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POLITICAL TRADITIONS

Conservatism, Liberalism, and Republicanism

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How unequal authority and power can be justified is a central question of political theory and of leadership studies (Price & Hicks, 2006). Indeed, while in everyday language *leadership* is commonly viewed as a positive term and the word *leader* connotes respect, in some political vernaculars, the very idea of leadership is suspect, if not embarrassing. For instance, one of the most influential public intellectuals of the late 20th century, Noam Chomsky, consistently refers to leadership in a disparaging way. In Chomsky's (2005) view, leadership is a code word intended to justify class rule, vastly unequal political and economic power, and imperialism abroad—all in the name of wisdom, prudence, and justice.

Chomsky's critique is rooted both in a specific assessment of the nature of contemporary American politics and America's place in the world and in a tradition of political thought that might be broadly described as anarchist. Anarchism represents the null hypothesis of Western political traditions: the claim that the state, or at least the modern nation-state, cannot be rationally justified and necessarily functions to ratify and reinforce unjust, unequal social relations. For anarchists such as Chomsky, this judgment does not mean that as a practical political matter we should reject all the activities of the modern state (such as its social welfare functions). Rather, it means that we should aspire to build a society rooted as directly as possible upon voluntarist and mutually supporting forms of social cooperation, as exemplified by democratically organized cooperatives and associations. Chomsky further suggests that it is this form of social organization, rather than

the hierarchical state and the capitalist political economy in which it is embedded, that best corresponds to human nature and our inclination toward cooperative communication with one another (Chomsky, 2005; Cohen & Rogers, 1991). Although Chomsky acknowledges the need for some coercive power to ensure social stability and cooperation, he favors arrangements in which coercive powers are not invested in specifically political institutions (those of the state) governed by a separate class of political experts.

Chomsky's anarchism represents one pole of the Western political tradition, albeit an important and often underappreciated pole. But the issues Chomsky's critique of leadership raises are more general, especially for those political traditions that aspire to achieve a more equitable, just society. As Robert Dahl (1970) has persuasively shown, no proposal for alternative political arrangements can avoid wrestling with dilemmas about how to organize authority so as to balance the competing considerations of choice (the idea that citizens' preferences should govern policy), competence (the idea that the most competent should lead), and economy (the fact that not everyone can participate fully in all decisions that affect their lives). After a short discussion of nonrational, authoritarian, and totalitarian forms of rule and the idea of a political tradition, this chapter will (all too briefly) discuss the conceptions of leadership and its justification predominant in three prominent political traditions—conservatism, contractual liberalism, and civic republicanism. The next companion chapter, "Political Traditions: Left Political Movements and the Politics of Social Justice" considers alternative

answers to the question of leadership offered by left (radical and revolutionary) political traditions.

It is particularly important to distinguish between two kinds of leadership problems. The first has to do with how to organize leadership in a just society; the second has to do with how to exercise leadership on behalf of change and movement toward a more just society, given present constraints. In the two chapters that follow, I argue that plausible conceptions from the left of what a good, practically attainable society might look like must, in thinking through how leadership and authority are to be organized, and borrow in substantial measure from the conservative, liberal, and civic republican traditions. By the same token, those traditions, especially liberalism and civic republicanism, have much to learn from the rich history of left thinking and practice about how to achieve meaningful social change within the context of contemporary capitalist societies. If left thinking about the good society (as end state) has often been naive and utopian (in the pejorative sense), liberal thinking (past and contemporary) about the possibilities of attaining and advancing justice within existing capitalist societies has itself often had too large a dose of wishful thinking and an overreliance on the ability of reason and good will to alter the behavior of entrenched power structures (Niebuhr, 1932).

The Idea of a Political Tradition and the Concept of a Political Regime

Political tradition, as it used in this chapter, refers to ongoing streams of thought that attempt to provide a rational account of how political authority should be organized and distributed. Influential traditions such as conservatism, contractual liberalism, and socialism articulate recurrent themes across multiple generations and often across multiple geographical locations and political settings. Influential political traditions also correspond to recognizable forms of political practice, and it is characteristic of a vibrant political tradition that it is capable of recommending specific responses to the challenges of a specific set of political circumstances. In some cases, the characteristic ideas of a political tradition help generate new forms of political activity; in other cases, the ideas are a reflection upon existing forms of political practice.

