Misunderstandings in Politics, Economics, and Language

Misunderstandings in Politics, Economics, and Language

By

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For Norb

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Power Songs

At the meeting they all sang their songs
For whatever power they had
Everyone sang.

power songs
when the people had nothing
when all had been taken away
when the world had vanished
when there were no more names
and no places

the people sang

when there was no more food
when the bellies of the young were like rawhide knots
when the hands of the men fell away from their bodies
like dried leaves
when breath walked out of the lips of the old
and the women's wombs became empty

the people sang

when there was no more wind and no grass
when all the hills had left
when there were no more rivers and no earth and no oceans

the people sang

when there were no eyes anymore
because all was darkness
when the fires went out
and there were no hands
when ears fell silent

they sang

when there was nothing to touch
when all was ash
when the skin fell away

and the spirits fled like smoke

when there was no more sky

when the mouth of death opened
and death yawned
and death was a hot blizzard

when death made no sound

the people sang

they sang the songs
for whatever power they had
everyone sang

they asked that song for help

it is a strong song
a power song
when there is nothing

an old song
older than the world

there is a way to sing it

<div align="center">Norbert Ruebsaat</div>

PREFACE

This is a small book that treats some very large issues. It doesn't need to be any longer. Once the main points are raised, some will agree and perhaps find good reasons for doing so. Others will disagree and dismiss the argument out of hand because it goes against basic assumptions they hold about the world and the way it works. It is really for people like this that I wrote the book. It is fair to say that writing for people who will probably dismiss what you have to say out of hand is a forlorn hope, if it is a hope at all. Perhaps. But we are all in this together, and it is never a good idea to ignore people who think or feel differently.

The main argument is simple. It is that the objectives of politics and economics are different, and that often, they are in conflict. The objective of politics, at least in an old-fashioned understanding of politics, is the well-being of the members of the state, or jurisdiction or community to which people belong. The objective of business is to maximize profits. If increasing profits means polluting air and water, deteriorating the environment, worsening conditions of work and life, "outsourcing" production and jobs away from one place to another, then businesses will do all these things, if that's what profitability requires.

If the purpose of government is the well-being of the community, governments will not look kindly upon activities of this sort. That is why business interests and corporations need, and generally have worked effectively, to offset the community-oriented responsibility of government. They do so in two main ways.

One is to put government, as far as possible, under the control of corporate interests. The most obvious way of doing this is seeing to it that business people, or people whose loyalties are to the corporate world, get positions in government. Taken far enough, this amounts to a hostile takeover of government by business. But just because that's what it amounts to, business folk can't be too obvious about it. In fact, they must, and do, go to great lengths to get us to think otherwise. This distracting the public from what is really going on is the other thing that corporations must do to assure their wealth and power.

If anyone told us that they were out to increase their control of the places we live, in the process probably making us poorer, depriving us of hitherto available means of making our wishes known and running down the places we live and work, we would not take kindly to that. And yet big corporations will likely do all of these things if they are believed to grow their bottom lines. Obviously, they can't say this. But they will do it, because their prime loyalty is to profitability. The prime loyalties of most people is to their country, their community and their fellow citizens. Because it would not be popular to turn a (still) democratic country into an autocracy; because it would not be popular to run down the economy of a home country to the benefit of other countries; because it would not be popular to deteriorate the environment and the climate to the point that large parts of the planet become uninhabitable, those who profit from doing these things find many and ingenious ways of saying it ain't so.

Direction of opinion is important in any society, but especially in democracies, where political opinion decides who rules. How we see things is important. It is important, for example, to know the difference between reality and fantasy, and to distinguish between them. Though this sounds simple, it is often hard to do. Opinion is influenced by a great variety of forces and interests that pull in different directions. There are fairy tales, metaphors derived from cowboy movies and organized sports, commercials, branded cable TV, there are clubs from the Rotary to the KKK, religious organizations ranging from fundamentalist to humanist, there are schools and colleges, think tanks and universities, and there are political parties with their own means of measuring and trying to influence opinion. How close your opinions are to reality usually depends on evidence. Deployment and obfuscation of evidence are central to how arguments are made, and sometimes, how convincing they are. This being the case, it seemed worthwhile to spend some time in looking at language and how it is used.

