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# Communitarianism and Republicanism

RICHARD DAGGER

Communitarianism and republicanism are closely related schools of thought – so closely related that friend and foe alike sometimes conflate them. The relationship is evident in their Latin roots: communitarians are concerned with *communitas*, the common life of people who form a community, and republicans are devoted to the *res publica*, the good of the public. Of the two, however, only republicanism traces its lineage as well as its name to ancient Rome. Indeed, scholars often look beyond Rome to the philosophers and city-states of ancient Greece, particularly Aristotle and Sparta, for the origins of republicanism. For the origins of communitarianism, though, one need look no farther back than the nineteenth century, and it is only since the 1980s that the term ‘communitarian’ has gained its present currency as a result of the so-called liberal–communitarian debate.

This debate points to another way in which communitarianism and republicanism are related. Both the emergence of communitarianism and the revival of republicanism in recent years stem from an uneasiness with liberalism. In both cases the fundamental complaint is that liberalism is guilty of an excessive or misguided emphasis on the rights and liberties of the individual that ‘nurtures a socially corrosive form of individualism’ (Newman, 1989: 254). But exactly how liberalism has gone wrong and what should be done to set matters right are points on which communitarians and republicans disagree – not only with each other but among themselves. Some communitarians and republicans advance their theories as alternatives to liberalism, while others take themselves to be restoring or reviving the concern for community or civic life that once informed liberal theory and practice. For contemporary communitarians and republicans alike, then, the abiding challenge is to define their position in relation to liberalism.

This challenge is especially daunting for communitarians, who seem to be joined more by a common impulse or longing than by agreement on shared principles. As a result, as I shall explain below, communitarians have been vulnerable to three charges: first, that their objections to liberal theory are largely misconceived; second, that they have no clear alternative to offer, largely because they fail to define ‘community’ in a precise or useful way; and third, that the vague alternative they do offer runs the risk of imposing stifling conformity, or worse, on society. There is, in addition, the embarrassment that some of the most prominent scholars to wear the communitarian label have either abandoned communitarianism or denied that the label ever truly fitted them.

Contemporary republicans face similar charges, but they have more resources with which to meet them. To understand what these resources are, however, and to appreciate the superiority of republicanism to communitarianism, we shall need to begin at the beginning – before the liberal–communitarian debate and before the republican revival of the last 30 years or so – with a brief account of the republican tradition in the history of political thought. With that and an even briefer account of the development of communitarianism lending the necessary background, we shall be in a position to assess the merits and prospects of contemporary communitarianism and republicanism.

## REPUBLICANISM, CLASSICAL AND MODERN

According to the standard dictionary definition, a republic is a political system with a representative

government and an elected executive officer rather than a monarch. In places where the presence or vestiges of monarchy are not a concern, the stress is likely to fall on the representative aspect of republicanism, as it did when James Madison distinguished a 'republic' from a 'pure democracy' in *Federalist* 10 (Rossiter, 1961: 81–2). Where the real or symbolic power of monarchy is still a political force, the anti-monarchical aspect of republicanism will be primary – as the statements of the Australian Republican Movement and similar groups in other Commonwealth countries indicate.<sup>1</sup> The same is true of France and other countries in which the struggle between pro- and anti-monarchical forces became a defining feature of the political culture.<sup>2</sup> Setting these differences of emphasis aside, however, it seems safe to say that a republican is someone who favours representative government and opposes hereditary monarchy.

Safe, perhaps, but neither entirely accurate nor especially enlightening. Whether they were Greeks or Romans, the original republicans did not think of the republic as a form of *representative* government. The ideal, at least, was that the republic would be a form of self-government in which citizens would act and speak for themselves. Historically, moreover, republicans have been concerned less with the elimination of monarchy than with preventing the abuse of power by anyone holding public office. Cicero does ask in his *Republic*, 'So who would call that a republic, i.e., the property of the public, when everyone was oppressed by the cruelty of a single man?' (1998: 72 [Book III, 43]). But the subsequent discussion reveals that Cicero believed that rule by the few and rule by the many could also be tyrannical – and therefore not republican. Like Polybius, Aristotle, and Plato, he held that there are both just and tyrannical forms of rule by one, by the few, and by the many, and he agreed with Polybius when he insisted that the surest way to prevent tyranny is through 'a carefully proportioned mixture' (1998: 21 [Book I, 45]) of these forms of rule. If Cicero and other republicans have often opposed monarchy, it is because hereditary monarchs tend to regard the state or body politic as their property, to be disposed of as they wish, rather than as the *res publica* – the public's property or affair. The core of republicanism, in short, is neither a desire for representation nor opposition to monarchy as such; it is the belief that government is a public matter to be directed by the members of the public themselves.<sup>3</sup>

