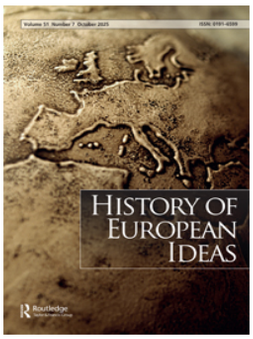

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Liberty, Slavery and Dependency: On Quentin Skinner's *Liberty as Independence*

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ABSTRACT

Quentin Skinner's 1998 book *Liberty before Liberalism* brought to light a pivotal tradition of thought that conceived liberty as independence from arbitrary power. A mystery remained: why did this way of thinking get displaced in the 18th and 19th centuries in favour of an alternative conception of liberty: liberty as the absence of restraint? In this much-awaited new book, *Liberty as Independence,* Skinner completes his monumental history of liberty as independence, charting its rise and eventual decline in the late 18th century. Skinner suggests that it was not that this conception of liberty was too conservative, too elitist in the newly emerging commercial age. Rather, liberty as independence was too radical. In advocating liberation from the arbitrariness of colonial and monarchical rule, and from the bonds of slavery and patriarchy, the ideal of liberty as independence was dangerously revolutionary. This article reflects on what liberty as independence illuminated but also on what it itself hid from view. It focuses on the historical and conceptual antithesis of liberty: slavery. Slavery was both a *focal point* and a *blind spot* for theorists of liberty and independence. Any retrieval of the tradition for contemporary purposes must remain aware of its historical blind spots.

KEYWORDS

Quentin Skinner; liberty; slavery; dependence; patriarchy; race

Quentin Skinner's 1998 book *Liberty before Liberalism* brought to light a pivotal tradition of thought, stretching from Ancient Rome to seventeenth century England, that conceived liberty as independence from arbitrary power. A mystery, however, remained: why did this way of thinking get displaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in favour of an alternative conception of liberty: liberty as the absence of restraint?

In this much-awaited new book, Skinner joins the dots, and completes his monumental history of liberty as independence, charting its rise and eventual decline in the late eighteenth century. Skinner suggests that it was not, as is often thought, that this conception of liberty was too conservative, too elitist in the newly emerging commercial age. Rather the opposite: liberty as independence was too radical. In advocating liberation from the arbitrariness of colonial and monarchical rule, as well as from the bonds of slavery and patriarchy, the ideal of liberty as independence was, it turns out, dangerously

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revolutionary. The alternative view of liberty as absence of restraint fuelled less inflammatory, more modest aspirations. Now freedom could be found in the silence of the law, compatibly with monarchical rule, and without any need to upend the social order.

The political sub-text of Skinner's characteristically learned and elegant opus is clear. The setting aside of liberty as independence is to be regretted, he suggests, because it foreclosed crucial egalitarian reforms of state and society at a time when these were, possibly, attainable – they were at least entertained by enlightened thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Richard Price, and Thomas Paine. Skinner uses history to ruminate about our present – not anachronistically, applying antiquated ideas to our completely different circumstances, but conjecturally: examining the paths historically not taken, the forms of political imagination they had made possible, and those they had hindered. In this brief comment, after highlighting the manifold innovations of this impressive book, I shall reflect on what the ideal of liberty as independence illuminated, but also on what it itself hid from view. I will focus in particular on its historical and conceptual antonym – slavery. Skinner dedicates inspired pages to suggest that slavery was both a *focal point* and a *blind spot* for theorists of liberty as independence – and I want to elaborate on these insights.

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In addition to narrating a compelling story about the decline of the ideal of liberty as independence in the late eighteenth century, Skinner considerably refines and enriches our understanding of the tradition as a whole. Let me simply single out his most innovative contributions – those likely to set the agenda for the future intellectual history of liberty. First is Skinner's identification of the origin of the theory in the writings of the jurists, historians and moral philosophers of Ancient Rome – in particular *the Digest,* later incorporated into *De Legibus.* This corpus was not principally republican – and Skinner has in the past called the tradition the 'neo-Roman' view of liberty on this ground. Second, Skinner gives central place to the ideal of liberty as independence in the defence of the 1688 revolution and the following Whig settlement, as well as subsequent political contestation. The ideal, he shows, was flexible – it could be conjoined with appeal to either historical or natural rights; and it could be spoken, alternatively, in monarchist or in more radical republican idiom. To Whig ideologists, the ideal had made England the freest country in the world – with its unique combination of the rule of law, moderate government and the spirit of liberty. Thirdly, however, the ideal of liberty as independence could also be deployed as a language of *critique* of eighteenth-century state and society. Here Skinner draws on hitherto unexplored sources – from pamphlets to satirical novels – to examine the gap between the self-congratulatory Whig discourse on British liberties and the widespread persistence of dependence in eighteenth-century England – as evidenced by the inferior status of slaves, women and servants. Fourth, Skinner sheds new, unexpected light onto well-known figures of the canon of political theory. Locke is firmly anchored to the tradition of liberty as independence, and is held as the main intellectual influence behind the US revolution. Liberty as absence of restraint is shown not to be an invention of Bentham, but rather to be traceable to the continuing influence of Hobbes on a range of writers, from the absolutist Pufendorf to the self-styled 'liberals' of the late 1790s.