I am indebted to a number of people for having helped in the preparation and working out of this project. Jonathan Vogt and Kevin Lyman read and commented on the entire manuscript, offering encouragement, not without criticism. Lenny Stendig, who is one of the people you would least want to rebound against, is also one of the most gentlemanlike people on the planet off the court. Despite fundamental differences in the way we see economics and many social issues, he carefully read and made thoughtful criticisms of what I had written. I think it is fair to say that for the most part he was unconvinced, though we were, and remain, in full agreement on the importance of democracy and constitutionalism. I heard the tale of the

NOTE ON USAGE

The abbreviation UP has been used for University Press.

References to works that exist in many editions have are given by chapter and other subdivisions of the work where this is feasible.

INTRODUCTION

The Cassandra Problem

There are things that exist in their own right. Mostly physical things or conditions, like mountains and rivers and timber lines and highways and buildings and body weight and blood pressure and temperature. Maybe these things have not always been there, or not in the shape they have now, and maybe they will change in the future, or even disappear altogether. But for now, we can see or feel or measure all these things. We can be pretty sure that they are there, and we can track how they change. And then there is a whole world of other things, or ways of seeing things, that depend on how we think of them.

There is, for example, no way to convince a person that a painting that they think is beautiful is not. Whether we admire certain people, or accept certain ways of seeing society, some other people will disagree. There is usually something to be said for both sides in discussions of values, and whichever side we favor, we probably do so on the basis of other values that are not necessarily held by everyone. And then there is that whole area of life that is a matter of opinion, and opinion is a tricky thing. Often opinion is influenced by what we call realities. Sometimes there is no connection. There is an old story about a pretty young priestess named Cassandra, who was admired by Apollo, the Olympian whose cult she served. She did not return his affection, so in anger he arranged that her prophecies, while true, would not be believed.

Cassandra saw correctly that the Greeks were up to no good with their big wooden horse, and said so. The Trojans, because of Apollo's curse, did not believe her. Rather than burn the horse outside the city as Cassandra advised, the Trojans brought it into the city, and the rest, as they say, is a moral tale. Actually, it's a tale with a double moral. One part concerns the way opinion can be misled, even when the truth is available and clearly presented. Given the status of the misleader in this story, we can understand that the most Trojans were led astray. The other moral is that Apollo, powerful as he was, could not change the truth, or keep the truth from a specialist truth-seeker like Cassandra. So Apollo had to see to it

that the truth be disregarded. To skip a few millennia, Fox Mulder, a very non-postmodern character, was fond of saying that the truth is out there. Maybe there is a third moral here, namely, that the problem is not just finding and recognizing the truth, but also preventing it being hidden or disregarded.

CHAPTER ONE

POLITICS

There has probably never been a human association of any size that did not have its politics. Families, tribes, regions, city-states, countries and empires all have their politics. We don't know much about the politics of very early pre-agricultural and tribal societies, and in the West we don't know nearly as much as we would like about the politics of early Greece and Rome. The Greeks provide examples of the main political models we know today. Homeric society was aristocratic, though it included kings of a sort; fifth and fourth century Athens had the earliest example of democracy we know of; and Alexander was a pioneer of empire building in the West.[1] Little is known of early Roman history, but the movement there seems to have been from monarchy to republic to empire. While the Roman empire lasted roughly 400 years (and we can roughly double that for the independent Roman state), it was overcome by forces from without and replaced in the West by localized rule that developed into what we know as feudalism, which was more aristocratic than anything else. In the early modern period, feudalism gave way to monarchy, and from the late eighteenth century, democracies began unevenly to emerge and to share the stage with monarchies and aristocracies. The twentieth century saw intense struggles between new and formidable totalitarian regimes and democracies, between imperial states and their colonies, and more or less obviously, between nation-states and multi-national corporations that look to put their interests above those of the regionally or nationally based

