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Republicanism

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CHAPTER 43

REPUBLICANISM

RICHARD DAGGER

REPUBLICANISM is an ancient tradition of political thought that has enjoyed a remarkable revival in recent years. As with liberalism, conservatism, and other enduring political traditions, there is considerable disagreement as to exactly what republicanism is and who counts as a republican, whether in the ancient world or contemporary times. Scholars agree, however, that republicanism rests on the conviction that government is not the domain of some ruler or small set of rulers, but is instead a public matter—the *res publica*—to be directed by self-governing citizens.

This conviction historically has led republicans to be suspicious of or downright hostile to monarchy, to the point where opposition to monarchy is often taken to define republicanism. Hence the eminent historian of political thought Quentin Skinner refers to ‘a republican (in the strict sense of being an opponent of monarchy) . . .’ (Skinner 2008: 84). Dictionaries frequently add to this negative definition the positive feature that republicans advocate government by elected representatives. Both points are correct insofar as republicans have generally opposed monarchy and favored representative government, but there is also reason to be cautious here—and reason to look more closely at the definition of republicanism before turning to its history.

DEFINING REPUBLICANISM

Caution is necessary because important thinkers commonly linked to the republican tradition, such as Aristotle and Cicero, were neither unequivocally opposed to monarchy nor clearly committed to representative government. As they saw it, a form of government is good if it will promote the public good. The problem with monarchy is not that it cannot do this; in some circumstances, Aristotle says, monarchy is the form of government most likely to promote the public good. The problem is that monarchs are all too likely, when unchecked by others, to become tyrants. That is why Cicero and other

classical republicans came to favor the *mixed constitution* (or *mixed government*) as a way of preserving *the rule of law*. A mixed constitution blends the rule of one with the rule of the few and of the many, so that the monarchical element will be limited rather than absolute, with the monarch under the law rather than above it. In this limited, constitutional sense of ‘monarchy’, republicans need not be opposed to monarchical governments. If, however, one means by ‘monarchy’ rule by one person who holds complete, unchecked authority, then a republican will necessarily be opposed to monarchy.

The connection between republicanism and representative government is similarly complicated. As the historical accounts of the development of political representation indicate, the terms ‘republic’ and ‘republican’ antedate the idea of government by elected representatives. *Mixed constitutions* require that the few and the many have a voice, but not that the members of either group elect those who speak for them. The rule of law cannot be effective where no one makes laws, or discerns them in nature or custom, but the legislator or legislators need not be elected. If the circumstances allow, in fact, republicans may even embrace a form of direct democracy in which the people as a whole are free to assemble, debate, and cast their votes for or against proposed laws. To be sure, modern and contemporary republicans are typically advocates of representative government, but that is because they do not think that circumstances are favorable to the exercise of direct democracy—not, at least, when the public business must be conducted on a scale as large as that of the modern state.

How, then, does a republic differ from a democracy? James Madison’s famous answer in *Federalist 10* distinguished ‘a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person’ from a ‘republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place . . .’ (Ball 2003: 43–4). Madison was surely right to think that no republican could countenance ‘pure democracy’, at least if it were understood to be a form of government in which the people ‘assemble *and administer* the government in person’ (emphasis added). Few self-professed democrats would disagree with republicans on this point, however. The important question is how a republic differs from a democracy when the latter term is taken in the sense commonly attached to it in current political discourse—that is, as *representative* democracy. To this there is no clear-cut answer. Contemporary republicans, as we shall see, are committed to both moral and political equality, so that they conceive of the republic as a kind of democracy, not as something distinct from or opposed to it. The difference is thus a matter of degree, not of kind. Republics and democracies are both forms of popular government, but the republican—always fearful of unrestrained power—will be less sanguine about the prospect of rule by the people than will the enthusiastic democrat. The people must be heard, the republican will say, for government is the public business of self-governing citizens; but government by the people should not be confused with doing whatever the majority of the people want whenever they happen to want it. A republic, according to the ancient formula, is the empire or government of laws, not of men. If a democracy maintains its respect for the rule of law, then it is a democratic republic; if not, it may be a populist, majoritarian, or plebiscitarian form of

democracy, but it cannot be a republic. That is why republicans historically have preferred the mixed constitution to one that is wholly popular or democratic.