What, then, was at stake in the contest between the two alternate views of liberty? On the Hobbesian, and later utilitarian and liberal view, to be free is not to be independent of

subjection, which is an impossibility. To be free is simply to be unimpeded and unrestrained. In order to achieve security and happiness, we must alienate our rights to the state. Our freedom then resides in the silence of the law. It follows that, as Hobbes had controversially proclaimed, 'whether a commonweal be monarchical or popular, the freedom is still the same'.

The Hobbesian view of liberty had always been a minority view, but it proved surprisingly serviceable in fending off the revolutionary and democratic potential of liberty as independence. The American colonists enthusiastically embraced liberty as independence in their rebellion against the unrepresentative British state. Paine and Price published inflammatory tracts denouncing subjection to Britain as a form of slavery – which provoked an outraged counter-revolutionary response in Britain. A focal point of that response, Skinner argues, was the articulation of a different view of liberty. This alternative conception – liberty as absence of restraint – also appealed to critics of the French revolution who sought a middle course between the conservatism of Burke and the radicalism of Paine. In William Paley's resounding summary, civil liberty must simply be the condition of 'not being restrained by any law'. Liberty as independence is 'unattainable in experience', and would serve only to 'inflame expectations that can never be gratified'.[1]

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One entry point into evaluating the radical potential of the ideal of liberty as independence is to reflect on the antonym of liberty: slavery. The Roman writers contrasted the *liber homo* and the slave. Slaves were unfree because they were not *sui iuris*, that is, within their own power; they found themselves subjected to the power, and dependent on the will, of their master. By analogy, the Neo-Roman writers insisted, subjection to arbitrary monarchical rule is a form of slavery. And other social bonds of dependency – those suffered by women and servants, for example – could also be criticised at the bar of liberty as independence.

On one level, the metaphor of slavery – once interpreted in this expansive way – served seventeenth- and eighteenth-century radical ambitions well. It conveyed the vivid idea that liberty is not only about actions or coercion, but rather about power and status. Slavery was a form of stark inequality – because of their subjection, slaves did not enjoy the same equal status as free persons. Slavery was found to be flatly incompatible with fundamental or natural rights, and its denunciation could be couched in Christian or in secular language. Liberty as anti-slavery offered a powerful language of rebellion against arbitrary rule – whether that of the English monarchy or the French monarchy. And it opened the tantalising prospect (in Skinner's words) of 'outlaw[ing] slaveholding in Britain, guarantee[ing] equality for women under the law, and … provid[ing] some security of employment for all' (p. 139). The ideal was radical, in sum, because it was extensible: it could be deployed to challenge patriarchy (women writers such as Judith Drake, Mary Astell, and Sarah Chapone – denounced the submission of wives to husbands – as well as so-called 'wage slavery').

And yet – on another level – slavery played a deeply ambivalent role in the tradition of liberty as independence. This is because slavery was not only the conceptual antonym of liberty; it was also its *historical condition*. This ideal of liberty emerged in ancient slaveholding societies. The *liber homo* could enjoy full freedom as independence because he did not have to work – he could rely on the unpaid labour of slaves (and women). And while republicanism shaped the US revolution, it did not challenge racial slavery.

It was an irony not lost on critics that colonists, such as Washington, were slave-owners themselves, and 'have no objection against slavery provided they shall be free themselves and have the power of enslaving others'.[2] Hence the paradox, formulated by Rousseau with characteristic provocativeness, that liberty might perhaps 'be maintained only with the support of servitude'.[3] On this view, liberty as independence is an essentially elitist, exclusive ideal: it can be had by some only if it is denied to others.