Two complicating thoughts should be added. First, not all forms of political practice merit the moniker of political tradition. Historically, many forms of authority—rule by elders, by priests, by successful warriors—have been nonrational. By nonrational, I do not mean that the political organization of such societies lacks an internal logic or is necessarily functionally ineffective. Rule by priests might in some circumstances be quite effective in providing the basic goods of shared social life: security from external attack, domestic peace, meaningful community life, and at least a minimal level of material prosperity.

Rather, I mean that such authority is not justified with reference to specifically political criteria. As John Dewey (1927) observed, “History shows that, in the main, persons have ruled because of some prerogative and conspicuous place which was independent of their definitively public role” (p. 78). In these societies, political rule is not an autonomous sphere, but it is subsumed by other dimensions of social and community life.

This observation is important because some utopian conceptions of politics in effect advocate for politics once again to be subsumed by logics derived from other parts of community life. A utopian Christian communitarian, for instance, may believe that in a good society, the practice of politics (and economics) should be guided by the norms of Christian brotherliness and an ethic of radical love. Most politically engaged Christians today recognize that this is not a reasonable aspiration in any literal sense for a complex society. Nonetheless, the belief that political and economic life should be informed and regulated by ethical criteria drawn from outside of politics is widespread. Most contemporary theorists accept that this is a legitimate viewpoint in a democratic, diverse society, so long as it, minimally, does not translate into the view that political leadership should be chosen by the church because that immediately begs the question, whose church? Ideally, it is accompanied by a recognition that one’s fellow citizens may be legitimately motivated by ethical or theological perspectives distinct from one’s own (Rawls, 1994).

Indeed, most political traditions aim to use political power to shape social and community life toward an ideal of some kind. This might be the ideal of maintaining traditional forms of social and community organization, the ideal of providing individuals maximum freedom to live lives of their own choosing, the ideal of ecological sustainability, the ideal of social equality, the ideal of social harmony, or the ideal of political equality itself. In its ideal form, democratic politics should be characterized by a backbone of consensus on core constitutional issues (such as the establishment and protection of individual rights) and vigorous but limited competition between a variety of political formations (often political parties) motivated by different social ideals. Even in the ideal egalitarian democracy, there might be vigorous disagreement between those who favor ecological sustainability and those who favor greater prosperity as social ideals, or between those who favor expansive provision of public goods and those who wish to maximize the proportion of the social product that individuals control directly. In practice, of course, democratic politics will always be further complicated by differences in the concrete material interests of citizens; no contemporary democratic theorist seriously envisions a political universe in which all citizens have literally the same interests.

That point is worth stressing because under modern conditions the attempt to create a state in which all citizens do have the same interests, and in which politics itself is to be

subsumed to the logic of a single ideal, can have extremely dangerous consequences. Totalitarianism—as particularly exhibited by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia in the 20th century—can be succinctly defined as the attempt to use state power to control all institutions of social life, down even to the family level (Arendt, 1951; Orwell, 1949). This need not necessarily mean the literal destruction of other social institutions; it might mean instead their co-optation by the state (the Protestant churches in Nazi Germany) or their marginalization and the establishment of constant state oversight (Orthodox churches in the Soviet Union). What is critical is that these social institutions (often today referred to by the term *civil society*) are not to be regarded as autonomous spheres operating according to their own logic, but are to function so as to accord fully with the aims of the state. If “primitive” societies based on warrior rule lack an autonomous political sphere, so totalitarian societies lack an autonomous sphere outside of the state. Revolutionary projects that do not stipulate in advance the limits of what revolution is to accomplish can be properly criticized for leaving the door open to totalitarian politics; if it is thought that the aim is to revolutionize all spheres of social life, all at once, it is not surprising that this may be interpreted as a mandate for the state to attempt to establish or impose a monopoly on all meaningful forms of social life.

A political tradition, thus, involves a conception of how a relatively autonomous political sphere is to be organized, how the political sphere is both to shape and be shaped by a society’s social and economic arrangements over time, and how state power is itself to be limited. The history of human societies provides a range of plausible answers to these questions. The first and still perhaps most useful to attempt to classify the variety of political regimes was provided by Aristotle, using two criteria: who rules, and who they rule for (*Politics*). Aristotle, thus, specified six regimes: three correct and three incorrect. Correct regimes are those that govern for the good of the whole; incorrect regimes are those that govern for the sake of the ruling party. Rule by one for the good the whole—kingship—is a correct regime; rule by one for oneself only is tyranny, an incorrect regime. Rule by the “better” people for the good of the whole is aristocracy, a correct regime; its converse is oligarchy, rule by the rich in their own interests. Rule by the many for the good of the whole, Aristotle terms *polity* or *constitutional government*; rule by the many in their own interests, he terms *democracy*.¹ Democracy is, thus, for Aristotle, an incorrect regime. Although this judgment may appear strange to us initially, the logic of his view becomes much clearer when we realize he is talking about completely unrestrained democracy, with no limitations on what government can do—no protection of individual and minority rights, for instance—and little credence given to the claims of what Dahl (1970) terms *competence* or the need for decision making to be informed by deliberative procedures. In extreme democracy, the people can decide anything they want, as quickly as they want; this is what Aristotle fearfully considered mob rule. In practice, modern

