



Book Review: *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism*  
edited by Hannah Dawson  
and Annelien de Dijn,  
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**BOOK REVIEW****EVGENY ROSHCIN** **HUP** HELSINKI  
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PRESS**ABSTRACT**

After *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Hamilton-Bleakley, Brett & Tully 2007), another of Quentin Skinner's influential books *Liberty before Liberalism* (Skinner 1998) received its own 'rethinking' in the volume *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism*. This is an excellent way to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the original work that was first delivered as Skinner's Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge at the end of 1997. As someone who has had *Liberty before Liberalism* on my syllabus for a few years now, I cannot but welcome a new publication aimed at rethinking Skinner's book. After all, political science students I taught could not contain the temptation to ask what happened next, if anything, in the great story of freedom and what we ought to do with the discovery. For many of them living in a Russian authoritarian context the only feasible political alternative was classical liberalism, if not libertarianism. Learning about the idea of freedom as the absence of dependency was thus an eye-opening experience. The new volume has a lot to offer to those who developed a thirst for an intellectual sequel after reading the original work.

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The volume is organised into three parts ‘Authors,’ ‘Hierarchies’ and ‘Traditions.’ It brings together an excellent network of authors who have a record of exploring republican themes in subfields of history and political theory. As is often the case with such teams, every chapter in the resulting volume is a separate story with its own heroes and its own climax. Yet, this new volume is glued together by a certain interconnectedness of themes that Hannah Dawson and Annelien de Dijn see under the rubrics listed above. Given the number of stories told, a reader might be left pondering about the extent to which the volume is about ‘rethinking’ the central premises of the neo-Roman theory of liberty that Skinner recovered in his book. In this sense, the volume might also be read as probing a neo-Roman concept of liberty in chronologically adjacent debates and episodes, or as searching for the traces of neo-Romanism in alternative domains. The volume is also special since it includes, as its final chapter, Skinner’s own reflection on the debates that ensued following the publication of *Liberty before Liberalism*.

Although the volume was not aimed at mapping all scholarly subfields where the impact of *Liberty before Liberalism* has been felt in recent years, it still shows comprehensively the key topics in social theory and history that could now be reappraised with the help of the neo-Roman theory of freedom. It is one of the reasons why this book should be of interest both to newcomers to the debate and to those who are well versed in the topic. Skinner’s *Liberty before Liberalism* tells the story of neo-Roman liberty emerging in the context of the English civil war. *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* attempts to identify the elements of neo-Roman thinking in the philosophies of canonical figures in the history of political thought, like Montaigne, Grotius and Locke, and in less well-known authors, such as brothers De la Court. In this sense, the volume asks how unique the movement of English neo-Roman authors was and whether we can meaningfully talk about neo-Roman liberty if certain key elements of the concept are missing.

Thus, one of persistent themes in the debates on neo-Roman liberty is whether an individual can be, or feel free, to master their own will irrespective of their social or legal settings. Felicity Green in her chapter on Montaigne refocuses discussion on a person’s ability to govern their own will. With the help of Montaigne Green wishes to emphasise that it is important to be able to set one’s own aims, which is even more important than to be able to achieve them. If such a self-governing individual in Montaigne’s philosophy could be portrayed in neo-Roman terms, the reader may be left worrying that this idea of freedom implies the possibility of being free even under a tyranny as long as you are able to preserve your own moral core. Martin van Gelderen in his chapter on Hugo Grotius also raises the question of what it means to be a self-governing individual. The chapter invites a reader to look for an answer in theological debates on the freedom of the will and human autonomy, to which Grotius was an important contributor. As such, these investigations show the extra layers one can identify in classical thinkers by utilising the neo-Roman insistence on the lack of dependence, but they also prompt the question of whether it is possible to even conceive of liberty without connecting one’s legal status to the idea of a free state in which the laws that oblige you must necessarily reflect your will. In this sense the chapter by Matthijs Lok fits the volume ideally as it brilliantly shows how counter-revolutionary thinkers of the late 18th – early 19th centuries defended ‘a true freedom.’ In their account, property and personal freedom could only be defended by monarchical rule, while revolutionary assemblies bring about tyranny. There seems to

be a limit beyond which even the conservative thinkers could not stretch the concept of freedom so as not to open it to democratic interpretations.

Dawson's chapter on John Locke reevaluates another great figure in the classical canon by showing how much of neo-Roman thinking and vocabulary one can find in his work. Dawson highlights Locke's arguments against arbitrary power and even ventures to re-examine Locke's defense of prerogative power in terms of its morality and capacity to protect public good when law fails to do so. The reassessment of Locke in neo-Roman terms is a fundamental move for the history of a republican moment, although one that might need further explication since a judgement about the morality of prerogative power cannot in itself be immune from arbitrariness and thus constitute a break with the neo-Roman tradition. Similarly, it is difficult to underestimate de Dijn's attempt to place what she calls a 'democratic republicanism' within a neo-Roman tradition of thinking of liberty. After all, Rousseau's is the name that is commonly associated with a republican tradition, especially in the Francophone world. In her chapter de Dijn tries to reconcile the De la Courts, Spinoza and Rousseau's commitment to 'majoritarianism' with a republican tradition as their philosophies rejected the idea of 'mixed constitution' upheld by Harrington and others. Popular assemblies, it is argued, are sufficiently 'reasonable' to govern in the name of the public good. Thus, there is no need in do you mean need of enlightened Harringtonian elites, whose rule might be arbitrary in the sense of not reflecting the will of the whole community. Yet, this is where the distinction between 'republicanism' and 'neo-Romanism' might be helpful. In rejecting the mixed constitution in favour of the popular assemblies as a way of diminishing the arbitrary will of the elite democratic republicans create the room for the arbitrary will of the popular government vis-à-vis an individual who is left without means to keep its power in check.

