

The Narrow Corridor

What's in it for me? Journey through the history of liberty - and the lack thereof.

For centuries, philosophers have pondered the concept of liberty. How should it be defined, and what conditions make a society liberal or illiberal? Despite the wide range of definitions, the authors argue that liberty has a fundamental, core meaning. For them, liberty equals freedom from violence, intimidation, and domination. In liberal societies, people are free to make their own choices as to how to live their lives, unafraid that they'll be punished for doing so. Liberty seems like something everyone would want. But despite this, it's historically been quite rare and elusive. That's because, as you'll learn in these blinks, liberty requires a constant and evolving synergy between state and society - that is, a government and the citizens living under it. This synergy is difficult to set in motion and equally difficult to maintain. A quick note before we begin: some of these blinks contain graphic depictions of violence. In these blinks, you'll learn

why the Tiv ethnic group doesn't have chiefs; the reason it's so hard to access welfare in Argentina; and how polarization helped the Nazis gain power.

The path to liberty is a narrow corridor, requiring a balance between state and society.

One of the world's oldest surviving pieces of text is the Epic of Gilgamesh. Etched upon a series of Sumerian tablets some 4,200 years old, it tells the story of Gilgamesh, king of the ancient city of Uruk. In the epic, we witness Gilgamesh presiding over a flourishing Uruk. The city is remarkable, home to glorious palaces and temples, bustling markets, and gleaming ramparts. But not all is well. King Gilgamesh is proud, vainglorious, and tyrannical. He arrogantly struts around the city, tearing sons and daughters away from their parents in order to murder or rape them. The people of Uruk plead with Anu, the god of the sky, to save them from Gilgamesh's tyranny and restore some semblance of liberty. The key message here is: The path to liberty is a narrow corridor, requiring a balance between state and society. The god Anu hears the people's pleas and comes up with a solution to what the authors call the Gilgamesh problem. It is the question of how to control the power and authority of the state so it benefits rather than oppresses society. Anu's solution? To have the creation goddess Aruru create a counterpart for Gilgamesh - a man equal to him in strength and power, who could balance him out. His name was Enkidu. At first, Enkidu succeeded in pushing back against Gilgamesh's tyranny. But soon, the two struck up a friendship and began to conspire together. With their combined strength, the possibility for checks and balances completely disappeared. Despotism was there to stay. So why didn't liberty emerge in Uruk? In short, because society wasn't mobilized and therefore had no political might. As a result, elites - in this case, Gilgamesh and Enkidu - had no reason to remain benevolent. Liberty requires a balance between state and society. Too strong a state, and you're left with despotism. Too weak a state, and violence and lawlessness emerge. The space

between these two extremes is a narrow corridor to liberty. Why a corridor and not a door? Well, because traveling in the corridor is a long, drawn out process – governments and institutions aren't forged overnight. And the corridor is narrow because it's not easy to restrain a powerful state – nor to keep members of society working together rather than tearing each other apart. When a society fails to enter the corridor, the consequences can be dire.

Without a strong central government, a society can't have liberty.

Nigeria, 1994. The country is in the grip of a military dictatorship, led by General Sani Abacha. Abacha's main mission? Not to resolve conflicts, protect, or provide services to Nigerian citizens, but to assassinate his political opponents and rob the country of its natural wealth. Essentially left without a central government, Nigeria's cities, including its business capital of Lagos, are on the brink of anarchy. Human corpses litter Lagos's streets, alongside ever-growing piles of trash and scavenging rats. Gang members called "area boys" terrorize citizens, committing murder and robbery. The government provides no electricity or running water. It's fair to say that, at this point in time, the people of Lagos were living in conditions far removed from liberty. The key message here is: Without a strong central government, a society can't have liberty. The Lagos of the 1990s seems like an aberration. But its conditions of violence and insecurity are the norm in societies with nonexistent or weak states. In fact, scientist Steven Pinker used archaeological research to estimate that more than 500 out of every 100,000 people in ancient hunter-gatherer societies died violent deaths every year. This meant that, over a lifetime of 50 years, a quarter of everyone you knew would die a violent death. Imagine how unpredictable and terrifying that would be! This sort of environment was aptly described by the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes as Warre. In Warre, each person is constantly pitted against every other person, fear reigns supreme, and industry is impossible to establish. But Hobbes had a solution to Warre: a massive, centralized, all-powerful government he called a Leviathan. Without a Leviathan, Hobbes believed Warre would continue perpetually. Hobbes was correct in this regard – that a Leviathan is necessary for a society to have any chance at liberty. But Hobbes failed to consider that not all Leviathans are quite the same. For instance, a Leviathan may itself foster conditions akin to Warre, dominating and subjugating society. This is what the authors call a Despotic Leviathan. On the other end of the spectrum, there's the Absent Leviathan, an extremely weak or nonexistent central state. Under these Leviathans, a society may be able to control the proliferation of violence. But that doesn't mean that the people have liberty. Between these two extremes, in the narrow corridor of liberty, lies a third, ideal type – one we'll explore in the next blink.