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[1] Aristotle provided a simple and elegant classification of governments that is still useful. One axis of his definition is based on the location of power, whether in one person, a few or the many. The other axis of the definition concerns the way power is exercised, whether for the general good, or for the benefit of the power holder, or holders. Rule by an individual is either monarchy or tyranny, rule by a few either aristocracy (rule by the best) or oligarchy (rule by and for the few) and rule by the many is either democracy (rule by the demos, or citizen body) or ochlocracy (rule by the mob). Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279 a-b. Like most political theorists, Aristotle did not much care for the mob.

countries whose interests are focused on the populations and resources they contain. We have not seen the last of this.

Objectives of Politics: Security

While there are a few basic political forms, each with enormous variation, it is probably fair to say that the main impetus to political association was, and is, security. We can also say that after security the main purpose of political association is the well-being of the society included in this association. Whatever the kind of formal organization a society or state may have, it must be able to defend itself from two main threats, or it will not survive. The first of these is internal disorder and conflict, which range from garden-variety crime to civil war. Crime is defined in terms of a law code, enforced by police and adjudicated by courts. As long as the law code of a society is seen as fair and equitable, the police constrained in their actions by the law, and the judiciary independent, the conditions for the rule of law are met, and the rule of law, as opposed to the caprice of rulers or their agents, is the basis of a well-functioning society. You will not achieve the general good without it. The further a country moves from a broad consensus on the fairness and reasonableness of its laws and from objective and equitable enforcement, the greater the danger of either dissolution or dictatorship.

The second threat to the continued existence and well-being of a society is conquest by another state or set of forces, and to offset this, an army is necessary as well as the strategic tools appropriate to the times – forts and castles, walls for cities (and sometimes countries), swords, spears, bows and arrows, crossbows, firearms, artillery, tanks, war planes, missiles, chemical, biological and atomic weapons, weaponized robots and cyber equipment. Conquest by and subjection to another state is one of the greatest evils that societies face, and it is security from this threat that is the first objective of any political structure, closely followed by internal security.

Early political associations, such as those in archaic and classical Greece, were dominated by warriors, with aristocrats usually serving as cavalry and self-sufficient members of the community as heavy-armed infantry, or hoplites. These warrior classes made up the citizen body. Our term "politics" comes from the Greek *polis*, which is usually translated as "city-state." For the ancient Greeks, the *polis* was the necessary condition not only for survival, but also for the full development of the human

potential of free adult males, who provided the military force to keep the town and its territories secure, and who deliberated about "policy" in public assemblies, "ruling and being ruled in turn."[2] Politics in the ancient Greek city-state was the exclusive prerogative of free adult males, almost all of whom performed some form of military service. It provided an ideal of citizenship balancing rights and responsibilities and an ideal of what it is to be a rounded human being, that have inspired political values from antiquity to the present.[3]

The Greek city-state excluded women, slaves and resident aliens from citizenship, making participation in government the monopoly of a small portion of the population. The notion that citizenship was a properly male prerogative was not overcome in the West until the twentieth century, and followed from complex social and economic developments, as well as changes in ethical and political thought. An old prejudice rooted in the connection between military and civic functions and perpetuated in the classical curricula of schools and universities that shaped education until a few generations ago, it died hard. To open citizenship to women, it took urbanization, the elimination of slavery, a shift to thinking of the populations of countries as citizens rather than subjects, gender equality in property rights and education, industrialization, and entry of women into upper levels of the workforce, all of which happened at different times in different places. Of course, not all women were equally disadvantaged. Within the home the mistress of the house could be as abusive to female slaves or servants as male proprietors or masters, so class and social standing separated women from each other as much as they separated men.