This is to say that *publicity* and *self-government* are the cornerstones of republicanism. By 'publicity' I mean the condition of being open and public rather than private or personal. This is the sense in which John Stuart Mill uses the word when he argues in *Considerations on Representative Government* that the vote is not a right to be exercised

in secret but a trust or duty that 'should be performed under the eye and criticism of the public' (1991: 355). But what, then, is 'the public'? And how are its members to govern themselves? There is no single republican answer to these questions. Republicans long assumed that only citizens counted as members of the public and only property-owning, arms-bearing men could be citizens. Contemporary republicans define the public and citizenship more expansively, however, to include women and people without substantial property. Similar shifts have occurred with regard to self-government. When they designed representative institutions for the new republic, for example, the men who drafted the US Constitution knew they were departing from the classical conception of self-government as direct participation in rule; yet they saw representation as an improvement within, not an abandonment of, republican practice. Whether they were right to think so, or whether they sacrificed too much participation and relied too heavily on representation, remains a point of contention. But it is the commitment to publicity and self-government that generates this and other intramural disputes among republicans. For republicans, the question is not whether publicity and self-government are good things, but how best to achieve them.

One could say the same, of course, about liberals, conservatives, socialists, and others who claim to promote government of, by, and for the people. To the extent that they stress the importance of publicity and self-government, however, modern political theories draw upon the legacy of classical republicanism. To the extent that they differ from one another – and from republicanism – it is because they pursue the implications of publicity and self-government in different ways. To understand what is distinctive about republicanism, then, we must examine the implications republicans draw from publicity and self-government.

In the case of publicity, the implications are twofold. The first is that politics, as the public's business, must be conducted openly, *in public*. The second is that 'the public' is more than a group of people; it is an aspect or sphere of life with its own claims and considerations, even if it is not easily distinguished from the private. Something is public when it involves people who share common concerns that take them out of their private lives and beyond: as Tocqueville put it in *Democracy in America*, 'the circle of family and friends' (1969: 506). No matter how desirable they may seem to others, neither a life of unfettered self-indulgence nor one devoted exclusively to family and friends will appeal to a republican.

From these aspects of publicity follow the republican emphases on the *rule of law* and, perhaps most distinctively, *civic virtue*. The public business

must be conducted in public not only for reasons of convenience – literally, of coming together – but also to guard against *corruption*. As citizens, people must be prepared to overcome their personal inclinations and set aside their private interests when necessary to do what is best for the public as a whole. The public-spirited citizens who act in this way display public or civic virtue. If they are to manifest this virtue, furthermore, the public must be bound by the rule of law. Because it is the public's business, politics requires public debate and decisions, which in turn require rules establishing who may speak, when they may speak, and how decisions are to be reached. Decisions must then take the form of promulgated rules or decrees that guide the conduct of the members of the public. From the insistence on publicity, the rule of law quickly follows.<sup>4</sup>

The connection of self-government to the rule of law is at least as strong and immediate. Self-governing citizens cannot be subject to absolute or arbitrary rule, whether it proceeds from external or internal forces. If the citizen is to be *self-governing*, that is, he or she must be free from the absolute or arbitrary rule of others, which means that citizens must be subject to the rule of law – the government or empire of laws, not of men, according to the old formula.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, self-government requires *self-governing*. The republican citizen is someone who acts not arbitrarily, impulsively, or recklessly, but according to laws he or she has a voice in making. 'For the impulse of appetite alone is slavery', as Rousseau declared in the *Social Contract* (1978: 56 [Book I, ch. 8]), 'and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is freedom'.<sup>6</sup> Again, the need for the rule of law is evident.

