free societies. In their latest book, MIT’s Daron Acemoglu and the University of Chicago’s James Robinson, authors of the highly influential *Why Nations Fail*, provide a framework in which to address the question of how to get there. Their simple answer is: it is hard. Their deep answer is: “Liberty originates from a delicate balance of power between state and society.”

Liberty is neither granted by the state, nor seized from a state’s dead hand. It is the product of **contestation** (sự tranh cãi) and co-operation between state and society. Following Lewis Carroll, the authors describe this relationship as a “Red Queen” race, in which state and society must run at equal speed if they are to stay where they are.

Crucially and rightly, the book does not see freedom as merely the absence of state oppression. Quite as **corrosive** of freedom are oppression of women by men, workers by bosses, or the poor by the rich. In the vein of the political philosopher Philip Pettit, the authors argue that “the fundamental **tenet** (giáo lý) of a fulfilling life is . . . freedom from dominance, fear and extreme insecurity”.

Their analytical starting point is the Leviathan of the 17th-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. To Hobbes the enemy was “Warre”, or unending conflict. To provide security against lives “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”, he argued, we require an all-powerful state, the Leviathan. This book calls such a Hobbesian state the “Despotic Leviathan”.

The opposite to the Despotic Leviathan is the “Absent Leviathan”. In some cases, a stateless society is indeed a war of all against all, as Hobbes feared, with the **vendetta** (mối thù) acting in place of the rule of law. In such societies, blood-feuds may stretch over generations.

Yet there is an alternative form of the Absent Leviathan: a cage that uses social sanctions to force people to behave in accordance with norms. The norms appropriate to one’s place in a caste structure are an example. Such a “cage of norms” may also be oppressive. By definition, it is also almost impossible to loosen the cage, since there exists no legislature to do so. That requires a state.

In the Despotic Leviathan, there is too much state and too little society. In the Absent Leviathan, there is too much society and too little state. In between lies a corridor, where things are neither too hot nor too cold. Here alone, the state and society balance each other. As the one becomes more potent, so does the other. Thus, argue the authors, “for liberty to emerge and flourish, both state and society must be strong”.

Denmark has a strong state and a strong society. Contrary to Friedrich Hayek’s fears, the emergence of a state with high taxes and generous welfare has not led to the fate described in *The Road to Serfdom*. It was instead the road to widely shared freedom and prosperity.

This is what Acemoglu and Robinson call a Shackled Leviathan. Their thesis is that neither an inevitable nor a simple path towards such a state exists. It is **contingent**: it depends on the norms and institutions with which a society starts the journey, on the nature of economic opportunities and on accidents.

In western Europe, they argue, progress towards a Shackled Leviathan began with the collapse of the Roman empire, which bequeathed institutional memories and the Church. But it also began with the deliberative assemblies of the Germanic tribes that had conquered Rome. These were the “two blades of the European scissors”.

The more confidence people have in their state, the argument goes, the more they demand of it and so the more effective it becomes. Trust, not fear, is the foundation of a strong state. So, paradoxically, a Despotic Leviathan is less able to act consistently and effectively than a Shackled one.

China is, historically, the world’s most significant Despotic Leviathan. It has struggled between two conceptions of such a state: Legalism, which imposes oppression on the people, and Confucianism, which emphasises obligations of rulers to the ruled. Yet the unconstrained Chinese state can never guarantee protection against its own changing whims. Its economic success was, accordingly, necessarily limited.

Historical legacies explain, for example, the divergent experience of post-Soviet societies. Russia has gone back to despotism because society was inert. Vladimir Putin could reimpose the Despotic Leviathan quite easily. Poland, however, with its relatively mobilised society, made great progress towards a Shackled Leviathan. But nothing is certain. Today, it appears, Poland is on its way back towards the Despotic Leviathan, together with Hungary.

One of the book’s big themes is the role of predatory elites in preventing the emergence of a Shackled Leviathan. It highlights the contrast between Costa Rica and Guatemala, the former a success in moving in that direction, the latter an enduring catastrophe of predatory elites. The driving force behind Guatemala’s failure to develop a Shackled State was the need of the elite to coerce labour. Exactly the same was true, of course, of the American South.

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For the citizens, Acemoglu and Robinson suggest, the Paper Leviathan, which manages to be both oppressive and ineffective, may be the worst of both worlds: Such “states are still pretty despotic — they get very little input from [citizens] and continue to be unresponsive to them, and then don’t have many scruples about repressing or murdering them.” An example is Argentina. But much of Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa falls into this category.

The Paper Leviathan is a blend of the Despotic with the Absent Leviathan. The book offers two reasons for the survival of such Paper Leviathans: one is that those in power do not want the state to mobilise the people; the other is that they wish to exploit clientelist relations. Either way, they do not wish the state to be neutral and effective, but rather partial and ineffective.

This book is more original and exciting than its predecessor. It has gone beyond the focus on institutions to one on how a state really works. It shows that getting to and sustaining a Shackled Leviathan is hard. It is easier to move from a Despotic Leviathan to an Absent or Paper Leviathan than to a Shackled one: Iraq is a recent example. When Saddam Hussein fell, the state disintegrated, albeit with US assistance.

The book also raises big questions about the future. Its view, for example, is that China’s Despotic Leviathan will ultimately fail to move this country to the forefront of the world economy. Similarly, the authors suggest that India’s cage of caste norms will continue to hamper its success severely.

Another important question is whether the “Will to Power” can be contained forever, even in established Shackled Leviathans. This is becoming a question in the US. The answer is to create a more effective state that is willing to act against the predatory few or the would-be despotic one. Society must mobilise once again. But will it?

Progress towards the Shackled Leviathan requires a mobilised society and a responsive state. That combination is far from inevitable. On the contrary, it is very hard to attain or sustain. Yet it is possible. Those of us lucky enough to live under such a state and in such a society are duty bound to defend it.

The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty, by Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson, Viking, RRP£25/Penguin, RRP\$32, 560 pages

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