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[2] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259 b 4-6 and 1277 b 8-10. Plato thought it would be a good idea for rulers to be philosophers. We are still waiting for that.
[3] There is another political model we derive from antiquity, and that has had no less an influence in determining what politics look like today. This is the model of empire, the best-known example of which is probably Rome, though there are other ancient and modern empires that have been no less important. The Roman empire was based on a combination of military power and administrative acumen. It dominated and exploited all peoples and territories within its reach for the benefit of the mother-city and its ruling classes. It was an early and successful example of well-organized gangsterism on a grand scale. It should be noted that Rome did not initially set out to conquer the world. Rather, it was engaged in constant conflicts with rival powers that it succeeded in overcoming by its superior financial and administrative organization which in turn supported its disciplined, well organized and well-equipped military. Having a stronger and deeper state than their rivals, the Romans overcame them.

If security, both from internal disorder and conquest from without, is the most basic need met by political association, this does not mean that having assured security, a political system has achieved all that it can and should do. While security is a necessary condition for the well-being of a society, it is not sufficient. We want and need other things from the state. But these other wants and needs can only be met when the primary need for security has been assured, and so depends on the success of the political system in achieving its most basic objective. In some cases, awareness of the importance of other values results from abuse of power, whether because of the shortcomings of individuals, or as a result of gradual changes that undermine the effectiveness of a given system and discredit it.

A society threatened by disorder from within or conquest from without will either organize to meet these challenges, or face the probability of dissolution or takeover by external forces. The cost of defense against these threats is usually high. It often means unlimited authority in the hands of those designated to assure security, and the allocation of resources to make this possible. The army and police play key roles in the life of a country, while the private interests and desires of the members of society are subordinated to the main and necessary goal of maintaining security. Once the dangers threatening the society have been overcome, the burdens that crises had imposed are seen as less necessary and more onerous, while demands of the civic and private spheres seem more reasonable, and achieving them more feasible. Thomas Hobbes was responding to the urgent needs of a society torn by civil war when he wrote *Leviathan* (1651) to argue for absolute monarchy. It was only when the crisis of the mid-seventeenth century had been overcome and order restored that John Locke could make his argument for reduced central authority and increased civic and political rights and freedoms in his *Second Treatise on Government* (1690). The less threatened and the more secure a society becomes after the main goal of security has been assured, the more demands for what we might call secondary goods, such as personal freedom and material comfort, seem reasonable and feasible. Having solved one problem, society can move along to others, always keeping in mind, as conservatives do, that security is fragile and that threats of disorder and insecurity are always there. It did not make sense for Locke to theorize about how best to assure citizens as much liberty as possible until the problems that troubled Hobbes had been solved.

Arrangements that are adequate to assure security in one set of circumstances may not be suitable in others. Feudalism developed in

Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, and when the Roman Empire with its strong central government fell, western Europe came under frequent attacks and raids from barbarians from the east, more barbarians from the north, and from the forces of more civilized Islam from the south. At this time there were no states that could raise and support armies to fend off attackers. The scope of life was regional, with local languages and dialects, customs and laws, and only rudimentary transport. During the early Middle Ages, before the growth of towns, there were two institutions that extended beyond local or regional boundaries. One, the Catholic Church, was international. The other, the pre-national feudal monarchy, was more a system of regional federations with leading local nobles often having as much influence as the feudal monarch, and it was not uncommon for such nobles to try to replace feudal monarchs themselves.[4] Strictly speaking, feudalism refers to the relations among nobles who, as knights, were the backbone of the armies of the time. In order to be able to keep horses and retainers and perform their military service, nobles were granted lands sufficient for these needs. Initially granted by the feudal monarch in exchange for military service, these lands soon became hereditary. Relations between the local noble and his tenants, or serfs, was another matter.