Most republicans have preferred the mixed constitution, I should say, for, in this respect, as in many others, those who have thought of themselves as republicans have not always agreed with one another. John Adams and Thomas Paine disagreed on this point, for example, with Adams staunchly defending mixed government and Paine rejecting it in favour of 'simple' forms: 'I draw my idea of the form of government from a principle in nature which no art can overturn, viz., that the more simple anything is, the less liable it is to be disordered and the easier repaired when disordered' (Paine 1953 [1776]: 7). Yet each considered himself a republican. In this and other respects Adams and Paine exemplify two tendencies within republicanism that another eighteenth-century thinker, Montesquieu, previously had identified as 'aristocratic' and 'democratic'.¹ Nor is this the only point on which the history of republicanism has been marked by disagreement and divergent tendencies.

REPUBLICANISM CONSIDERED HISTORICALLY

Whether Adams (1735–1826), Paine (1737–1809), Montesquieu (1689–1755), or any other modern thinker really was a classical republican, or even a republican at all, is not a settled matter. According to J. G. A. Pocock, 'Paine was no classical republican, only a hater of monarchy . . .' (2003 [1975]: 575). For Pocock, who traces the 'Atlantic republican tradition' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries back through Machiavelli to Polybius and Aristotle, Paine's approval of a national debt is reason enough to deny his republican credentials. Debt is a form of *dependence*, and therefore something that republicans want to avoid, not embrace; for a self-governing citizenry must be free from dependence on those whose money or power would enable them to control or corrupt the republic.

Pocock's emphasis on the continuity of the republican tradition puts him at odds with a prominent group of scholars who believe that 'classical republicanism' is a term that should be reserved for ancient philosophers and polities. As those in this group see it, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the other *classical* republicans of the ancient world praised *civic virtue*—that is, the republican citizen's willingness to sacrifice personal interest for the public good—because this virtue protected and preserved the *polis* or *civitas* in which the highest virtues could be cultivated: 'Wherever the genuine classical republican tradition still lives, there is some kind of agreement as to the supreme value of the intellectual virtues, and of a life spent in leisured meditation on the nature of justice, the soul, and divinity' (Pangle 1988: 61). *Modern* republicans, by contrast, are

¹ 'In a republic when the people as a body have sovereign power, it is a *democracy*. When the sovereign power is in the hands of a part of the people, it is called an *aristocracy*' (Montesquieu 1989 [1748]: bk I, ch. 2, p. 10; emphasis in original).

more likely to value individual rights and liberties than civic duties or virtuous devotion to the public good. These modern or 'liberal' republicans—notably John Locke (1632–1704), Montesquieu, and the American founders—share enough in common with the classical thinkers to deserve to be called republicans, including devotion to self-government and the rule of law. Under the influence of Machiavelli, however, they depart from the classical tradition and embrace an aggressive or expansive republic in which representative government supplants direct participation and virtue is as likely to be the commercial virtue of the merchant as the civic virtue of the loyal citizen (Pangle 1988; Rahe 1992; Zuckert 1994; Sullivan 2004).

Still, Pocock is not the only scholar to trace a continuous line of development in republicanism from the ancient world to the modern. For some of them, however, the line reaches back not to Greece but to Rome. Those who join Pocock in tracing republicanism to Aristotle and Athens tend to emphasize the importance of active participation in public affairs—of ruling and being ruled in turn, as Aristotle said in *The Politics* (1283^b42–1284^a3). Those who see a closer link to Roman theory and practice are more likely to stress the republican commitment to the rule of law (Sellers 1998) and to freedom as the absence of arbitrary or dominating power—to 'neo-roman liberty', in Skinner's terms (1998). Scholars in both the Athenian and the Roman camps agree that a modern political thinker can be a classical republican, then, but disagree as to exactly what a classical republican is (Honohan 2002). Some even push the distinction to the point of arguing that the Athenian school of thought is really tracing the development of *civic humanism* rather than classical (or civic) republicanism. That is, civic humanism is 'a political philosophy centered on the idea of promoting a specific conception of the good life as consisting in active citizenship and healthy civic virtue on the one hand, while combating any sort of corruption that would undermine these values on the other' (Lovett 2006: §3.1). As such, it differs from the more modest philosophy of classical (or civic) republicanism, which takes political participation and civic virtue to be '*instrumentally* valuable for securing and preserving political liberty, understood as independence from arbitrary rule' (Lovett 2006: §3.2). From this point of view, a modern, civic, or neo-republican can be a classical republican, but only if classical republicanism is understood to be distinct from civic humanism.