democratic societies all place important constraints on the pure democratic principle.

In Aristotle’s view, while the perfectly good king might in theory make for the best possible regime, the principle of kingship is dangerous: Hereditary forms of kingship are likely to lead to mediocrities ascending the throne, and kingships may decay into the worst sort of regime—tyranny. Further, Aristotle argues that the collective wisdom of the many may often be superior to that of a single outstandingly wise person. Consequently, Aristotle comments most favorably on political arrangements that combine a variety of principles in what might be termed a *mixed regime*. Successful mixed regimes give both the propertied and the many a voice and pay particular attention to moderating debilitating class conflict. “A city with a body of disenfranchised [*sic*] citizens who are numerous and poor,” Aristotle writes, “must necessarily be a city which is full of enemies” (*Politics* Bk. III, chap. 11). Mixed regimes that tend toward the oligarchic principle can be characterized as aristocracies; those that tend toward the democratic principle can be called politics (*Politics* Bk. IV, chap. 8). When new constitutions need to be established, wise legislators will look to the lessons of experience rather than a priori theory in seeking to establish an ideal (i.e., the best attainable) political regime and will keep in mind that the primary goal is to craft a regime that will endure. For instance, Aristotle’s study of political regimes persuaded him that the presence of a strong middle class and an effective civic education were two key ingredients promoting stability. Those regimes that succeed in providing political stability over time merit respect, given the frequency and ease with which political regimes collapse. This last observation offers a natural launching point for consideration of the conservative political tradition.

Conservatism

The conservative political tradition is associated with three recurrent themes. The first is the claim that substantial inequalities of power and other goods (including wealth, income, and social esteem) are morally justified and, indeed, are the hallmark of a decent society. The second is a posture of skepticism toward innovation, particularly radical innovation, and respect for existing institutions. The third is a distrust of the masses and the belief that popular influence over political decision making should be at least partially offset by authority invested in a small elite or in individual statesmen. To be sure, not all conservative thinkers voice all these themes—as we shall shortly see, Plato’s *Republic* assumes the possibility of radical political and social reconstruction even as it goes on to defend thoroughly hierarchical social arrangements. Moreover, actual conservative politics are often complemented by other themes, such as a concern with traditional social values and religion, nationalism and military strength, and (especially in recent times) celebration of free market economics. But

the three themes identified here are the most salient in understanding the conservative view of political leadership.

Conservative thought regards hierarchy, inequality, and the investment of authority in particular leaders as both natural and just, reflecting actual inequalities of ability and virtue between leaders and followers. The definitive statement of this outlook remains Plato's *Republic*, which posited four character types: lovers of money, a category further subdivided between money lovers who cannot control their base desires and those who are capable of delaying gratification to earn yet more money (i.e., the Franklin-esque virtues of intelligent money making); lovers of honor; and most rarely, lovers of wisdom. Plato argues that rule by money lovers and lovers of honor inevitably produce discord and civil war while violating justice. Only rule by the wise—a virtuous, highly educated few who are not motivated by the quest for material goods, a lust for power, or even the desire for social recognition—can produce a just society that accords each class of persons a role and a set of goods befitting their nature and abilities (Reeve, 1988; Williamson, 2008).

Most contemporary democrats regard the notion that people are by nature fundamentally unequal as *prima facie* offensive and elitist. But Plato's ideal city does frame and provide an answer to at least three persistent leadership questions that all political traditions must address: how to ensure that those most fit to lead actually attain leadership positions; how to ensure that those leaders are motivated by concern for the common good, not their own personal or class interests; and how to create and sustain a stable social system over time that accomplishes these tasks. Stated in these terms, Plato's proposition that the most able should lead and that it is the most virtuous and knowledgeable who are the most able seems far more attractive. Indeed, rival political traditions frequently adopt versions of these arguments.