As Europe's population grew, towns expanded and economic activity increased. As military technologies changed and new threats faced the fragmented continent, the inadequacies of feudalism became apparent, and the need for a new set of arrangements more urgent. With larger towns, new elites emerged whose fortunes were not based only on land, who lacked noble status, and who played no significant military role. The introduction of gunpowder and the development of firearms and cannon resulted in mounted knights losing their predominance on the field of battle, while castles, which were impregnable to older military technologies, became vulnerable. Cannon being expensive and beyond the means of most nobles, this innovation shifted the military balance of power toward the richest and most powerful. Those at the top of the pyramid of feudal politics, where they were successful, developed from feudal kings into absolute monarchs. The newly empowered kings also sought to reduce their dependence on the old nobility by finding money to

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[4] The feudal monarch was the leading figure in a system of contracts (*foedi*) that bound all signatories to the contracts by mutual obligations and rights. A feudal monarch could expect military aid and counsel from his nobility. He would not get money or taxes from them. He was expected to "live from his own."

hire mercenary troops rather than relying on increasingly unreliable feudal levies.[5]

This gradual shift from rule by the local strong man to government by an increasingly powerful and centralized state was difficult, but the peasantry –80% or more of the population-- gained more than it lost from it. For the crown, control of the judiciary was a major issue because it reflected sovereignty. In western Europe high justice, or cases involving capital punishment, had long been the prerogative of the crown, but cases involving property and noncapital punishments were normally in the hands of local lords, or seigneurs. To strengthen his hold on government Louis XIV, probably the best example of an absolute monarch,[6] sent his emissaries to the more remote parts of the kingdom to control the way justice was administered there. Records of the sittings of one of these extraordinary tribunals were made by a cleric attached to the royal courts, Esprit Fléchier, and they show how Louis XIV presented the ideology of absolutism. They also document abuses of power by local seigneurs that are horrendous by any standards. Fléchier's journal shows why French monarchs aspiring to absolute authority enjoyed considerable support among ordinary people.

According to Fléchier, what the central government was setting out to do was to meet the most basic of internal political needs: order and security. Louis XIV's commission was to repress the lawlessness of local strong men, and so to provide a degree of security for the king's subjects. This was not easy because the rights of the seigneurs were anchored in law. Seigneurs were fully entitled to appoint judges to administer local law and they had the right to collect certain fees. It was not the principles of seigneurial justice and seigneurial rights that Louis's assizes challenged,

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[5] While there was a basic conflict of interests between the kings and the nobility, this did not mean that there was no cooperation between them. Early modern kings rarely had complete control over all the territory they nominally ruled, and often depended on local nobles to administer certain regions, and on the clergy to inform the public of new laws or directives. This was not, however, an even partnership, in that the extension of royal authority meant a decline in that of the nobles, and all parties were aware of this.

[6] "Absolute" should not be taken in the sense of totalitarian. An absolute monarch was not "absolute" in the sense that he could do whatever he wished. The term absolutism is derived from the Latin *ab* (not) and *solutus* (bound), which is to say, not bound, specifically, by the feudal contract. Commoners had no part in feudalism, which was a system of agreements among noble warriors, but were dependents of the lords in what is better termed a seigneurial system.

but abuses of these things. As broad guidelines, the king's commission required that judges must meet reasonable levels of competence, that they be obliged to investigate all crimes and the evidence for them, that the prisons that seigneurs had the right to keep were well built and properly administered, and that prisoners were to be adequately fed.[7] While minimal, these demands were not altogether innocent. Many nobles had to make do with reduced incomes, and the crown's demands imposed further costs that many nobles could not, or would not, meet. Moreover, the central administration was now a competitor of the seigneurs for the surplus revenue generated by overburdened peasants, and it was very much in the interest of the crown to weaken the status and authority of the nobility by asserting its sovereignty. Beyond these issues there was also the tendency of beneficiaries of the seigneurial system to extend their rights to outright oppression of the peasants.

