



Gatti, Hilary. Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe: From Machiavelli to Milton

Jeffrey Collins

Volume 40, numéro 4, automne 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086085ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i4.29287>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Collins, J. (2017). Compte rendu de [Gatti, Hilary. Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe: From Machiavelli to Milton]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40(4), 209–210. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i4.29287>

Gatti, Hilary.

Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe: From Machiavelli to Milton.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. vii, 215. ISBN 978-0-691-16383-3 (hardcover) \$45.

Hilary Gatti's *Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe* tackles a very large subject with a rather slender volume. The result is a series of lucid and well-informed discussions of canonical early modern thinkers who advanced, in various contexts, defenses of liberty. The book, however, fails to advance a cohesive argumentative line. It is a book with a subject, but without a compellingly defined problem.

Gatti begins with a chapter surveying theoretically-informed definitions of liberty as they have played out in the historiography of early modern political theory. She begins with Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction of positive and negative liberty, and the effort of neo-republican theorists—including Quentin Skinner—to offer "liberty as non-domination" as a third conception of early modern liberty. (This definition prioritizes the conditions of liberty, rather than the mere presence or absence of interference.) The introduction also surveys classic works by Richard Popkin, Hans Baron, and Nicholai Rubenstein, as well as more recent work by Jonathan Israel. The point of this survey is ostensibly to set up Gatti's own investigations: into whether the distinction between positive and negative liberty "was already being made in the period covered by the present volume"; and into the relative importance of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the "radical enlightenment," respectively, in advancing early modern conceptions of liberty.

But before Gatti's own arguments get off the ground, she avows that "it is not the purpose of this book to take sides with one or another of these theses that have done so much to form the ideas on the historical roots of the liberty discourse that dominate the culture of the Western world today." It is thus perhaps unsurprising that the chapters that follow drift somewhat widely away from the thematic and historiographical discussion of the introduction.

The five chapters that follow provide potted discussions of major early modern figures, each of which exemplifies some dimension of liberty as it was understood, at points, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Machiavelli speaks for "political liberty," understood in collective terms as "the freedom of a nation united and strong in its autonomy and independence

from the ‘degrading stench’ of foreign domination.” A chapter on Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin explores the question of free will in Reformation thought and presents predestinarian theology as a serious impediment to the “inner freedom” of individual conscience advanced by Luther. Bruno (Gatti’s primary research subject heretofore), Sarpi, and Galileo enter the account as martyrs for the “freedom of philosophy” and the freedom of expression. There is a strange, inconclusive interlude on Shakespeare, and a rather interesting one on Jacques Auguste de Thou, the historian of the French wars of religion. Milton and the English republican Henry Neville round out the volume, the former as an advocate for conscience freedom and a free press, the latter as a devotee of Machiavelli.

Gatti concedes that her book offers less a cohesive account than a “series of exemplary case studies, designed to illustrate the ways—or at least some of the principal ways—in which a discourse about liberty emerged in Europe in a century and a half that saw it convulsed in the throes of unprecedented conflict and war.” To some extent this is a worthwhile goal, given the fixation of the Cambridge School intellectual history industry on republicanism and the new *jus naturalism*. It is worth remembering that the language of liberty was found in texts other than the canonical works of “political theory.” The struggle to permit scientific argument and critical historical research was a major context for conflicts over liberty and authority.

And yet the case study approach has produced a disjointed text. Gatti hunts for mechanisms to link up her chapters: Protestants interested in Galileo’s natural philosophy; Huguenots drawn to republican constitutionalism; Milton’s borrowings from Sarpi and his pilgrimage to Galileo. But these are few and far between, and in general her potted accounts are narrated episodically. “Liberty,” in such disparate contexts, proves too multivalent to operate as an effective covering idea. The book thus reads like a series of discreet discussions. As such, they are interesting and well versed, and often explore Continental historiography that is perhaps not particularly well known among Anglophone readers. But together they provide at best a suggestive and impressionistic intervention into the established debates. Gatti is surely right to conclude that “sixteenth and early seventeenth century discourses about liberty deserve closer attention than they often receive.” Unfortunately, it is not only those discourses that are, according to her, “fragmented.” Her treatment is as well.

JEFFREY COLLINS

Queen’s University, Kingston, ON