A major criticism of the conservative political tradition from its rivals is that actually existing hierarchies and inequalities rarely if ever reflect actual differences in virtue and wisdom. In contemporary democratic societies with universal basic education and in which relentless mocking of the intelligence of our top leaders has often been a national pastime, most citizens find it difficult to believe that Platonic superior wisdom accounts for why some have power and others do not. Consider then what emerges if we slightly recast Plato's theory to read as follows: Hierarchies and inequality are justifiable just to the extent that they reflect actual differences of knowledge and virtue. Restated as such, the putatively conservative theory of rule by the wise becomes a critical social theory, capable of critically interrogating contemporary capitalism, insofar as capitalist societies tend to give the greatest share of social and political power not to the wise, but to those with the greatest financial clout. In this vein, social theorist Michael Walzer (1983) adopts the Aristotelian notion that goods ought to be distributed according to their internal logic (i.e., athletic prizes to the most athletic, orchestra

chairs to the best musicians, elected offices to those with the most votes) as a critique of the capitalist notion that money ought to be able to buy everything (see also Sandel, 1998). In particular, when economic power is easily converted into political power, disinterested public servants beholden to no particular interests and motivated wholly by concern for the common good become rarer and rarer. Plato anticipated the point by forbidding his ruling class to own personal possessions or engage in money-making activities.

Conservatism is not just a belief that many existing forms of inequality are just. It also consists of a disposition to be skeptical toward political change, especially radical or revolutionary change. The logic of the conservative position, hinted at above in our discussion of Aristotle, is that the establishment of workable political institutions is a fragile accomplishment and that we should be very cautious about untested proposals to reshape society, as these carry the high likelihood of leading to disaster. The classic statement of this viewpoint is Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790/1993). Burke, a former member of Parliament, offers both a defense of English political institutions and a scathing critique of the French Revolution (1789) as well as a firm prediction of future chaos and tyrannical violence in France, a prediction largely borne out by subsequent events.

In the text, Burke offers a critique of democratic principles and a defense of political and social inequality; of greatest resonance, however, are his cautions to those who think it a simple matter to build entirely new institutions from scratch. "The errors and defects of old establishments are visible and palpable," noted Burke, but "no difficulties occur in what has never been tried" (1790/1993, pp. 280–281). Building new institutions is a complex, daunting proposition, and the course of reform goes best when it is slow—"Our patience will achieve more than our force" (pp. 280–281)—and mixed with the disposition to preserve that which is good. Interestingly, Burke anticipates Dahl's competence criterion and critiques it to show why going slow is desirable in pursuing change: "I have never yet seen any plan which has not been mended by the observations of those who were much inferior in understanding to the person who took the lead in the business" (pp. 280–281). When we go slowly, "by a slow but well-sustained progress, the effect of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first, gives light to us in the second; and so, from light to light, we are conducted with safety through the whole series" (pp. 280–281). Burke then proceeded to a point-by-point critique of the institutions and policies of revolutionary France, concluding that "the improvements of the National Assembly are superficial, their errors fundamental" (p. 375).

As these quotations suggest, the Burkean disposition as such need not imply the rejection of all reform at any time as unwarranted. But in Burke's thought, we see the archetypal expression of what Albert Hirschman (1991) has termed the *perversity thesis*: the argument that proposed

far-reaching social changes are likely to have effects opposite to those intended. This mode of argument, in Hirschman's account, is one of three recurrent tropes in conservative and reactionary thought; the others are the futility thesis (the claim that innovative social action will fail to change anything fundamental) and the jeopardy thesis (the claim that a proposed social change will generate unwanted changes that outweigh any gains it may bring).

Whether one is persuaded by these sorts of arguments will of course depend heavily on one's assessment of the status quo, which in turn is impacted (though not always predictably) by one's class and social position. Many U.S. conservatives today express great reverence for the framers of the U.S. Constitution and the federalist system it established, yet rarely do they evaluate the document from the standpoint of African Americans whose legal slavery the original Constitution ratified. More generally, almost no one on the political spectrum is implacably opposed to all revolutions anywhere; contemporary conservatives welcomed the revolutions that ended Communism in Europe from 1989 to 1991. Likewise, modern South Africa provides a striking example of a society that has undertaken a rapid transformation of political institutions and implemented an entirely new constitution that, while not perfect, has succeeded in securing political stability in what many regarded as an irreconcilably divided society (Nupen, 2004). Burke's arguments carry their greatest force when applied to the defense of institutional arrangements that are least arguably decent and functional and that allow at least some room for popular voice and some route for the implementation of intelligent reforms. When such institutions are in place, conservatives argue that the burden of proof that innovation would improve the situation without unwelcome side effects rests on the innovators. Reformers and radicals, in contrast, often prefer the necessary uncertainty of what radical reform might bring to the certain continuation of an intolerable status quo.