The records kept by the Assizes of Clermont show that one of the local nobles, the Baron de Sénégas, had improperly interfered in the election of magistrates, made unjustified forced levies, and had extorted sums from villagers subject to his authority. He had further interfered with collection of the king's taxes, usurped the tithe of a prior on one of his estates, and demolished a chapel in order to use the materials in one of his own buildings. There were also "…the accusation of two or three assassinations, of some unjust confinements, of several ransoms forcibly extracted, of many usurpations, and of several cases of forced labour unjustly required and violently enforced."[8]

Fléchier observed that Sénégas' case caused the court considerable trouble because of the Baron's intelligence and his ability to defend his actions. Fléchier was aware that the law supported the authority of seigneurs and their prerogatives, and that it was often difficult to distinguish between the proper, improper and illegal exercise of this authority. For the seventeenth-century commentator, this was the crux of the matter. Today it seems more a question of subversion of feudalism by the centralizing monarchy, and the fact that seigneurs had lost the main justification of their authority as the state took on the responsibility of providing defense against external enemies, while local lords retained their

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[7] Esprit Fléchier, *Mémoires de Fléchier sur les Grands-Jours d'Auvergne*, ed. Yves-Marie Bercé (Paris, Mercure de France, 1984). A convenient selected translation of this work can be found in H.G. Judge, *Louis XIV* (London, Longman, 1965), 80-89.
[8] Judge, *Louis XIV*, 82.

rights and privileges. By the eighteenth century the seigneurs of France enjoyed all manner of rights and fees for which they no longer provided the basic service on which the system was based, and moreover, were increasingly tempted to supplement their reduced incomes by abusing their traditional rights. The legislators of the French Revolution, who were strong believers in the sanctity of property, initially decreed that seigneurial rights were to be redeemed for cash payment. However, the peasantry did not believe that compensation was justified, and for the most part simply stopped paying seigneurial dues. These rights and dues were then formally abolished in 1793. Whatever their broader political views, the abolition of seigneurial dues and services, as well as elimination of the tithe, endeared the Revolution to much of the peasantry, which formed the great majority of the population.

There is a well-known denunciation of seigneurialism in one of Dickens' best-known novels. In a climactic chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens has the dying brother of the fervid revolutionary, Madame Defarge, denounce the evils of the Old Regime, prominent among them abuses of the seigneurial system. As described by Madame Defarge's brother, these included the right of the first night, forcing peasants to work as draft animals, and making them stay up all night to beat the ground in order to prevent frogs from disturbing the sleep of their masters.[9] The first of these charges was more an element of anti-seigneurial propaganda than anything else, the second can be seen as an exaggerated form of the *corvée*, a recognized labor obligation, while the third seems to be the sort of invention a novelist might make to darken the shade of black in which he was painting his villains. Curiously, though, there is documentation of frog-silencing duties imposed on peasants before the Revolution. In the session of the night of 4 August 1789, in which the National Assembly did away with most aspects of seigneurialism, a deputy from Brittany, Leguen de Kérangal, denounced precisely this practice.[10] Dickens also placed the estate of the family of noble villains, the Evrémondes, in Brittany. What

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[9] Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, book III, chapter 10.

[10] For a translation of Kérangal's speech see the collection of documents by Paul H. Beik, *The French Revolution: Selected Documents* (London, Macmillan, 1971), 92. Just where Dickens found the frog-silencing feature in his characterization of the abuses of seigneurialism is not clear. Carlyle in his *French Revolution*, which is Dickens' main source for the historical background and conceptualization of his book, treats the night of August 4 cursorily, and does not mention Kérangal or refer to his speech. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, book VI, chapters 2 and 3.

seems an extreme fictionalized distortion designed to heighten the reader's disdain for the villains of the story was based in fact and reflected the extent to which the abuses of seigneurialism could go.