As with publicity, the republican commitment to self-government leads to characteristic republican themes, such as concern for freedom, equality, and, again, civic virtue. Self-government is, of course, a form of freedom. For republicans, it is the most important form, for other kinds of individual freedom are secure only in a free state, under law. Freedom thus requires dependence upon the law so that citizens may be independent of the arbitrary will of others. As Rousseau said in *Émile*:

Dependence on men ... engenders all the vices, and by it, master and slave are mutually corrupted. If there is any means of remedying this ill in society, it is to substitute law for man and to arm the general wills with a real strength superior to the action of every particular will. (1979: 85)

Rousseau also knew, as he makes plain in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *Political Economy*, that the law itself could be corrupted. That is why he ends Book I of the *Social Contract* with this note: 'laws are always useful to those who

have possessions and harmful to those who have nothing. It follows from this that the social state is only advantageous to men insofar as they all have something and none of them has anything superfluous' (1978: 58). Equality under law is only possible, in other words, when wealth and property are distributed in a way that prevents some people from bending the law to their will. Republicans, including Rousseau, have typically endorsed private ownership of property because they see in it a means of fostering independence. They have been less interested in an equal opportunity to become rich, however, than in equal protection under the law and equal opportunities to participate in public life. That is why they have sometimes called for limits on the accumulation of wealth, as James Harrington did in *Oceana* when he advocated an 'agrarian' law 'fixing the balance in lands' (1992: 13). (For similar views in contemporary republicanism, see Sandel, 1996: 329–33 and Pettit, 1997: 135.) It also explains Mary Wollstonecraft's complaint that the inferior status of women often compels them to eat 'the bitter bread of dependence' (1985: 158).

The law only ensures the citizen's freedom, however, when it is responsive to the citizenry and when the republic itself is secure and stable enough for its laws to be effective. Sustaining freedom under the rule of law thus requires not only public-spirited participation in public affairs and a willingness to bear the burdens of a common life – the civic virtue of the republican citizen – but also the proper form of government. This usually has been some version of *mixed* or *balanced* government, so called because it mixes and balances elements of rule by one, by the few, and by the many. As J. G. A. Pocock (1975) and others have noted, writers from Polybius and Cicero to Machiavelli and the American Founders celebrated the mixed constitution for its ability to stave off corruption and tyranny [see further Chapter 26]. Monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, according to these writers, are prone to degenerate into tyranny, oligarchy, and mob rule, respectively; but a government that disperses power among the three elements could prevent either the one, the few, or the many from pursuing its own interest at the expense of the common good. With each element holding enough power to check the others, the result should be a free, stable, and long-lasting government. To be sure, republicans have sometimes struggled to reconcile their faith in mixed government with their distrust or even hatred of hereditary monarchy and aristocracy. But this struggle, as in the case of the American Founders, has led to a reinterpretation of balanced government as one that relies upon the *checks and balances* of separated powers or functions of government. Whether mixed in the older sense or balanced in the newer, though, the point is

to resist the corruption of power by preventing its concentration.

If the balanced constitution is the characteristic form of the republic, civic virtue is its lifeblood. Without citizens who are willing to defend the republic against foreign threats and to take an active part in government, even the mixed constitution will fail. Republics must thus engage in what Michael Sandel calls 'a formative politics ... that cultivates in citizens the qualities of character that self-government requires' (1996: 6). Constitutional safeguards may be necessary to resist avarice, ambition, luxury, idleness, and other forms of corruption, but they will not be enough to sustain freedom under the rule of law. Replenishing the supply of civic virtue through education and other means will thus be one of the principal concerns of a prudent republic – a concern manifest in the works of writers as different in other respects as Aristotle and Wollstonecraft.

A prudent republic will also be a small one. That, at least, has been the conclusion – or presumption – of many republicans throughout the centuries. 'In a large republic,' Montesquieu explained in *The Spirit of the Laws*, 'the common good is sacrificed to a thousand considerations; it is subordinated to exceptions; it depends upon accidents. In a small one, the public good is better felt, better known, lies nearer to each citizen; abuses are less extensive and consequently less protected' (1989: 124 [Book VIII, ch. 16]). So widespread was this view in the late eighteenth century that the American authors of the *Federalist* found it necessary to point out that Montesquieu had also allowed for the possibility of a 'federal' or 'CONFEDERATE' (*Federalist* 9) republic. Even then, the debate over the proposed Constitution often turned on the question of whether the United States would become a 'federal' or a 'compound' republic – that is, a republic comprising 13 or more smaller republics – or whether it would become a 'consolidated' republic that could not long preserve its republican character.