The third feature of conservative thought bearing directly on leadership is the valorization by many conservative thinkers of the need, within constitutional democracies or republics, for an active, powerful executive given the authority to override popular judgments. The statesman, in this tradition, is a person with sufficient greatness to comprehend the good of the whole and the imagination to see how it can be improved. The statesman's judgment is superior to that of the ordinary citizen and should be respected as such by constitutional arrangements. A paradigmatic example of this kind of statesmanship from U.S. history is President George Washington's advocacy of the unpopular Jay Treaty (ratified in 1795), which normalized relations with Britain despite deep-seated anti-British public opinion at the time (Marshall, 1838/2000). The putative lesson is that the great leader saw the right thing to do and was able to do it, regardless of what the public thought. Contemporary conservative scholars such as Robert Faulkner (2008) have tried to revive this conception of statesmanship, arguing that even modern constitutional regimes must make room for the contributions of

"greatness"—that is, superior ability. Arguments for expanding executive prerogative and power were a central feature of the presidency of George W. Bush. The counterargument to these claims, of course, is provided by examples when the executive contradicted public opinion, or swayed public opinion in the direction of a course already predetermined, and then proved to be disastrously mistaken. John Locke's (ed. 1970) *Second Treatise of Government* anticipated this difficulty in stating that the expansion of executive prerogative afforded to wise, successful leaders presented a danger for future generations, for new, untested leaders, perhaps lacking the same wisdom, would have access to expanded power they may not have the ability to use well.

Liberalism

Once we drop the assumption that some classes of people are by nature superior to others, inequalities of power become much more difficult to justify. Yet liberal democratic societies also exhibit large-scale social inequalities and invest disproportionate power (especially economic and political power) in the hands of a relatively small group of people, commonly regarded as leaders.

The classic statement of contemporary liberal egalitarianism, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) argues that inequalities are justified just to the extent that they benefit the least well off in society. This is the principle of distributive justice, Rawls argues, that rational persons would choose if placed in an original position in which they knew nothing about their own particularities with respect to race, class, gender, religion, ability, and preferences; in such a situation, rational parties would carefully adopt principles of justice they could live with no matter who they turned out to be once the "veil of ignorance" is lifted.² Rawls devotes most of his argumentation to discussion of economic inequalities, and his justification of some (limited) degree of economic inequality does not straightforwardly extend to politics. Justice requires that citizens have equal political voice (regardless of economic status); a political process that largely excludes the poor from influence is ipso facto unjust, in Rawls's view, even if it has other beneficial consequences. Nonetheless, Rawls (like other liberal democrats) does not question the notion that there are some specialized tasks—including political rule—that need to be performed by a special class of people with particular expertise. Further, liberals characteristically do not think that acknowledging the need for leaders is inconsistent with a general belief in human equality.

Instead, liberals contend that unequal authority can be rationally justified. Depending on the nature of the case, three kinds of principles of justification are typically invoked. The first is what we might call simply the *democratic principle*—the notion that the people have the right to select their own leaders and that such leaders, once selected, have the right and responsibility to exercise (unequal) authority and power.

The second principle is that of *free competition* for what Rawls (1971) terms *positions and offices*. These refer not only to elected political offices, but also to more permanent administrative positions with special privileges and powers. Certain kinds of bureaucratic positions within government might fall under this category, along with judicial positions (e.g., judges) and plausibly even academic and scientific positions. The thought is that modern governments depend on the presence and competence of specialized bureaucrats and legal officials and that modern economies require a specialized knowledge-generating industry (in science and academia), an industry that is quasi-public in nature (i.e., heavily subsidized by public funds, even within nominally private educational institutions). How can a liberal society distribute such inherently privileged positions without violating its (stated) commitment to social equality? The most common answer is to insist that there be free and fair competition for such positions. This means not merely that the best qualified people should be drafted into such positions regardless of social background, race, gender, or other morally arbitrary factors, but (at least for Rawls) that all persons should have equal opportunity to develop their native abilities and, hence, compete for such positions on an equal footing with all others in the society, regardless of initial social status. If this condition is met, then there is nothing inherently unjust about organizing society so that certain types of people (at any particular time) have more power than others, on the liberal view.