Ancient Athens achieved liberty by empowering society to balance state power.

Throughout most of the Greek Dark Ages, which began in 1200 BCE, the city of Athens was ruled by magistrates called Archons. Archons were appointed to their positions and, in practice, always came from an elite class of wealthy families. They frequently

competed among themselves for power, and, occasionally, these power struggles led to coups. Eventually, the elites had had enough and decided that they needed a better method of conflict resolution. They began a series of attempts to produce written laws – but there was a problem. Athens still lacked a centralized authority that could actually enforce those laws. This remained a problem for decades, until a trader and military commander named Solon was appointed Archon. Through a series of reforms and new laws, Solon forged an Athenian Leviathan. The key message here is: Ancient Athens achieved liberty by empowering society to balance state power. When Solon became Archon, conflicts between Athenian elites and society were growing. To control the burgeoning discord, Solon knew he needed to enact reforms that would satisfy both sides. First, Solon created new laws that encouraged citizens to participate in politics and made them less subservient to elites. Next, to keep the elites happy, he divided the population into four classes based on wealth and declared that only men from the top two classes could become Archons. Then Solon began building a state, one with the authority to enforce his new laws. Common citizens could now rely on courts to administer justice, and the same laws applied to everyone – elite or not. By implementing these reforms, Solon activated what the authors call the Red Queen effect. It's named after an event in Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking-Glass*. In it, the characters of Alice and the Red Queen race against each other. But no matter how hard they run, both remain in the exact same place. Instead of Alice and the Red Queen, imagine the state and its elites are racing society at large, neither able to gain the upper hand and dominate the other. That's the Red Queen effect, and it leads to the type of state Solon created: a Shackled Leviathan. In this ideal system of government – the only one in which liberty is possible – society and the state remain in perfect balance. Under Solon, the newly mobilized citizenry was empowered to enact checks on the state, while the state gained the ability to control violence and resolve conflicts. It didn't happen instantly, but with its new Shackled Leviathan, Athens finally achieved liberty.

The cage of norms keeps some societies locked in an Absent Leviathan.

The Red Queen effect creates the right conditions for liberty and economic prosperity. Yet there are still modern societies that choose to stick with weak or nonexistent Absent Leviathans, in which liberty and economic prosperity are scarce. Why? Social scientists suggest a variety of answers. They argue, for instance, that factors like low population density or the absence of agriculture or trade make it less necessary to have a central government. The authors believe something else plays a more important role, however. That something is the cage of norms, a rigid set of cultural practices and traditions that can act as a dominating force over a group of people. A powerful enough cage of norms can keep a society hopelessly locked in with an Absent Leviathan. The key message here is: The cage of norms keeps some societies locked in an Absent Leviathan. We can see the cage of norms perpetuating the Absent Leviathan in rural Nigeria, where an ethnic group called the Tiv resides. In 1914, a British colonial ruler named Lord Lugard attempted to take control of the Tiv. To do so, Lugard chose a method of indirect rule, where he would select local chiefs and elites to serve as his vassals while he relaxed in his London estate. But there was a problem with this strategy – the Tiv, a highly egalitarian society, didn't actually have any chiefs or a class of elites at all. So Lugard decided to make his own chiefs and impose them on the Tiv. By 1939, it had become apparent that Lugard's strategy was completely untenable. The reason for this was the

rise of a cult called Nyambua. Its members handed out wands and whisks, which they claimed could point to a substance called tsav. Tsav was said to grow on the hearts of people who sought political power – and could be increased by the practice of cannibalism. Eventually, the wands and whisks began to point toward the Tiv chiefs appointed by Lord Lugard. These accusations negated the chiefs' authority, bringing social and economic activity to an abrupt halt. The emergence of the Nyambua was unsurprising because Tiv norms had evolved specifically to prevent the emergence of a political hierarchy. Their suspicious attitudes toward anyone who sought power made it impossible for the Red Queen effect, and by extension a Shackled Leviathan, to emerge.