From the perspective of the limits of a republican/neo-Roman moment, the new volume offers an interesting critique of the scope of neo-Roman arguments in their own time. For instance, a chapter by Rachel Foxley demonstrates that even one of the staunchest defenders of neo-Roman liberty John Milton himself admitted the existence of natural hierarchies. Those who suffer the imperfection of reason (e.g. women and 'bad men') would in this reading be rightfully subjected to good reason, which, in other words, means to say that liberty is ultimately not for all. In this respect, René Koekkoek's chapter fills another screaming gap. The juridical tradition underlying the neo-Roman concept of liberty is famously based on the distinction of a free person and a slave, the former being *sui iuris*, the latter being *in potestate*. Koekkoek offers a fascinating snapshot of the 18th-century republican debates about chattel slavery in the French, Dutch and American revolutionary contexts. This is where we paradoxically find arguments for and against slavery among those who defended freedom.

*Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* does an important job in bringing neo-Roman thinking into the fields where it was long anticipated. Philip Pettit suggested some time ago that despite classical utilitarian formulations of freedom as non-interference eventually became dominant, the language of republican freedom was soon picked up, although not consciously, by the early feminist and socialist thinkers (Pettit 2010, 46–8). This new volume demonstrates how neo-Roman thinking could be utilised in feminist and Marxist research. Sandrine Bergès shows how 18th-century feminist thinkers (Roland and de Gouges) took up neo-Roman liberty to re-define relations within the family and undermine the structure of domestic domination. However, one might worry whether the ideas these thinkers engaged with were indeed

neo-Roman as their key intellectual interlocutor was none other than Rousseau. Nonetheless, Bergès' chapter, as well as chapters by Leipold, Nelson and Halldenius, show how the neo-Roman theory of liberty informed theorising in contemporary big traditions of Marxist thought, feminism, moral political philosophy and human rights. Bruno Leipold convincingly shows that Marx effectively used republican language in exposing the relations of domination when analysing wage-slavery. Leipold's incisive analysis of the domination category in Marx and Engels shows how wage-labourers take in effect the structural role occupied by slaves in the Roman thinking of liberty, how they suffer at the workplace from the arbitrary rule of a capitalist, and, more importantly, how they get exposed to the structural domination by the class of masters thinking they might enjoy liberty by going from one master to another. Even if socialist and republican thinkers might draw different conclusions from the fact of structural capitalist domination, the analysis of wage-labour and domination seems vividly republican as Skinner himself concedes.

Finally, Eric Nelson and Lena Halldenius take neo-Roman theory to build bridges to the dominant conversations in moral political philosophy and the philosophy of human rights. Nelson's chapter, *inter alia*, highlights an important development that emerged from the discussion of method in historical inquiry such as the one undertaken by Skinner. Namely, Nelson constructs what one might call an alternative genealogy of neo-Roman liberty. He identifies the elements of neo-Roman liberty in John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and traces it back to Kant and his embrace of Pelagian controversy, thus omitting the prominent episode in the context of the English civil war. A Pelagian question of how one can be responsible to God thus leads to an understanding of a free person as a 'self-originating source of claims' in contemporary moral philosophy. Halldenius' translation of neo-Roman theory into the philosophy of human rights also involves Rawls and brings the ideas of polity and social context back in. Halldenius' republican interpretation focuses on how human rights law works. Thus, her combined neo-Roman-Rawlsian answer as to how we make human rights work and rectify the negative effects of arbitrary power stemming from social or economic inequalities would be in constructing a just institutional design rather than in the supply of specific goods.

An advantage of this volume is that the proposed 'rethinking' is done in a sense together with Quentin Skinner, who responds to individual contributions in the concluding part of the book. Thus, a reader gets access to an immediate interpretation of how all of the above relates to the neo-Roman theory of liberty Skinner attempted to excavate in the original work. Although Skinner's reply deserves an unmediated reading, one further clarification in the standing of the overall project would be helpful here. In his reply Skinner specifies a juridical nature of the neo-Roman concept of liberty. Being a free person (*sui iuris*) in a free state is a sufficient definition in itself. As such, it is not predicated on or requires the idea of virtue. This is an important difference with the understandings of liberty formulated by Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor and J.G.A. Pocock, who all thought of liberty in terms of civic fulfilment. Skinner emphasises that participation has an instrumental meaning to Renaissance and early modern authors in the sense that a free person must ensure that his will is reflected in the laws that oblige individuals to act in a certain way. Failure to ensure this would amount to living according to the will of someone else. And, when a free person does participate in politics, by way of occupying a public office, he or she or they would most likely need a number of civic virtues to perform this function so as to do it in the interest of public good (Skinner, 251–2). This is what makes *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism*

a valuable addition to the original work on a bookshelf: it helps to identify the neo-Roman way of thinking about liberty vis-à-vis the main alternatives, say Lockean, Rousseauian or Arendtian; it also shows whether and which certain conceptual tensions might transpire from the ‘application’ of this thinking to the well- and less-known authors outside of the original context, say Montaigne, Grotius or Marx.

*Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* is different from the original *Liberty before Liberalism* in yet another critical dimension. In *Liberty before Liberalism* Skinner famously left his readers to ‘ruminate’ what had been excavated and, in this way, invited them to ‘learn to do their [our] own thinking,’ simply because the past authors could not have thought of supplying answers to the problems we face today. In the last four pages of this new volume Skinner turns into a genealogist, although insisting on his identity as a historian, when he ventures to formulate political implications that the concept of neo-Roman liberty might have for political problems we face today. This final step, alongside with other contributions to the volume, does an important work of ‘rethinking’ the original project as a critical genealogy of the present.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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