

Session 1, Reading 1b: The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty

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Liberty is not the natural order of states and societies. Either states have been too weak to protect individuals from these threats, or states have been too strong for people to protect themselves from despotism. In most times and places, the strong have dominated the weak and human freedom has been quashed by force (e.g., Hong Kong, 2019-22) or by customs and norms (e.g., Medieval Europe)

The key values of liberal democracy emerge and are sustained only when society is mobilized, actively participates in politics, and holds its own against powerful interests in the state and the elites.

There is a Western myth that liberal democracy is a durable construct, a steady state, reached by a process of enlightenment. Rather, the corridor to liberty is narrow and stays open only via a fundamental and incessant struggle between state and society.

The power of state institutions and the elites that control them cannot go uncontested in a free society. In fact, the capacity to contest them is the foundation of liberty.

State institutions must evolve continuously as the nature of conflicts and the needs of a society change, and thus society's ability to keep state and rulers accountable must intensify in tandem with the capabilities of the state. This struggle between state and society becomes self-reinforcing, inducing both to develop a richer array of capacities just to keep moving forward along the corridor.

This struggle also, however, underscores the fragile nature of liberty. It is built on a precarious balance between: state and society; between economic, political, and social elites and other citizens; and between institutions and norms. If one side of the balance scale grows too strong, as has often happened in history, and is happening with great frequency now, liberty begins to wane.

Liberty needs:

- The vigilant mobilization of society to prevent the elites and the state from quashing freedoms and allowing inequality to grow; and
- State institutions to constantly reinvent themselves to meet new economic and social challenges that can expunge liberty, equality, and other values of liberal democracy.

Today we are in the midst of a time of wrenching destabilization. We need liberal democracy as much if not more than ever, and yet the corridor to achieve and sustain liberal democracy is becoming narrower and more treacherous.

The danger on the horizon is not “just” the loss of our political freedom; it is also the disintegration of the safety, prosperity, and flourishing lives that critically depend on liberty. Being outside the corridor that liberal democracy occupies is the road to ruin.

The impact of various structural factors—such as economic conditions, demographic shocks, and war—on the development of the state and the economy depend on the prevailing balance between state and society. (p. 30)

Although the U.S. managed to build a shackled Leviathan, this was based on a Faustian bargain: the Federalists accepted a constitution that kept the federal state weak both to appease a society that was concerned about the threat of despotism and to reassure Southern slaveholders who were worried about losing their slaves and assets. The compromise worked, but it also led to the unbalanced development of the American state, which still has limited capacity in several important domains. This uneven state development has caused a distorted evolution of the power and capabilities of society, and paradoxically created room for the state’s power to evolve in unmonitored and unaccountable ways in some domains (such as national security). (Ch. 10)

As the world evolves, the state must expand and take on new responsibilities, but this in turn requires society to become more capable and vigilant, lest the nation as a whole find itself veering away from the corridor, the zone where continuation of liberty is possible. New coalitions are critical for the state to gain greater capacity while keeping its shackles (a possibility illustrated by Sweden’s response to the economic and social exigencies created by the Great Depression and how this led to the emergence of social democracy). It is no different today, when we are facing many new challenges, ranging from inequality, joblessness, and slow economic growth, to complex security threats. We need the state to develop additional capabilities and shoulder fresh responsibilities, but only if we can find new ways of keeping it shackled, mobilizing society, and protecting our liberties. (Ch. 15)

The two sides—the state and society—are in competition but must also cooperate. Each side must build up its capacity, putting it in position to gain the upper edge. But neither can try to emasculate the other. (p. 399) Society must always have more power, but cannot try to take control of the state. The state is shackled but not controlled; there is a crucial difference. Both sides must strengthen as a result of their competition (p. 400)

The elites must be kept under control, but still have important roles to play (p. 399)

All of this, therefore, is “positive sum,” with all elements thriving and increasing their capabilities, but no element allowed to become dominant. (p. 400)

The requirements of this relationship between the state and society mean that, over time, we move down a narrow corridor:

With many doors on every side.