Some scholars have taken disagreements about the proper size of a republic to mark one way in which modern republicans have diverged from the path of classical republicanism. According to this view (Pangle, 1988; Rahe, 1992; Zuckert, 1994), the truly *classical* republicans of ancient Greece saw civic virtue as desirable because it protected and preserved the *polis* 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). By contrast, modern republicans, who stem from Machiavelli, are willing to accept representative government and large polities

because of their conception of virtue, which allows for commerce and acquisitiveness, and their concern for natural rights [see also Chapters 3 and 26].

Other scholars are more impressed by the continuity of the republican tradition. Some of these, such as Pocock (1975), trace the line of development from the 'Atlantic republicans' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries back through Machiavelli to Polybius and Aristotle, while Quentin Skinner (1998) and others hold that modern republicanism derives primarily from Roman theory and practice (see e.g. Sellers, 1998). Those who look back to Aristotle tend to stress the side of republicanism that calls for a life of public-spirited political participation; those who look to Rome stress the republican commitment to independence as freedom under the law. (See Honohan, 2002, for an analysis that stresses the distinction between participatory and rule-of-law republicanism.) In neither case, however, is there an attempt to draw a sharp or significant distinction between classical and modern republicanism. To the contrary, these scholars take the historical consciousness of modern republicans – a consciousness reflected in their tendency to look to the ancient world for exemplars – as evidence of the continuity of the classical republican tradition.

Whether the camp that insists on distinguishing modern from classical republicanism or the camp that resists that distinction is right is, of course, a contested matter. But there is no doubt that it is the latter group that is largely responsible for the republican revival of recent years. Before turning to that revival, however, we should step back for a brief survey of communitarianism, with special attention to the liberal–communitarian debate [see further Chapters 8 and 30].

## COMMUNITARIANISM

Longing for community is no doubt to be found in political thought at least as far back as the republican concern for publicity and self-government. But that longing did not find expression in the word 'communitarian' until the 1840s, when it and *communautaire* appeared almost simultaneously in the writings of English and French socialists [see further Chapters 28 and 29]. French dictionaries point to Étienne Cabet and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon as the first to use *communautaire*, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the credit for 'communitarian' to one Goodwyn Barmby, who founded the Universal Communitarian Association in 1841 and edited a magazine he called *The Promethean, or Communitarian Apostle*. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on 'English reformers', Barmby

advertised his publication as 'the cheapest of all magazines, and the paper most devoted of any to the cause of the people; consecrated to Pantheism in Religion, and Communism in Politics' (1842: 239).

In the beginning, then, 'communitarian' seems to have been a rough synonym of 'socialist' and 'communist'. While those words gradually acquired a more precise sense in the ideological battles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'communitarian', when it was used at all, remained a vague, general term. To be a communitarian was simply to believe that community is somehow vital to a worthwhile life and is therefore to be protected against various threats. Socialists and communists were leftists, but a communitarian could as easily be to the right as the left of centre politically (Miller, 2000c) [see further Chapter 10].

Communitarianism in this sense began to take shape as a self-conscious way of thinking about society and politics in the late nineteenth century [see Chapters 28 and 29]. According to one line of thought that developed at the time, the primary threat to community is the centrifugal force of modern life. That is, people who moved from the settled, family-focused life of villages and small towns to the unsettled, individualistic life of commerce and cities might gain affluence and personal freedom, but they paid the price of alienation, isolation, and rootlessness. Ferdinand Tönnies (2001), with his distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (association or civil society), has been especially influential in this regard. As Tönnies defines the terms, *Gemeinschaft* is an intimate, organic, and traditional form of human association; *Gesellschaft* is impersonal, mechanical, and rational. To exchange the former for the latter, then, is to trade warmth and support for coldness and calculation.