The third principle for justifying leadership typically invoked by liberalism is that of *free choice*, or *freedom of association*. The idea is that in civil society (meaning the private sector of the economy as well as the vast nonprofit sector), groups, organizations, and firms can create leadership positions and assign them to whomever they choose, with individuals free to accept or decline such positions and the responsibilities they entail. This principle implies, for instance, that a Protestant church is free to recruit and hire a minister who will have enormous influence over the direction and daily activities of the church and is free to dismiss such a minister when deemed necessary. It also implies that the church cannot compel an unwilling person to perform that role. And, importantly, it implies that the church is free to decide it does not want a traditional leader at all and, instead (like the Quakers), adopt an alternative governance model not centered on the hired full-time minister.

The principle of free choice has obvious normative attractions, particularly in the case of voluntary and nonprofit organizations, including religious congregations (Rosenblum, 1998). Radical critics of capitalism would contest the view, however, that the unequal social relations characteristic of private capitalist firms can be adequately described using the language of free choice. They point out that in conventional privately owned firms, workers do not choose who will lead or manage them and that because employment is an economic necessity and because workers have limited information and limited resources in

searching for jobs, we cannot assume that there is an exact or even approximate fit between where (most) people actually work and the ideal workplace preferences of those same workers. That is to say, many people are for economic reasons stuck in job situations they regard as substandard and would abandon if they could (Dow, 2003).

Liberal egalitarians such as Rawls recognize this point. For a Rawlsian liberal, the principles of free competition for public and quasi-public positions of authority and free choice for privately organized leadership positions must operate against a background of just political economic arrangements. As already suggested, part of that background must be substantive equality of opportunity for all individuals to develop their abilities (provided through a high quality system of universal education as well as associated training opportunities). Less commonly understood, Rawlsian social justice also calls for property and other economic assets to be widely distributed—via a property-owning democracy (Rawls, 1971, 2001). The aim is to avoid a situation in which one class (i.e., workers) have essentially no tangible assets and are compelled by economic necessity to work for another class (i.e., owners) under conditions they would not choose if not for overwhelming economic need (Williamson, 2009). A more equitable distribution of assets would in effect strengthen the bargaining power (for wages and working conditions) of employees upward, mitigating or eliminating the worst inequities (low pay, poor working conditions, being subject to arbitrary authority) characteristic of capitalist labor markets in countries such as the United States (Hsieh, 2009).

For Rawls and liberal egalitarians, the truly difficult task is to establish background conditions of social justice. But once established, this account suggests, the question of how leaders are to be chosen and how authority positions should be distributed presents no particular difficulties. Political leaders are to be selected by majorities, positions of special privilege and responsibility in the public and quasi-public sectors are to be distributed to the most deserving via fair competition open to all, and positions of private power are to be created and distributed according to the free choices of individuals and the organizations they create and control. It is assumed political leaders can be held accountable via the electoral process, that holders of other offices can be removed for substandard performance, and that private leaders will be held accountable by the organizations that they serve. There is assumed to be no danger of a special class of leaders that perpetuates itself from one generation to another emerging; just because one's parent is a person of authority gives one (minimally) no special entitlement to become similarly privileged nor (maximally) any special advantage in attaining such positions.

Civic Republicanism

Beginning in the 1980s, liberal egalitarianism came under criticism from a variety of thinkers concerned that the

Rawlsian paradigm did give the concept of community a sufficiently central role. These critics challenged the individualistic presumptions of liberalism and the idea that it makes sense, as a way of thinking about justice, to imagine selves in an original position completely shorn of all particularity (Barber, 1984; Sandel, 1982; Walzer, 1983; Young, 1990). Some went on to argue that egalitarianism must presuppose the presence of a community and a commitment to sharing with one another and took issue with Rawls's claim that political society should strive to be neutral with respect to conceptions of the good life rather than favor some conceptions of the good rather than others (Sandel, 1982); others argued that the Rawlsian paradigm did not take seriously enough the significance of politics as an independent sphere in which citizens make judgments together, rather than a site in which we simply implement philosophically sound principles (Barber, 1984); others challenged the idea of universally applicable principles of distributive justice by arguing that the content of social justice is context dependent and varies according to the nature of the good in question (Walzer, 1983). For a time, these critics of liberalism were commonly described as *communitarian*, and the debate between Rawls and these various thinkers often described as the *liberal-communitarian* debate. Further, one public intellectual, Amitai Etzioni (1993), launched an ongoing public campaign aimed at building what he hoped would be a communitarian movement, with the aim of correcting what he saw as the excessive emphasis on individualism and the discourse of rights in contemporary political culture.