In what follows, I would like to dispel the crude version of this line of argument, and then draw attention to what the metaphor of slavery did, in fact, hinder and hide from view. In response to the crude argument, we can make a couple of observations. First, slavery was a widespread institution in ancient societies, and it would be anachronistic to expect emerging ideas of liberty to challenge it. Second, there is no later evidence of necessary historical connection: not all republican societies were slave societies (think of Renaissance Florence) and not all slave societies were republican (think of colonial Brazil).[4] And third, from the eighteenth century, advocates of liberty as independence were neither more, *nor less,* inclined to join in with the abolitionist cause than other theorists. As Skinner suggests, those liberal theorists who denounced liberty as independence often had themselves nothing to say about the actual enslavement of millions of people in the Euro-Atlantic in the eighteenth century. One's particular theoretical stance about liberty, then, did not align neatly with any view about slavery. And as we saw, the most perspicacious advocates of liberty as independence did perceive the radical potential of the ideal, once universalised and extended to all those who lived in situations of dependency and subjection.

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All that said, it is true that the slavery analogy led to a number of unfortunate blind spots in the tradition of liberty as independence. Let me highlight three of them.

First, to think of dependency as the chief evil of slavery drastically underestimated the horrors of enslavement. As Skinner shows, critics of Price were quick to ridicule those who claimed that being subjected to the English monarchy was like being a slave. One difference was that enslaved people were the personal property – or 'chattel' – of their owners, with no recognition of their rights as human beings. Their state of dependence was not the worst of their fate: they were de-humanised, stripped of their rights, family, identity and autonomy, treated as things to be bought and sold and killed at will. Neo-Roman musings about the dependence of slaves subjected even to the proverbially 'benevolent' masters seemed oddly disconnected from the brutal reality of racial chattel slavery, and might well have contributed to erase the latter from view.

Second, dependency on the neo-Roman view entailed a set of psychological habits and dispositions associated with servility. Skinner notes that slaves adapted to their subjection by developing habits of deference, sycophancy, and timidity. This is an important insight in the tradition, which explains why mere awareness of one's subjection – regardless of how the master acts – limits one's freedom. Yet Skinner does not dwell on the connected idea, equally central to the tradition, according to which servile people may be dispositionally *unsuited* for freedom. Here, I think, lies the potential elitism of freedom as independence – in the thought that freedom is a habit to be cultivated, and a status to be earned. This made it difficult to challenge the widespread view, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that Black people (and women) were not yet ready for freedom, because of the deleterious effect of their long-term servitude on their

dispositions and character. It also ignored the spirit of defiant independence and rebelliousness that manifested itself during the regular slave revolts.[5]

Third, to think of political freedom as the status of being free from a master fed an obsession with personal dependency. This generated three further blind spots in the theory. First, it encouraged the thought that all bonds of personal dependency threaten freedom. However, the proudly independent male citizen was also dependent on the care of others – notably the women who raised, fed and sustained him. Clearly, social life requires interdependence, and not every dependence is dominating; the tradition should have denounced asymmetric and arbitrary power relations, rather than personal dependence *per se*. Second, Skinner carefully distinguishes between differing notions of slavery (dependence/dominium) and argues that 'proper' slavery must refer to relationships of property (dominium *stricto sensu)*. Notions of dependence seem more apt to capture the predicaments of women and servants. The question that arises here is whether, in admitting degrees of dependence, we have not lost the neatly binary notion favoured by the Romans, which allowed them to say that one is either free or unfree, *simpliciter*.[6]

Third, in their focus on *personal* rule, neo-Roman writers underestimated the danger of *collective* rule for freedom. Relying again on the slavery analogy, they insisted that to be free is not to be subjected to the will of one master. Yet they neglected to explain how citizens could avoid subjecting themselves to the no less arbitrary will of a democratic majority. Skinner notes the problem, but only in passing. Yet it was a central problem in republican, democratic thought – one confronted squarely, if somewhat unsatisfactorily, by Rousseau, in his distinction between the will of the people and the general will.

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To conclude, it seems to me that to conceive of freedom as the antonym of slavery was in turn illuminating and misleading. Quentin Skinner splendidly demonstrates that, in renouncing liberty as independence, we lost a powerfully radical way of thinking about freedom. Yet any retrieval of the tradition for contemporary purposes must remain keenly aware of its historical blind spots.

Notes

1. William Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 1785, cited in Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 77–9.
2. Josiah Tucker, cited in Skinner, *Liberty as Independence*, 221.
3. Cited in Lovett, "The Labour Republicans and the Classical Republican Tradition," 246.
4. Ibid., 247.
5. See, e.g. Watkins, "Slavery and Freedom in Theory and Practice".
6. For an attempt to distinguish between slavery-like 'full' domination and the 'contingent' domination suffered by Blacks and women today, see Laborde, "Being Free, Feeling Free".

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Disclosure statement

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