Concern for community took another direction in the twentieth century as some writers began to see the centripetal force of the modern state as the principal threat to community. This turn is evident, for instance, in José Ortega y Gasset's warnings in *The Revolt of the Masses* against 'the gravest danger that today threatens civilisation: State intervention; the absorption of all spontaneous social effort by the State' (1932: 120). Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* (1953) provides an especially clear statement of this position, which draws more on Tocqueville's insistence on the importance of voluntary associations of citizens than on a longing for *Gemeinschaft*. Community, on Nisbet's account, is a form of association in which people more or less spontaneously work together to solve common problems and live under codes of authority they have generated themselves. But the free and healthy life of community is increasingly difficult to sustain, he argues, in the face of constant pressure from

the modern state, with its impulses toward centralized power and bureaucratic regulation.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in short, the longing for community took the form of a reaction against both the atomizing, anomic tendencies of modern, urban society and the use of the centripetal force of the modern state to check these tendencies. Moreover, modernity was often linked with liberalism, a theory that many took to rest on and encourage atomistic and even 'possessive' individualism (Macpherson, 1962). Against this background, communitarianism developed in the late twentieth century in the course of a debate with – or perhaps within – liberalism. This debate occasionally took an overtly political form as various political figures insisted on the need to defend community standards and cohesion against the onslaught of relentless individualism. Most notably, Bill Clinton in the United States and Tony Blair in Britain appealed to communitarian concerns as they advocated policies meant to give as much weight to individual responsibilities as to individual rights. The terms of the liberal-communitarian debate, however, were set not so much by politicians as by political philosophers.

Four books published in rapid succession in the 1980s – Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* (1983), and Charles Taylor's *Philosophical Papers* (1985) – marked the emergence of this philosophical form of communitarianism.<sup>7</sup> Different as they are from one another, all of these books express dissatisfaction with liberalism, especially in the form of theories of justice and rights. The main target here was John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), but Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), Ronald Dworkin's *Taking Rights Seriously* (1977), and Bruce Ackerman's *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (1980) also came in for criticism. A typical complaint was, and is, that these theories are too abstract and universalistic. In opposing them, Walzer proposes a 'radically particularist' approach that attends to 'history, culture, and membership' by asking not what 'rational individuals ... under universalizing conditions of such-and-such a sort' would choose, but what would 'individuals like us choose, who are situated as we are, who share a culture and are determined to go on sharing it?' (1983: xiv, 5). Walzer thus calls attention to the importance of community, which he and others writing in the early 1980s took to be suffering from both philosophical and political neglect.

Nor do Walzer and the others who came to be known as 'communitarians' believe that theoretical indifference has merely coincided with the erosion of community that they see in the world around them. In various ways Walzer, MacIntyre, Sandel,

and Taylor, among others, have all charged that the liberal emphasis on distributive justice and individual rights works to divide the citizens of the modern state against one another, thereby fostering isolation, alienation, and apathy rather than commitment to a common civic enterprise. Liberals responded, of course, and the liberal–communitarian debate was on.

Those enlisted on the communitarian side of the debate have pressed four major objections against their ‘liberal’ or ‘individualist’ opponents. The first is the complaint, already noted in Walzer, that abstract reason will not bear the weight philosophers have placed on it in their attempts to ground justice and morality. This ‘Enlightenment project’ (MacIntyre, 1981) is doomed by its failure to recognize that reasoning about these matters cannot proceed apart from shared traditions and practices, each with its own set of roles, responsibilities, and virtues. Second, the liberal emphasis on individual rights and justice comes at the expense of civic duty and the common good. In Sandel’s words, ‘justice finds its limits in those forms of community that engage the identity as well as the interests of the participants. ... [T]o some I owe more than justice requires or even permits ... in virtue of those more or less enduring attachments and commitments which taken together partly define the person I am’ (1982: 179, 182). Contemporary liberals are blind to these enduring attachments and commitments, according to the third charge, because they too often rely on an atomistic conception of the self – an ‘unencumbered self’, in Sandel’s terms – that is supposedly prior to its ends and attachments. Such a conception is both false and pernicious, for individual selves are largely constituted by the communities that nurture and sustain them. When Rawls and other ‘deontological liberals’ teach individuals to think of themselves as somehow prior to and apart from these communities, they are engaged quite literally in a *self-defeating enterprise*. The fourth objection, then, is that these abstract and universalistic theories of justice and rights have contributed to the withdrawal into private life and the intransigent insistence on one’s rights against others that threaten modern societies. There is little sense of a common good or even a common ground on which citizens can meet. In MacIntyre’s words, the conflict between the advocates of incommensurable moral positions has so riven modern societies that politics now ‘is civil war carried on by other means’ (1981: 253). The best we can do in these circumstances is to agree to disagree while we try to fashion ‘local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us’ (1981: 263).