For present purposes, it seems best to take an inclusive or expansive approach to republicanism, leaving the reader to decide what to make of these scholarly debates and distinctions. Such an approach will begin with the thinkers of classical Greece, at the latest. Indeed, some of the leading themes of republican thought are sounded in dramatic works, such as the exchanges between Oedipus and Creon in *Oedipus the King* (ll. 626–30) and between Creon and Haemon in *Antigone* (ll. 734–40)—exchanges in which Sophocles (496–406/5 BCE) implies that the city state (*polis*) is not the sole possession of the king, to be ruled simply as he sees fit, but a public trust. In his *Oresteia* trilogy, Aeschylus (525–456 BCE) makes another proto-republican point with regard to the rule of law, which the plays depict as superior to endless blood feuds and acts of private vengeance. Similar themes mark the work of Greek philosophers. In his *Republic*, for example, Plato (427–341 BCE) insists that the proper role of rulers is to

protect the interests of the people, not to advance their own; and in the *Statesman* and *Laws* he argues for the importance of the rule of law as, among other things, a constraint on those who hold power.

Aristotle and Polybius, however, are the two Greek thinkers most often associated with republicanism. As previously noted, Pocock and others take Aristotle (384–322 BCE) to be a republican largely because of his praise of the active life of the citizen who rules and is ruled in turn. But his famous, if not entirely original, division of governments into six basic forms in Book III of *The Politics* (especially 1279^a22–1279^b10) also links him, in two further ways, to republicanism. First, Aristotle's criterion for distinguishing 'true' from 'perverted' forms of government is whether 'the one, or the few, or the many, govern with a view to the common interest . . . or with a view to the private interest . . .' of the ruler(s) (*Pol.* 1279^A29–32). The 'true' form of rule by the many he calls 'polity' (*politeia*); the 'perverted' form, in which the many rule in their own interest as a class, is 'democracy'. Second, he subsequently refers to 'polity', in a different context and perhaps in a distinct sense of the word, as government by the middle class that mixes two of the perverted forms, oligarchy and democracy. As he says in Book IV, Chapter 11, moreover,

it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered in which the middle class is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes [i.e. the rich and the poor], or at any rate than either singly, for the addition of the middle class turns the scale, and prevents either of the extremes from being dominant. Great then is the good fortune of a state in which the citizens have *a moderate and sufficient property*; for where some possess much, and the others nothing, there may arise an extreme democracy, or a pure oligarchy; or a tyranny may grow out of either extreme . . . but it is not so likely to arise out of the middle constitutions and those akin to them. (*Pol.* 1295^B34–1296^A21; emphasis added)

Like Aristotle, Polybius (c.200–c.118 BCE) believed that mixing two or more of the forms of government would check the tendencies of the ruling group—whether comprising one person, the few, or the many—to pursue its own interests, and thus would promote the common good. Polybius took the idea further than Aristotle, however, and he drew on Roman history and practice as much as Greek experience in developing the theory of the mixed constitution. As a Greek leader held hostage in Rome for seventeen years, Polybius had the opportunity to study what the Romans had long regarded as their *res publica*—that is, the 'public thing' that was their body politic. In his *Histories*, Polybius argued that each of the true or good forms of government suffers from a tendency to degenerate over time into its corresponding corrupt or perverted form: monarchy into tyranny; aristocracy into oligarchy; and rule by the many, which he called 'democracy', into mob rule. Yet Rome had found a way to stave off political decay and corruption by mixing or balancing rule by the one (the Roman consuls), the few (the Senate), and the many (the people through various powers, such

as the power to elect tribunes and to reward and punish their leaders). Corruption might be inevitable, but for Polybius the republic, with its mixed constitution, offered the best chance for a stable and long-lasting government in the public interest.