The Red Queen effect is messy and imperfect.

The Red Queen effect is rarely pretty. In fact, a society learning to live with a state, and the state learning to live with its shackles, can often be downright messy. This is particularly apparent in the United States, which has achieved a powerful Shackled Leviathan – but one with a dark side. The first system of laws in the US, the Articles of Confederation, leaned heavily in favor of individual states' rights. They allowed each state to print its own money and refuse to fund the national debt. Soon enough, it became clear that these policies were damaging to the coordination of the central state. The Founding Fathers created a solution: the new Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which centralized power while still taking care to protect individual liberties. All of the states eventually ratified these documents – but to get them to do so, some distasteful concessions had to be made. The key message here is: The Red Queen effect is messy and imperfect. To get the southern states on board with their state-building project, the Founding Fathers agreed to allow for the continued practice of slavery. Slavery deprived an entire segment of the population of their liberties. It also had reverberating consequences on the Red Queen effect, which often operates in favor of those with the loudest political voices and influence. This frequently excludes disadvantaged groups, including African-Americans and poor people. The result is a political system that doesn't always work for everyone. For instance, a lack of effective law enforcement in many poor, urban areas has led to high rates of violence. This takes a mental toll; a 2009 study of an inner-city neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia found that a shocking 46 percent of people suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The American Red Queen has had other effects too. The heavy shackles on the central state mean that the Leviathan isn't always able to provide effective solutions to problems like health care or infrastructure. This means it must rely on a system of public-private partnerships to provide certain services. Sometimes, the government can incentivize private companies to do certain jobs so it doesn't have to raise taxes to fund them. But even with incentives, private companies aren't often likely to provide universal coverage or provisions – which again leaves some parts of society out of the equation.

Under a Despotic Leviathan, there can be economic growth – but not liberty.

When Thomas Hobbes theorized about a state of Warre, he defined it as “every man, against every man” – that is, citizens fighting their fellow citizens. But history demonstrates that all-powerful Leviathans can also instigate versions of Warre –

governments can dominate and murder their own people. The Chinese people lived through this nightmarish situation in the middle of the twentieth century, under the reign of Chairman Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party. During this time, the Chinese state systematized violence in order to achieve the goals of the Communist Party. It was a textbook case of the Despotic Leviathan. The key message here is: Under a Despotic Leviathan, there can be economic growth – but not liberty. The Communist Party instituted a number of programs under its “Great Leap Forward,” Mao’s plan to modernize the Chinese economy. One of these was its “Reeducation Through Labor” system, which was designed to stamp out opposition to the Communist Party. It established reeducation camps, in which prisoners were subject to innumerable forms of torture – always with euphemistic names. According to Luo Hongshan, who was sentenced to three years of reeducation, the camp directors would force prisoners to ingest feces and call it “eating fried dough sticks.” The Reeducation Through Labor system still exists in China today. In fact, Luo Hongshan’s arrest wasn’t in Mao’s China, but in 2001. The program continues to grow. In 2012, about 160,000 people were detained in reeducation camps; by 2014, that number had increased to 709,000. It is legal to send a person to one of these camps for up to four years without any due process. It’s obvious that Despotic Leviathans aren’t conducive to liberty. But what about their economic prospects? Despotic Leviathans often have organizational structures, laws, public services, and education designed to foster economic activity. This can sometimes work successfully, leading to despotic growth – that is, economic growth under a Despotic Leviathan. But despotic growth has major limitations. In China’s case, the state is untrustworthy and can manipulate the economy at will. This means that people’s property rights are insecure, which makes it something of a gamble to invest or innovate. The rampant corruption in the Chinese government, a result of the Leviathan’s utter dominance, contributes to an unstable and opaque economic environment. Despotic growth simply can’t last.

Leviathans can’t work properly when the cage of norms is too restrictive.