The development of absolutism created a new political and military situation in which Europe was less threatened by forces from Scandinavia and the Muslim world (though there was an Ottoman siege of Vienna in the late seventeenth century), and more from internal rivalries. The more centralized states were able to dominate the less well-organized ones, and a race developed to concentrate state power in the new monarchies. The sixteenth century saw the Habsburg-Valois competition from which France emerged triumphant. With Richelieu, Mazarin and Louis XIV in the seventeenth century, France became the model for monarchical absolutism and the most powerful state in Europe. Britain, which was centralized early, emerged as a major power during the eighteenth century, thanks mostly to its commercial prowess and exploitation of its colonial empire. By very different means, so did Prussia. The absolutist model of the centralized state, which inflicted great suffering on the unprivileged sections of the population that bore the brunt of brutal systems of taxation, was most successful politically. States that failed to centralize could not compete, and were dominated by their more powerful rivals. In extreme cases, such as that of Poland, states that failed to develop strong, centralized governments, were driven out of existence. Russia, Prussia and Austria partitioned large parts of Poland in 1772. They increased the territories partitioned in 1793, and eliminated the country with a final partition two years later. Polish independence was regained only after the First World War. The Third Reich and the USSR conquered Poland in 1939 and again partitioned it out of existence. Its nationhood was restored after World War Two. Stronger, deeper states survived and prospered. Weaker ones did not.

Freedom and Unfreedom

Among the goods that political association seeks to assure, freedom probably ranks second only to security, and it can only flourish when security has been assured. There is, of course, no such thing as absolute freedom, and there is always a tension between how much freedom the individual finds it wise or necessary to concede to the community or state,

to various institutions, or to circumstance.[11] Even in a democracy, an army subjects its citizens to a discipline so comprehensive, that, as soldiers, they have no freedom at all. For soldiers there is only duty and obedience. On leaving the status of soldier and returning to the civic sphere, a citizen will regain the range of freedoms that are the norm in his or her society. Those freedoms do not include the right to the property of other people, or to drive their cars in any way they see fit, or to play music at any volume at any time of day or night. These are all restrictions that most of us willingly accept because they are conditions that make it possible for us to live together with a reasonable degree of security and comfort. How much security and freedom we can enjoy varies with time, place and circumstance.

There is no question but that from classical antiquity on, freedom, or liberty, has been seen as a paramount human value. Freedom was believed necessary to assure full humanity. In antiquity, freedom was perhaps valued so highly because unfreedom was so common. There were probably more slaves than free citizens in classical Athens.[12] One could be born into slavery, one could fall into slavery through debt, one could be kidnapped and sold, or one could be captured in war. However one arrived at the unhappy condition of slavery, one was deprived of one's will and at the command of a master.[13] For Aristotle, some people were by nature slaves, and a slave was simply an "animate tool" with no more rights or independence than an animal.[14] In Roman law slaves were referred to as "speaking tools."[15] Slavery meant, in effect, dehumanization.

In antiquity and beyond people had it in their power to refuse slavery by renouncing life. Some perhaps did so, but most did not. For most people, life is a greater good than unfreedom is an evil, so they opt for a

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[11] If someone wants to sell you a world where there is complete and unlimited freedom, beware. There is no such thing. The question is always how much freedom you can realistically have at any time in any given circumstances, and what you have to pay for it.

[12] For lack of reliable sources, it is very hard to make statistical generalizations about the ancient world. See, however, Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, NLB, 1975), 22, 36, 38 and 40, and M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York, Viking, 1980), 29-30 and 79-80.

[13] For an elaboration on these conditions, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard UP, 1982).

[14] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b16-1256b3.

[15] Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, 24.

harsh and bitter existence rather than no existence at all. This cannot be an easy choice, but it is the one most often made, whether in the hope of eventually regaining one's freedom, or mitigating conditions of unfreedom, or simply because for most people any form of life is preferable to death. During antiquity slavery was extremely widespread among the more "advanced" civilizations, which depended on slave labor much as we depend on electricity.