Roman political practice was probably more important to the subsequent development of republicanism than Roman political philosophy, but Cicero (106–43 BCE) contributed in at least two ways to republican theory. First, he reinforced the claim that there are both true and perverted forms of rule by one, the few, and the many, and he agreed with Polybius when he insisted, in book I, §§54 and 69, of his *Republic*, that the surest way to prevent corruption is through ‘an alloy’ that is ‘balanced and compounded from’ these forms of rule (1999: 24, 31). Cicero’s second contribution was his famous definition of the republic, or commonwealth, as ‘not any group of men assembled in any way, but an assemblage of some size associated with one another through agreement on law and community of interest’ (1999: 18). For Cicero, indeed, ‘agreement on law’ seems to be a large part of the ‘community of interest’ shared by the citizens of a republic. Like the historians Sallust (c.86–34 BCE) and Livy (59/64 BCE–17 CE), he took the republic to be an empire of laws, not of men (Wirszubski 1960: 9).

An empire of men, or Caesars, soon eclipsed the Roman republic, however, and republican theory declined along with republican institutions. The rise of Christianity, with its tendency to discount the value of politics, may also have played a part in this decline. Republican ideas survived in the Roman legal tradition, to be sure, and they did not disappear completely from the political theory of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74), for example, drew heavily on Aristotle in his natural-law theory, defining law in his *Summa theologiae* (I–II. 90, 4 *in c.*) as an ‘ordinance of reason for the common good’; and later declaring (*ST* I–II. 95, 4 *in c.*) that ‘a form of government which is a mixture of the other types... is the best’ (Aquinas 2002 [1266–73]: 82–3, 136). But it was a Renaissance Italian Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) who seems to have contributed most to the revival of republican thought.

This revival began in the late Middle Ages, perhaps as early as 1085, when one after another of the cities of northern Italy asserted its independence of the authority of the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire (Skinner 2002: ch. 2). The revival eventually included Machiavelli’s Florence, where the republic was under continual threat from both internal and external opponents. Although he is best known for the apparently callous advice he offers in *The Prince*, Machiavelli stated his preference for republicanism in his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*. In particular, he endorses mixed government in Book I, Chapter 2, of the *Discourses*, praising Lycurgus for establishing such a government in ancient Sparta and acknowledging Fortune for fostering, in Rome, a republic in which ‘all of the three types of government had their shares’, thereby producing ‘a perfect state’. Friction played as much a part as Fortune, though, as Machiavelli maintains that the Roman Republic achieved ‘this perfection... through the discord between the people and the Senate...’ (Machiavelli 1965: 200).

Machiavelli had in mind the discord that emerges as the elements of a mixed constitution check and balance one another—that is, the healthy discord or friction that sustains the rule of law as it prevents any one element from dominating the others. But it was the discord of the religious and political upheavals of early modern Europe that spread the revival of republicanism. The early Protestants did not think of themselves as republicans, but they began to resort to republican ideas to justify the stances they took with regard to the secular authorities. Thus John Calvin (1509–64) found himself appealing, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536: bk IV, ch. 20, §31) to the Spartan office of the *ephor* and the ‘popular tribunes’ of Rome when he suggested that Christians may justly disobey their rulers when ‘any magistrates appointed for the protection of the people and the moderation of the power of kings’ lend their authority to disobedience (Calvin 1956 [1536]: 81). Subsequently, in the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century, a number of writers pressed the ‘neo-roman’ conception of liberty, according to which freedom is the absence of dependence or domination (Skinner 1998). So conceived, freedom is not simply the absence of restraint or interference, but freedom under or through the law, with the law to be determined in some fashion by self-governing citizens.

