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LIBERTY
BEFORE
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107689534

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First published 1998
Thirteenth printing 2010
Canto Classics edition 2012
3rd printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-68953-4 Paperback

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‘Until I was thirty years old and upwards I rarely looked at a history – except histories of philosophy, which don’t count’ (F. W. Maitland to Lord Acton, 20 Nov. 1896, Cambridge University Library, Add. MS 6443/197, fo. 1v).

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Preface

The following essay is an extended version of the Inaugural Lecture I delivered in the University of Cambridge on 12 November 1997 as Regius Professor of Modern History. I have tried to sketch the rise and fall within Anglophone political theory of what I have labelled a neo-roman understanding of civil liberty. The neo-roman theory rose to prominence in the course of the English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century. Later it was used to attack the ruling oligarchy of eighteenth-century Britain, and still later to defend the revolution mounted by the American colonists against the British crown. During the nineteenth century, however, the neo-roman theory increasingly slipped from sight. Some elements survived in the Six Points of the Chartists,¹ in John Stuart Mill's account of the subjection of

¹ The demands for annual parliaments and equal electoral areas appear in particular to reflect neo-roman priorities.

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women,² and in other pleas on behalf of the dependent and oppressed.³ But the ideological triumph of liberalism left the neo-roman theory largely discredited.⁴ Meanwhile the rival view of liberty embedded in classical liberalism went on to attain a predominance in Anglophone political philosophy which it has never subsequently relinquished. The ambition of the following essay is to question this liberal hegemony by attempting to re-enter the intellectual world we have lost. I try to situate the neo-roman theory within the intellectual and political contexts in which it was initially formulated, to examine the structure and presuppositions of the theory itself, and thereby to provide us with the means to think again, if we will, about its possible claims on our intellectual allegiances.

Slight though this essay is, I have incurred many obligations in the course of writing it. I have greatly benefited from discussions with a number of scholars

² See Mill 1989, esp. pp. 123, 131–3, 149, on the dependent status of women and their resulting servitude.

³ The vocabulary of Roman legal and moral philosophy is strikingly prominent, for example, in Marx's analysis of capitalism, especially in his discussions of wage-slavery, alienation and dictatorship.

⁴ On the transition from whiggery to liberalism see Pocock 1985, esp. pp. 253–310, and Burrow 1988.

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working on related themes. My warm thanks to David Armitage, Geoffrey Baldwin, Annabel Brett, Alan Cromartie, Martin Dzelzainis, Markku Peltonen, David Runciman, Jonathan Scott, Jean-Fabien Spitz and Blair Worden. I am also very grateful to David Johnston for many discussions about Roman law, and to John Pocock and James Tully for exceptionally helpful correspondence. I am conscious of a special debt to Philip Pettit and his writings on liberty, by which I have been deeply influenced.⁵ It was largely owing to the joint seminar that he and I conducted on freedom and its history at the Research School of Social Science at the Australian National University in 1994 that I returned to working on these themes. As always, by far my greatest debt is to Susan James, who has not only read the following essay in each of its successive drafts, but has discussed it with me on more occasions than I care to recall.

For the past two years I have been acting as chair of the European Science Foundation network entitled *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*. I have learned a great deal from the papers delivered at our meetings, and I am sure that our discussions must have left their mark on my argument. Special thanks

⁵ See Pettit 1993a, 1993b and 1997.

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to Martin van Gelderen for acting as secretary of our group, as well as for numerous conversations about matters of mutual scholarly interest.

I have been privileged to try out some aspects of my argument on two highly distinguished audiences. I was greatly honoured by the invitation to deliver the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in December 1995, and much enjoyed the seminars that followed my talks. I was equally honoured to be asked to lecture at the Collège de France in the spring of 1997, where I delivered a revised version of my Eliot lectures under the title *Quatre traditions de la liberté*. It is a particular pleasure to thank Pierre Bourdieu for being such a receptive and considerate host.

The suggestion that my Inaugural Lecture should be published in this extended form came from the Cambridge University Press. I am grateful as always to Jeremy Mynott for his generous advice and encouragement. Richard Fisher acted as my editor, and saw my manuscript into print with the utmost speed and efficiency; Frances Nugent subedited with a wonderfully vigilant eye. Not for the first time, I am conscious of how much I owe to everyone at the Press for their exemplary service. Philip Riley agreed at short notice to correct the proofs, a task he

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performed with his usual extraordinary meticulousness.

The following conventions have been used. The bibliography of primary sources refers to anonymous works by title. Where a work was published anonymously but its author's name is known, the name is added in square brackets. All ancient authors are cited in their most familiar single-name form. When transcribing from early-modern texts, my general rule has been to preserve original spelling and punctuation. However, when fitting quotations around my own prose I have sometimes changed lower-case initial letters to upper, or vice versa, as the context required. I have preferred in all cases to make my own translations, even when using editions in which facing-page translations are supplied.

I have attempted to preserve some of the informality of a lecture, but I have of course removed any purely local allusions and references. Among these changes, the only one I regret is the loss of the tribute I paid at the start of my lecture to my two immediate predecessors in the Regius chair, Geoffrey Elton and Patrick Collinson. So I should like to end by saying a word about these two great Cambridge presences.

Lord Acton spoke at the beginning of his Inaugural

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Lecture about what he described as the general movement of ideas.⁶ To anyone whose historical interests centre on such movements, it is hard not to feel that the climacteric moment in British history came with the constitutional upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century. But this judgement is by no means to be taken for granted. Geoffrey Elton changed the face of British historiography by making it one of his avowed ambitions to demonstrate that the sixteenth century was a period of still more formative significance. No less telling and innovative has been the contribution of Patrick Collinson. With his enviable combination of learning and literary grace, Patrick continues to show us that, in the realm of ideas no less than in politics, the era encompassing the birthpangs of Protestant England and the Elizabethan Puritan movement cannot but be recognised as a major turning-point.⁷ I am very conscious that, in returning in what follows to the seventeenth century, I am returning to a scene transformed out of recognition by Elton's and Collinson's work on the preceding period.

⁶ Acton 1906a, p. 3.

⁷ See Collinson 1967 and 1988; see also below, chapter 1, note 32.