The forms that unfreedom takes in history change, but unfreedom does not disappear. The economy of the southern states of the United States depended on the labor of black slaves into the second half of the nineteenth century, and there is still extensive slavery in the contemporary world.[16] Slavery continued to play a role and have legal standing during the Middle Ages, but beside it there appeared another less comprehensive form of unfreedom, namely, serfdom. A system tying peasants to the land developed during the late Roman Empire as the supply of slaves dried up and large landowners sought to assure themselves a permanent labor force. But a full-blown system of serfdom is generally regarded as medieval.

Serfdom involved recognition of a local strong man as master or lord, and acceptance of the status of something like indentured servant by the serf. The serf was obliged to provide certain services and pay certain dues to the lord. He was not free in his person and could not move about as he might wish, and such property as he held was subject to severe restrictions. Moreover, the rudimentary legal system of the lands and residents subject to the lord were entirely in the hands of the lord. Initially, the lord, or seigneur, offered his serfs one big thing in exchange for their subservience: security.

Slavery can be seen as the reduction of human beings to the level of things or, in the context of ancient warfare, it can be seen as a kind of agreement in which one party accepts unlimited servitude in return for life. Similarly, serfdom can be seen as an agreement in which peasants accepted severe restrictions on their property rights and personal freedom and agreed to make payments and perform a range of services for the local strong man in return for security from external aggression.

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[16] According to the Global Slavery Index there are about 40 million slaves in the world in 2020. On the eve of the Civil War the United States had a total population of between 31 and 32 million, of whom just under four million were slaves.

The knights or lords who, with their mostly impregnable, but uncomfortable, castles offered security to those around them, were the dominant figures in their highly localized and hierarchical societies. Knights in their suits of armor, mounted on their chargers, were to medieval warfare what tanks were to warfare in the twentieth century. It made sense for knights to be provided with land which allowed them to maintain their horses and immediate followers, and for them to build castle-fortresses which served as places to live and, when necessary, as a refuge from marauders for the dependent population. The knights, or lords, exacted a heavy price for the protection they offered. It is probably not too much to say that the feudal-seigneurial complex was a kind of protection racket. Still, it was worthwhile for the peasants to pay the price for this protection, because the lord, or knight, could usually provide the goods, and no one else could. Without security, whether in the Middle Ages or before or since, people face the threats of banditry, invasion, subjection, slavery and violent death. Medieval peasants sensibly, though without a viable alternative, accepted subordinate status, various obligations, and severe limits on their personal freedom for the security they got, or hoped to get, in return. In the circumstances, the deal made sense.[17]

If security and freedom are the primary objectives of political association, they cannot be assured by the same means at all times. Feudalism was the most effective way to provide a localized form of security during the early Middle Ages, though at a high cost to freedom. As conditions changed it became necessary to impose a significant degree of centralization on a fragmented political system. As it emerged from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, absolutism retained the separate statuses and a legal system based on privilege, but it did significantly strengthen and modernize the state, while reducing the role of the nobility

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[17] During the Middle Ages the lords were loosely aligned in a system of contracts at the head of which stood the leading lord, or king. These contracts were mutually binding, so that feudal monarchs lacked the authority and power of monarchs of the new states that began to appear roughly from the sixteenth century. The relations between the lords, who had noble status, and the king, who was usually just the leading nobleman at the time, was properly called the feudal system. The relation between a lord and his peasants was seigneurialism. During the early Middle Ages, the lord provided essential services and his domination of local life was seldom questioned. When kings succeeded in organizing national armies directly answerable to themselves and in centralizing other key government functions, lords, or seigneurs, lost their main functions, but retained their privileges and rights to various seigneurial dues and obligations. As we might expect, their tenants came to resent this.