The communitarians have not all pressed all of these objections with equal force, nor have they all

understood themselves to be criticizing liberalism from the outside. Taylor (1989), for instance, has argued that reasonable liberals and communitarians share a commitment to ‘holist individualism’ – a view that rejects ontological atomism and affirms that individuals are somehow socially constituted, on the one hand, yet also recognizes, on the other, the importance of individual rights and liberties. Other theorists with communitarian leanings continue to regard themselves as liberals (Galston, 1991; Spragens, 1995). From their point of view the fundamental worry is that *other* liberals are so preoccupied with the rights and liberties of the abstract individual that they put the survival of liberal societies at risk. Whether this worry is well founded is a question that the ‘liberal’ side of the debate has raised in response to the ‘communitarians’. (For a valuable, full-length survey of this debate, see Mulhall and Swift, 1996.)

Here we may distinguish three interlocking responses. The first is that the communitarians’ criticisms are misplaced because they have misconceived liberalism (Caney, 1992). In particular, the communitarians have misunderstood the abstractness of the theories they criticize. Thus Rawls maintains (1993: Lecture I) that his ‘political’ conception of the self as prior to its ends is not a metaphysical claim about the nature of the self, as Sandel believes, but simply a way of representing the parties who are choosing principles of justice from behind the ‘veil of ignorance’. Nor does this conception of the individual as a self capable of choosing its ends require liberals to deny that individual identity is in many ways the product of unchosen attachments and social circumstances. ‘What is central to the liberal view,’ according to Will Kymlicka, ‘is not that we can *perceive* a self prior to its ends, but that we understand ourselves to be prior to our ends, *in the sense that no end or goal is exempt from possible re-examination*’ (1989: 52, emphasis in original). With this understood, a second response is to grant, as Kymlicka, Dworkin (1986; 1992), Gewirth (1996), and Mason (2000) do, that liberals should pay more attention to belonging, identity, and community, but to insist that they can do this perfectly well within their existing theories. The third response, finally, is to point to the dangers of the critics’ appeal to community norms. Communities have their virtues, but they have their vices, too – smugness, intolerance, and various forms of oppression and exploitation among them. The fact that communitarians do not embrace these vices simply reveals the perversity of their criticism: they ‘want us to live in Salem, but not to believe in witches’ (Gutmann, 1992: 133; Friedman, 1992). If liberals rely on abstractions and universal considerations in their theories of justice and rights, that is because they must do so to rise

above – and critically assess – local prejudices that communitarians must simply accept.

Communitarian rejoinders have indicated their sensitivity to this last point. Sandel, as we shall see, has decided that ‘republican’ better defines his position than ‘communitarian’, and MacIntyre has denied, quite forcefully, that he is or ever was a communitarian.<sup>8</sup> Others have embraced the communitarian label, but their rejoinders to ‘liberal’ criticisms stress their desire to strike a balance between individual rights and civic responsibilities (Etzioni, 1996) in order to ‘move closer to the *ideal* of community life’ – a life in which ‘we learn the value of integrating what we seek individually with the needs and aspirations of other people’ (Tam, 1998: 220, emphasis added). In contrast to MacIntyre, Sandel, Walzer, and Taylor, these ‘political communitarians’ (Frazer, 1999) are less concerned with philosophical criticism of liberalism or individualism than with moving closer to the ideal of community life by reviving civil society. They hope to do this, in particular, by calling attention to shared values and beliefs, encouraging active and widespread participation in civic life, and bringing politics down to the local, properly ‘human’ level (Frazer, 1999: 41–2).