Today, India is the largest democracy in the world by population. It also has a rich history of widespread participation in society. But despite these factors, India remains outside the narrow corridor. Why has liberty there been so impeded? The reason is its powerful cage of norms, which comes in the form of the caste system. Originating in ancient India, the caste system divides the country’s population into status groups that affect people’s chances of getting certain jobs, their marriage prospects, and their ability to move up in the social hierarchy. The case of India shows how the cage of norms can be a paralyzing force, preventing the Leviathan from working properly. The key message here is: Leviathans can’t work properly when the cage of norms is too restrictive. Unlike with the Tiv, the cage of norms didn’t prevent the emergence of political hierarchy in India. It does, however, stand as a major obstacle to economic prosperity. That’s primarily because the system locks people into certain professions based on their caste – meaning an enormous amount of talent simply goes to waste. Indian law does not force people into particular professions. But the cage of norms can be very persuasive. One study, conducted by British colonial administrator E.A.H. Blunt in 1931, showed that 75 percent of Indians born into the street-sweeper caste end up adopting that profession. The result is a system that misallocates jobs and impedes innovation, paired with a fragmented society that’s unable to collectively push for reforms. In India, the cage of norms impedes the Red Queen effect. But in another

country – Saudi Arabia – it’s used as a tool for despotism. The Saudi Arabian cage of norms is encoded into law through the Islamic faith. In Islam, there is no church hierarchy of popes and cardinals like in Catholicism. But it does have ulamas – scholars of Islamist theology who can issue fatwas, which are rulings on particular aspects of Islamic law and scripture. In Saudi Arabia, an advisory council called the Committee of the Grand Ulama is completely subservient to the Saudi state. Its fatwas are not issued independently, but at the behest of Saudi rulers who use them to legitimize whatever actions they decide to take. At the same time, the stifling cage of norms, built upon a strict interpretation of Islam, acts to keep Saudi Arabians in line.

Paper Leviathans combine weak states with weak societies.

Leticia is an Argentinian citizen hoping to register for a welfare program called Nuestras Familias, or Our Families. In fact, she’s tried to sign up at the appropriate office three times in the past two weeks. The first time she went, she was told to come back in three days. But when she did as instructed, the office turned out to be closed. She returned again the next day and was told there were no funds in the program. Leticia’s case is not at all atypical. Anyone who wants to gain access to Nuestras Familias must wait – and wait, and wait, and wait some more. The Argentinian state is weak, ineffectual, and completely lacking order. There are no routines people can rely on; officials rarely do their jobs. Argentine society, for its part, has little political input or influence. These characteristics make Argentina an example of what the authors call a Paper Leviathan. The key message here is: Paper Leviathans combine weak states with weak societies. Paper Leviathans have institutions and administrative structures that certainly seem legitimate and modern. But behind the facade, these institutions are incapable of regulating the economy or properly enforcing laws. Governments are dominated by elites who hand out positions to friends and family rather than qualified individuals. Meanwhile, society isn’t mobilized and has little power to enact checks on the state. Paper Leviathans are especially common throughout Latin America and Africa – a legacy of European colonization. As we saw with the Tiv, many colonial leaders chose to rule their colonies indirectly, using local elites to do their bidding. But they did so on the cheap, appointing very few administrators to run each colony without any input from society at large. Regular citizens had no way of controlling their new institutions, while the states themselves were left paper-thin. It’s no surprise, then, that Paper Leviathans have a difficult time maintaining public order. But if elites are ultimately in control, why don’t they simply turn into garden-variety Despotic Leviathans? A main reason is that despotic leadership sometimes initiates the mobilization effect, in which opposition parties or coalitions may arise, potentially establishing a new political hierarchy. But if the political elites don’t engage in overt despotism, they likely don’t have to worry about their power becoming endangered. The result is a disempowered society combined with a weak state. The Red Queen is nowhere in sight.

Numerous factors affect whether a state can move into the corridor.