Communitarianism in this form had some influence on political discourse in the United States during the 1990s, but it has not been the basis for a popular movement. Equally important for our purposes, the term communitarianism has been rejected by many of Rawls's most trenchant critics for two reasons. Feminist critics such as Iris Marion Young (1990) oppose the idea of a unitary community that suppresses difference (race, gender, class, culture) as a dangerous and oppressive fantasy. Other critics of liberalism such as Michael Sandel reject the label communitarian because it implies that social practices and institutional arrangements can be critiqued only based on values and principles internal to the society in question (i.e., the argument that a society is failing to live up to its stated values) and that an external critique of a given society or culture's norms and moral standards is impossible. Instead, Sandel (1996) embraced the term *civic republicanism*, a framework that accommodates many of the criticisms of liberal egalitarianism canvassed above while also providing an objective, cross-cultural standard for evaluating institutional arrangements and policies: namely, the degree to which they permit and encourage meaningful self-governance by active citizens.

Although civic republicanism was framed by Sandel and related thinkers as an alternative to mainstream Rawlsian liberalism, increasingly it is seen less as a polar opposite than a needed complement to liberal egalitarian theory (White, in press). For civic republicans, moral principles

of the kind stipulated by Rawls's lack meaning and substance unless or until they are attached to an account of how institutions will in practice realize such principles (Elkin, 2006). Civic republicans insist we must pay attention to the institutional order as a whole—including political institutions as well as core social and economic institutions such as property—in evaluating political-economic orders. In particular, to preserve meaningful self-governance, we must be vigilant to the threat of domination by factions aiming to elevate their private interests over the common good (Maynor, 2003; Pettit, 1997).

Consider, to take a straightforward example, the principle that political leaders ought to be elected. Taken by itself, the principle leaves many substantive questions unanswered: How much power should such elected leaders have; what constraints should be put on their exercise of power; how much respect for political opponents elected leaders must show; how such leaders can be kept from acting in their own narrow or class interest? It is perfectly possible to have an elected leader—indeed, a frequently reelected leader—who acts so as to undercut democratic self-governance by attacking or threatening political opponents, restricting free speech, spying on political activists, making deals that benefit his or her private interests, or attempting to create a system of one-party rule. Examples of recently elected leaders accused (in various degrees) of acting so as to subvert democratic self-governance include former President George W. Bush in the United States, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand, and President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela.

The central mechanism for specifying the powers and responsibilities of government and its attendant offices is the constitution. But (to take the U.S. case) the framers of the U.S. Constitution assumed that the written constitution would be just part of a larger institutional regime—namely a political-economic system that combined republican self-government with the institutions of private property and a market economy. Republican theory, unlike ideal theory versions of liberalism, thus, deals explicitly with the problem of how to balance interests and maintain a workable regime. Proto-republican theorists such as Machiavelli assumed any social order would be marked by some degree of class conflict, as contending powers sought to advance their own interests. The question becomes how to temper such conflict to a sufficient degree to maintain a peaceful civil regime and how to keep one class or interest group from coming to dominate the others.

The best-known and most influential version of republican constitutional theory is that supplied by James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* (Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, ed. 1961). Madison was preoccupied by the problem of faction and, in particular, majority factions that might challenge the prerogatives of privileged property holders. (As historian Woody Holton in 2007 has pointed out, Madison was in particular perturbed by the tendency of state legislatures under the Articles of Confederation to pass debt forgiveness bills intended to benefit veterans of the revolution; such

bills had the effect of drying up credit markets, making it harder for men such as Madison to get loans.) Madison believed one advantage of a large country is that it would make it harder for coalitions representing the unpropertied to form and establish a majority; regional differences and variations in local interests would tend to prevent such a faction from emerging, thus protecting the status quo with respect to property (Hamilton et al., ed. 1961).