The key question for these ‘political’ communitarians is whether ‘the ideal of community life’ is precise and powerful enough to do the work they want it to do. To the ‘political’ communitarian, appealing to the ‘spirit’ of community holds the promise of uniting people of various political inclinations – left, right, and centre. To others, however, it seems that ‘the communitarian political movement, avoiding controversial political issues in order to appeal to as wide a range of constituents as possible, ends up as little more than a moral appeal to us all to behave better: take more responsibility for our social environment, avoid corruption, etc., etc.’ (Miller, 2000c: 109). Communitarianism of this sort may be useful as exhortation, but it is too vague and accommodating to succeed as a political philosophy.

## REPUBLICANISM REVIVED

Whether ‘philosophical’ or ‘political’, communitarianism is too vague to be helpful and too accommodating to be acceptable. Communities take a great many forms, including some – such as fascist or Nazi communes – that communitarians themselves must find unpalatable or intolerable. Sandel acknowledges the point when he says, in his review of Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*, that the ‘term “communitarianism” is misleading ... insofar as it implies that rights should rest on the values or

preferences that prevail in any given community at any given time’ (1994: 1767). He has, accordingly, abandoned this misleading term in favour of ‘republicanism’. He persists in his criticism of liberalism, to be sure, but he apparently believes that he is in a better position to criticize as a republican committed to ‘a formative politics ... that cultivates in citizens the qualities of character self-government requires’ (1996: 6) than as a communitarian committed to the prevailing values and preferences in a given community at a given time. What counts for the republican is not community *per se*, but the community of self-governing, public-spirited citizens.

Sandel’s profession of republicanism has contributed to a revival of republican political theory that has been under way since at least 1975, when Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* called attention to the ‘Atlantic republican tradition’. Pocock himself drew on the work of other historians, such as Zera Fink (1945), Caroline Robbins (1959), Bernard Bailyn (1967), and Gordon Wood (1969), who had stressed the importance of republican or ‘commonwealth’ themes in the political controversies and upheavals of England and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [see further Chapter 26]. Another source of inspiration was the political theorist Hannah Arendt: ‘In terms borrowed from or suggested by the language of Hannah Arendt, [*The Machiavellian Moment*] has told part of the story of the revival in the early modern West of the ancient ideal of *homo politicus* (the *zōon politikon* of Aristotle), who affirms his being and his virtue by the medium of political action’ (1975: 550) [see further Chapter 23].

It would be unwise to say that a thinker as multifarious as Arendt was first, last, and above all a republican, but there is certainly a strong streak of republicanism in her writings (Canovan, 1992, esp. ch. 6). This streak is most evident in her recurring concern for what I have called the cornerstones of republicanism – publicity and self-government. To some commentators this concern seems little more than misplaced nostalgia for the ancient *polis* (e.g. O’Sullivan, 1975). But Arendt’s complaint is not so much that civic life in modern democracies has declined dramatically from some golden age, as that it has failed to realize the promise of republican citizenship. Technology has eased the burdens of labour and freed us to act as citizens in the public realm, she argued in *The Human Condition* (1958), yet we forsake public life in favour of private consumption. We want government to provide for the welfare of the citizenry, she declared in *On Revolution*, but we ‘deny the very existence of public happiness and public freedom’ as we ‘insist that politics is a burden’ (1965: 273). We are, in short, squandering an opportunity to achieve what the republicans of ancient Greece and Rome



thought to be impossible – a polity in which the freedom of republican self-government is available not only to the well-to-do few but to almost the entire people.