Entering the narrow corridor is far from easy, no matter where a society stands in relation to it. But, historically, there are examples of Absent, Despotic, and Paper

Leviathans becoming democratic and liberal. Take South Africa, which entered the oppressive regime known as apartheid in the early twentieth century. Laws like the Native Land Act codified the oppression of the country's Black citizens, who suddenly found themselves forced off of the land they owned and tended throughout 87 percent of the country. During this period, South Africa was well outside the corridor. Yet by 1994, it had established a democracy and begun taking steps toward liberty. How did this happen? The key message here is: Numerous factors affect whether a state can move into the corridor. One of the major reasons for South Africa's move into the corridor was its ability to form coalitions that opposed the country's anti-Black elites. Apartheid laws created a huge class of displaced Black laborers, who were only legally allowed to take unskilled positions in agriculture and mining. The cheap labor benefited the elites in those industries. But the laws hurt industrialists, who could only hire better-paid white workers in skilled positions. The industrialists' lukewarm attitude toward apartheid made them a good target for leaders in the African National Congress, or ANC, and the Black middle class. Together, the three groups formed a strong coalition that helped empower Black South Africans and, eventually, dismantled the oppressive regime. In South Africa, the country's status as a Despot Leviathan meant that the path to the corridor involved a mobilization or strengthening of society. In an Absent Leviathan, the opposite must occur – the state must be strengthened so it can provide services. And in a Paper Leviathan, both must be strengthened simultaneously. Additionally, the shape of the corridor can change – become wider or narrower, easier or more difficult to enter – depending on a variety of factors. One of these, for instance, is labor coercion – where some subset of the population is enslaved or enserfed. Labor coercion depends on a hierarchy in society that empowers elites while disempowering the poor. This condition makes it that much harder to ever balance out the powers of the elite and non-elite. So far, we've talked a lot about how nations might enter the narrow corridor. How might they fall – or get pushed – out of it?

Polarization can disrupt the Red Queen effect and cause a loss of liberty.

In 1928, the National Socialist German Workers Party – the Nazis – was still a fringe movement. It had received just 2.6 percent of the vote in the election that year. But the following years saw the party creep into prominence, until it received 33 percent of the vote in 1932. How did this happen? Recall that the Red Queen effect is generally characterized by competition between state and society. But while each side continually attempts to gain the upper hand, neither ultimately aims to destroy the other. In Germany, however, this was precisely the case. The Red Queen was becoming a zero-sum contest, in which elites and the mobilized parts of society were pitted against each other, with no desire or ability to compromise. The key message here is: Polarization can disrupt the Red Queen effect and cause a loss of liberty. Germany's democracy, the Weimar Republic, was a political system defined by its active, mobilized population. Society was growing ever stronger – but elites weren't necessarily happy about it. In particular, elites felt their irrelevance increasing with the rise of left-wing, Marxist groups, who wanted a revolution much like the one that had recently occurred in Russia. Meanwhile, elites desired a return to the more authoritarian state of the nineteenth century – one where they still called the shots. Feeling threatened by the Marxists, elites threw their tacit support behind the Nazis. Even the police and judiciary began to favor them. From 1919 to 1922, right-wingers – mostly Nazis – committed 354 political murders, but only 24 were convicted for their crimes. Left-wingers, by contrast,

received 38 convictions – but actually only committed 22 murders. Polarization wasn't just increasing between elites and non-elites. Left-wing parties, too, were finding it increasingly difficult to see eye to eye. And even in small towns, citizens began separating themselves into highly insular political and religious communities. With no liberal-minded leaders to unite the warring factions, the Red Queen quickly became zero-sum, providing an opportunity for the Nazis to seize power. The Nazis rose up from the ranks of ordinary citizens to create a Despot Leviathan. But this is just one way for a society to be thrown out of the narrow corridor of liberty. Elites can seize power and turn the state despotic, or citizens may even give up their power willingly. No matter what, one thing is clear: democracy and liberty are never truly safe.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: For societies to achieve liberty, they must enter a narrow corridor – one in which state and society check and balance each other. Too much state power, and you end up with a Despot Leviathan that oppresses society; too little, and you have an Absent Leviathan with insufficient capacity to collect taxes, resolve conflicts, or provide services. The ideal state is the Shackled Leviathan, characterized by a mobilized society that restrains the power of government such that it can be trusted to do its job. Though some economic growth can happen under Despot Leviathans, liberty and sustained economic prosperity are only possible under Shackled Leviathans. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Narrow Corridor as the subject line and share your thoughts! What to read next: *Why Nations Fail*, by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson Our blinks to The Narrow Corridor examined states and societies throughout history to understand why liberty has been achieved in some places and not others. If you're up for another historical trawl, you'll enjoy our blinks to Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's previous work, *Why Nations Fail*. The blinks examine the reasons for the failure or success of nations. You'll learn how political and economic institutions can be inclusive or extractive, and how these two qualities enable a state to flourish – or cause it to crumble.