Book Reviews


In *Gender, Class, and Freedom in Modern Political Theory*, Nancy Hirschmann discusses the work of five paradigmatic freedom theorists from the point of view of contemporary philosophical and political concerns. The book has several general themes. First, Hirschmann discusses Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty—the staple of undergraduate teaching on the concept of liberty. According to this distinction, conceptions of freedom are either negative or positive, depending on the sorts of obstacles that are recognized as limiting freedom, the sorts of state policies that are deemed freedom-promoting, and the ideal of the free individual that is appealed to. As such, Hirschmann notes that both positive and negative liberty are usually allied with certain theorists. Of those she discusses, Hobbes, Locke and Mill are usually taken to be paradigmatic negative liberty theorists, whereas Rousseau and Kant are usually seen as defenders of positive liberty. However, one of Hirschmann's main themes is that even these theorists of the modern canon employ more complex theories of freedom than the usual analysis implies. Each philosopher combines aspects of negative and positive liberty in his account, sometimes in surprising ways.

The second theme of Hirschmann's book concerns the concept of social construction. It is usually thought that theorists of negative liberty reject or ignore the ways in which individuals and their desires are socially constructed. According to the doctrine of negative liberty, an individual is free simply if she is not subject to deliberate coercion from another human being. How the individual comes to have certain desires or ends, the ways in which she formulates her goals, and whether those goals are dependent on a particular social context or structure, is irrelevant to her freedom. Hirschmann argues that an account of freedom thus construed is impoverished since it ignores the way in which individuals and their desires are socially constructed. She identifies three layers of social construction (ideology, materialization and discourse), and argues that each has implications for freedom. And yet one of the main arguments of *Gender, Class, and Freedom* is that even those canonical theorists traditionally associated with negative liberty do in fact pay attention to social construction. Often this attention occurs in their work on education, on which each of the theorists has definite views. It is important for each philosopher that individuals receive a certain sort of education because only then will each individual be equipped for the sort of freedom which is appropriate for them. Sometimes, as happens with Mill, social construction is dealt with explicitly. But even where it is implicit, each theorist makes use of some version of the concept, according to Hirschmann: even those theorists that use ideas of the state of
nature (e.g. Locke and Hobbes) actually employ an account of human behaviour as socially constructed.

Hirschmann argues that canonical freedom theorists do not divide neatly into advocates of negative and positive liberty, and that even those theorists traditionally associated with negative liberty in fact use the concept of social construction more usually associated with positive liberty. Nonetheless, she asserts that Berlin’s negative v. positive liberty distinction remains useful (therefore justifying her extended discussion of it).

A final underlying theme is that gender and class help us to understand these theorists’ work. Sometimes this is because their discussions of gender illustrate their position on social construction and on freedom. Sometimes it is because we cannot adequately understand their accounts of freedom without paying attention to the implicit or explicit assumptions of class and gender that the philosophers employ.

The book is structured almost as a sandwich of conceptual philosophy and history of political thought. The opening and concluding chapters set out the theoretical framework for the book as a whole. The opening chapter largely repeats the position that Hirschmann develops in her earlier book *The Subject of Liberty*. Indeed, she writes that the present book emerged when two of the chapters from *The Subject of Liberty* had to be excised: Gender, Class, and Freedom contains those two chapters plus additional ones. The majority of Gender, Class, and Freedom, then, consists in five chapters, each dealing with one modern political theorist: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Mill. The structure of each chapter is broadly the same. The bulk of the chapter is exposition, often very broad-ranging throughout a variety of the theorist’s works. Some of this will thus be very familiar to the average student of the history of political thought, but parts of the discussion will be unfamiliar to those with less than specialist knowledge of the relevant author. In particular, Hirschmann draws out what each philosopher has to say about issues of gender, class and social construction, which often involves delving into their works on education, and the family. During the exposition Hirschmann refers to the secondary literature and points out any areas where she disagrees with it. This critical aspect of the book is most pronounced in the later sections of each chapter, where she explicitly addresses the general themes of the book as a whole (social construction, the negative/positive liberty distinction, gender, class). Some of Hirschmann’s arguments are fairly familiar, others are novel. For example, her interpretation of Hobbes’ social contract as it applies to women engages with and differs from Carole Pateman’s landmark analysis in *The Sexual Contract*.

There is a great deal of material in this book, and only a few people will be familiar with all that it contains. As such it is very rich. However, this breadth of coverage is one of its problems: it is not always clear how the general themes of the book are supposed to interact, or which of Hirschmann’s claims are supposed to be central and which supporting. The argument that Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty masks complexity and nuance is familiar: as previously mentioned, his work is standard issue for many undergraduate courses and there is a great deal of literature of varying sophistication pointing out the ways in which Berlin obfuscates and confuse the issue. Moreover, it is not clear why, having claimed that Berlin’s distinction is imprecise, Hirschmann nevertheless insists that the distinction is needed. Why it is better to interpret theorists of freedom using this distinction? Does doing so teach us about the distinction or about the theories under consideration?