The most notable of these neo-roman writers was probably James Harrington (1611–77), the author of *Oceana*. In the ‘Preliminaries’ chapter of *Oceana* Harrington distinguishes between two ways of defining ‘government’. On one side of the divide are those who define ‘government . . . *de jure* or according to ancient prudence’ as ‘the empire of laws and not of men’; on the other, those who define it ‘*de facto* or according unto modern prudence . . .’ In the former group he places Aristotle, Livy, and ‘Machiavel (whose books are neglected . . .)’; in the latter category are Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and others who regard government as ‘the empire of men and not of laws’ (Harrington 1992 [1656]: 8–9). Linking himself to the former group, Harrington goes on to endorse mixed government and two other schemes less commonly associated with republicanism. One is a *rota*, or a system of rotating public offices so as to avoid concentrations of political power; and the other is an agrarian law that would redistribute land in order to prevent concentrations of economic power—concentrations that would render some citizens dependent upon the will of others.

In the eighteenth century republican concerns were central to the revolutions in North America and France, with Harrington a writer much admired by the American revolutionaries. Perhaps the clearest evidence of their republican tendencies appears, however, in the new governments that emerged from these revolutions. In the United States, the Constitution ratified in 1788 guarantees every state of the union ‘a Republican Form of Government’ (art. IV, §4); and in the next decade the French revolutionaries—who attempted to replace the traditional *monsieur* and *madame* with *citoyen* and *citoyenne* (citizen)—declared the abolition of the monarchy and the formation of the French Republic. In the course of the ratification debates, moreover, the principal authors of *The Federalist*—Alexander Hamilton (1757–1804) and James Madison (1751–1836)—drew on Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* to counter the claim that the new country would be too large to survive as a republic. It would not be too large, they argued,

especially in Hamilton's *Federalist* 9, because the United States would be a 'compound' or 'confederate' republic—that is, a large republic composed of smaller republics.

What exactly should be the proper relationship between this large republic and its constituent republics became the subject of long and sometimes ferocious controversy in the United States. That the country should be a republic, however, was never in dispute. Agreement as to the desirability of republican government became increasingly widespread in Europe and Latin America, too, though not without resistance on the part of defenders of monarchy, theocracy, and, in the twentieth century, fascism and communism. By the twentieth century, however, republicanism was no longer a central concern of political philosophers. In part this was the result of the growing attention to democracy, and in part the result of the rise of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism—all of which bear the traces of republican concepts and principles.

CONTEMPORARY REPUBLICANISM

For much of the twentieth century, at least in the English-speaking world, republicanism seemed more a matter of historical than of philosophical interest (e.g. Fink 1962 [1945]; Robbins 1959; Pocock 2003 [1975]). Books such as Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (1965) and Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision* (1960) powerfully stated republican themes, but neither Arendt nor Wolin advertised these books as contributions to republican theory. Interest in the possibilities of such a theory revived in the last decades of the century, however, and especially so with the publication of Philip Pettit's *Republicanism* (1997).² Pettit's book and subsequent essays are noteworthy for many reasons, but in particular for his claim that 'the supreme political value' of republicanism is freedom, with freedom understood to be freedom from domination (Pettit 1997: 80). Whether this is a uniquely republican or even an adequate conception of freedom is now the subject of considerable controversy, with Pettit and Skinner vigorously responding to their critics (e.g. Pettit 2008; Skinner 2008). Whether republicanism itself is an adequate or distinctive political philosophy is the subject of a broader controversy (e.g. Gey 1993; Goodin 2003; Brennan and Lomasky 2006). There is no doubt, though, that a republican revival is well underway, with various civic or neo-republicans working to demonstrate the merits of this ancient theory in the twenty-first century (e.g. Sandel 1996; Viroli 2002; Maynor 2003). These efforts include attempts to draw out the implications of republicanism for economic matters (e.g. Dagger 2006 and Pettit 2006, both responding to Gaus 2003), for criminal justice and the law more generally (e.g. Braithwaite and Pettit 1990; Besson and Marti 2009), for welfare policy (White 2003), and for the problems of culturally pluralistic societies

² See Dagger (2004) for a more complete account of these developments.

(Laborde 2008). These and similar efforts may or may not prove to be widely persuasive among political philosophers, but they testify nevertheless to the enduring conviction that animates republicanism—that is, the conviction that government is a public matter to be directed by self-governing citizens.

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