But Madison's constitutional theory also contained a positive theory of how to attain the common good. The presence of relatively large congressional districts would make it more likely that citizens would elect "men of property" as their representatives. Such persons would need to have a strong reputation for virtue and character to be elected. Importantly, they would also have a permanent stake in the well-being of their local communities, as property holders (i.e., land) and, hence, would be more likely to take a long-term view of the public good since the value of their property would rise and fall with the well-being of the entire community. Once elected, the need to build legislative majorities as well as to obtain cooperation from the other branches of government would require ambitious lawmakers to deliberate with one another and to frame their proposals in terms of the public interest, not narrow factional concerns. In these circumstances, the successful politician will be one who is most skilled in advancing the public interest. Well-designed institutions could, thus, harness the forces of ambition and self-interest to produce a common good (Elkin, 2006).

Madisonian political theory, thus, presumes a world in which different interests in the community are in more or less constant conflict and does not presume (as in Plato's *Republic*) the presence of wise leaders not motivated by power, ambition, or money. This realism makes the Madisonian view of politics attractive. Nonetheless, as Stephen Elkin has recently argued, there are numerous strong reasons why contemporary republicans, even in accepting the Madisonian style of thinking about political regimes, should reject Madison's specific account of the early U.S. republic as an adequate constitutional theory for today's United States.

To take two obvious examples, Madison's account of property, which centered on land, is obviously outdated and ill suited for a world dominated by corporate and financial property. Specifically, there is no good reason today for thinking that the mere fact of owning substantial property of this type in itself brings one's interests in alignment with the greater public good. Second, Madison's account, in its eagerness to protect the institution of property, provides few resources for thinking about contemporary problems of inequality and its impact on the political regime. In Elkin's view, both the alienation and exclusion of the poor from national politics and the disproportionate influence of the affluent have a baneful effect on U.S. politics; what is needed is a regime that is in effect steered by the interests of the middle class toward policies that secure the broad prosperity of the nation as a whole. The severe concentration of

wealth (especially corporate holdings) and political power among the most affluent makes such a regime difficult if not impossible to realize (Elkin, 2006). Contemporary civic republicans, thus, have strong reason for questioning and challenging the institutional status quo in the United States, not simply because it does not realize Rawls's difference principle, but because it constitutes a political regime biased toward the interest of the economically powerful at a time when there is no necessary connection between possession of economic power and farsighted attention to the good of the community as a whole. Consequently, what is needed is not simply better attention to abstract moral principles, but the reconstruction of a functional regime that rebalances the different interests in play so as to ensure that the regime tends over the long term toward the good of the broad community; not coincidentally, such a regime must produce and reward political leaders capable of articulating and advocating for this broader common good.

Thus stated, the contemporary civic republican project as articulated by Elkin, Richard Dagger (2006), and other writers shares some obvious similarities to the historic socialist project of replacing capitalism with a more just political-economic system. There are important differences, however. Elkin's version of republicanism explicitly aims at a commercial republic—that is, one in which continued private control of substantial amounts of capital, the operation of markets, and at least some nontrivial degree of economic inequality will continue to be important features. Likewise, Elkin is much more explicit about the need for government to be limited than most advocates of socialism. Finally, Elkin stresses that a commercial republic is necessarily different in kind from European-style social democratic regimes in which public policies are primarily the result of bargained negotiations among capital and labor (and their corresponding political parties) as well as public-minded civil servants.

These differences aside, it is clear that contemporary civic republicans do aim to alter existing forms of capitalism in a meaningful way so as to secure a more fully self-governing regime. How can such a goal be advanced, given existing political realities? This is not the same question as how better leaders and leadership can be promoted within the existing political-economic structures; rather, the question is how to alter the political-economic structures themselves. As we discuss in the following chapter, that is a question that historically has been most vigorously debated on "the Left."

Notes

1. In most societies, Aristotle assumes, the rich will be the few, and the poor will be the many. Interestingly, however, Aristotle states that it is social class and not quantity of people that distinguishes oligarchies from democracies. A society in which the majority of the people were rich and ruled in their own interests would still be an oligarchy; a society in which the poor

rule in their own interests would be considered a democracy, even in the (unlikely) case that they did not constitute a numerical majority. See *Politics*, Bk. III, chap. 8.

2. Importantly, the parties in the original position would also choose a principle of liberty—a scheme of equal liberties. These consist of civil and political liberties, including freedom to choose

one's career and general plan of life, but (unlike for libertarians) they do not extend to unconditional property rights or an unconditional right to engage in market transactions; Rawls thinks these can and must be legitimately regulated. In cases of conflict between the principle of liberty and distributive justice, the liberty principle is to take precedence.

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