But most of these exit doors are one way: once you leave the corridor, it is very difficult to find a door to get back in. (cf., *The Adjustment Bureau*, with Matt Damon and Emily Blunt)

There are several ways that a liberal democracy can leave the corridor. Elites can assert control. Alternatively, segments of society can decide they no longer have the nature and scope of power they want, and destabilize the corridor. This is happening today in many countries. (p. 406)

A wider corridor yields a more stable liberal democracy than a narrower one. (p. 405)

Increasing distrust in the ability or willingness of the institutions of liberal democracies to control the elites or effectively address key problems paves the way for populist movements.

The populist movements themselves exacerbate this process, as they corrode politics in the corridor. The rhetoric of populist movements, positing that everyone outside the movement are enemies and that the scheming elites are hold down the people, drives further polarization. As trust in institutions declines, it becomes harder for them to broker compromise. (p. 421)

Populist movements eventually lead to despotism when they come to power, due to their focus on taking control of the state and their claim that checks on their power will help the scheming elites. The defining characteristic of a populist movement—their refusal to accept constraints and compromise—makes them unlikely to redress imbalances in society. They are about creating new dominances, not ending them. (p. 421)

An all-too common scenario today in the world: a population failing to benefit from economic growth, feeling that the elites are getting the upper hand, and losing its trust in institutions. A struggle between different partis becoming increasingly polarized and zero-sum. Institutions failing to mediate and resolve conflicts. A economic crisis further destabilizing institutions and eviscerating trust in them. A strongman claiming to stand for the people against the elites, and asking for the institutional checks to be relaxed so that he can serve the people better. (p. 425)

Think Erdogan, Orban, and Trump.

The most powerful way to ensure the leviathan remains shackled is to leverage society's mobilization. There are numerous ways to do so, and they involve building on the protection for the rights of citizens against all threats, including those from the state, the elites, and other citizens.

Rights are intimately connected to our notion of liberty as protection of individuals from fear, violence, and dominance. Fear and violence, as observed by Hobbes, have been the most visible signs of the loss of liberty. Dominance, however—defined as the inability of individuals to make choices and pursue their lives according to their own values—is often as stifling. Rights are fundamental ways for society to encode in its laws and norms the capacity of all individuals to make such choices in their lives.

The emphasis on rights extends as far back as Locke *2nd Treatise*, Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* and *Virginia Resolution on Religious Freedom*, and the French *Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen* in 1789. Our modern conception is shaped by FDR's *Four Essential Freedoms* in 1940-1, the essential rights he enumerated in his *State of the Union Address* in 1944, and the *Universal Declaration of Rights* adopted by the U.N. in 1948.

In 1945, William Beveridge anticipated the UN's ideas in his pamphlet, *Why I Am a Liberal*, in which he wrote:

“Liberty means more than freedom from the arbitrary power of governments. It means freedom from economic servitude to Want and Squalor and other social evils; it means freedom from arbitrary power in any form. A starving man is not free.”

These modern conceptions of rights go way past the Bill of Rights in two major ways:

- They are universal and general, including a broad set of rights and all persons. Among others, taking away the means of earning a decent living would create a form of dominance.

- They recognize the importance of individuals being able to both make and realize their choices.

Enshrining these rights creates clear limits on what the state, powerful elites, and the many can and cannot do.

If clearly delineated boundaries on what the state can and cannot do are recognized universally, encroachments of these boundaries can create the spark for a broad-based societal mobilization to stop the state's overreach.

Recognizing minority rights as universal is crucial, as without such recognition, only the specific minority whose rights are currently being violated are likely to complain and protest, and it would make unlikely any general mobilization. In the 1950s, the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller pithily captured in a poem why it was so easy for the Nazis to control German society:

First they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.

The lack of a universal recognition of very basic rights was at the root of the inability of German society to rise up to the Nazis, who could deal with and eliminate each group separately, without mobilizing a broad coalition in Germany society to stand up to them. To the extent a society can make a broad set of reasonable rights more universal, it will be better placed to organize and match the state's growing power.

The key to making a state and society more stable and less likely to spin out of the corridor is to seek to create and continually re-create the balance of power between the state and society, between those who are powerful and those who are not, and between institutions and norms. Ultimately, society's power is about society's organization and mobilization. (pp. 495-6)