Similar worries about ‘the erosion of the distinctively political’ animated Sheldon Wolin’s influential *Politics and Vision* (1960: 290). Like Arendt, Wolin’s complaint is that ‘the political’ has been displaced by ‘the social’ in the modern world. What we call ‘politics’ is little more than the squabbling of groups seeking to protect and promote their interests, with devastating consequences for civic life. ‘There is substantial evidence,’ Wolin remarks, that

participation in public affairs is regarded with indifference by vast numbers of members. The average citizen seems to find the exercise of political rights burdensome, boring, and often lacking in significance. To be a citizen does not appear an important role nor political participation an intrinsic good ... By reducing citizenship to a cheap commodity, democracy has seemingly contributed to the dilution of politics. (1960: 353)

In retrospect, then, Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* appears to have brought together and supplied a name for two previously distinct bodies of scholarship: the efforts of historians to recover a form of political thought that seemed to be all but lost; and the efforts of political theorists, notably Arendt and Wolin, to remind their contemporaries of the value of the public life of the self-governing citizen. Those scholars who have subsequently seen themselves as engaged in the republican revival have tried, for the most part, to combine these tasks by dedicating themselves to the historical retrieval and reconstruction of republicanism (e.g. Sullivan, 1986; Boyte, 1989; Oldfield, 1990). So much is necessary, it seems, if they are to show that the republican concepts and idioms of earlier eras still speak to present concerns. Thus Sandel tries in *Democracy’s Discontent* to devise a ‘public philosophy’ for the United States by reclaiming the republicanism of the American Founding and the ‘political economy of citizenship’ that governed American thinking about economic relationships, he argues, into the late nineteenth century.

But that is not to say that neorepublican theorists have shied away from prescription as they have explored the implications of republicanism for contemporary politics. To the contrary, their recommendations range from the specific – national or civic service programmes (Barber, 1984: 298–303), campaign finance reform (Sunstein, 1988: 1576–8), and compulsory voting (Dagger, 1997: 145–51), for example – to such general issues as national identity (Miller, 1995), economic arrangements that foster citizenship and strong communities (Sandel, 1996: Part II; Sullivan, 1986; ch. 7), and the justification of

punishment (Braithwaite and Pettit, 1990). They are not so united on any of these points as to warrant the claim that there is a neorepublican programme for political change, but it is possible to discern four broad themes on which they do agree. These are the interrelated themes of political equality, freedom as self-government, deliberative politics, and civic virtue (cf. Sunstein, 1988: 1548).

The commitment to equality is hardly distinctive of neorepublicanism, for it is a commitment shared, if Dworkin (1977: 179–83) and Kymlicka (1990: 4–5 and *passim*) are correct, by every plausible political theory. It does distinguish them, of course, from their classical forebears, whose praise of the equal rule (*isonomia*) of citizens sometimes went hand-in-hand with a defence of slavery. What makes the neorepublican position truly distinctive, however, is the combination of a belief in the equal moral worth of persons with the traditional republican emphasis on the importance of *political* equality. Everyone, that is, should have the opportunity to become a citizen, and every citizen should stand on an equal footing, under law and in the political arena, with every other citizen. Republicanism may thus require steps to be taken to relieve women from subjection to men, workers from subjection to employers, and the members of some racial, ethnic, or cultural groups from subjection to others. In the traditional idiom, these steps may be necessary to free some people from dependence on others. They may also require some redistribution of wealth and limits on the use of money to obtain or exercise political influence. Even so, neorepublicans typically take the Aristotelian view of property – private ownership for the public good – and see no point in ‘material egalitarianism’ for its own sake (Pettit, 1997: 161).

The connection of political equality to the second theme, freedom as self-government, is a close one. Both involve what Philip Pettit calls ‘the frankness of intersubjective equality’ (1997: 64). On the republican view, as we have seen, freedom is not so much a matter of being left alone as it is of living under the rule of laws that one has a voice in making. Republicans differ from liberals in this regard, according to Pettit, because ‘the supreme political value’ (1997: 80) of republicanism is freedom understood not as non-interference – the liberal view – but as non-domination or, in Skinner’s terms, ‘absence of dependence’ (2002: 18). It is not interference as such that is objectionable, on this view, but its arbitrariness. The slave and the citizen may both suffer interference when one must bow to the will of the master and the other must bow to the law, but it is a mistake to say that they both suffer the loss of freedom. The master need not be concerned for the slave’s desires or interests, but the law, at least in the ideal, must attend to the interests

of the citizen *qua* citizen even when it interferes with his or her activities. By protecting the citizen against arbitrary power, the law is 'the non-mastering interferer' (Pettit, 1997: 41) that ensures the citizen's freedom. So valuable is this independence from arbitrary power, Pettit insists, that it is a 'primary good' in the Rawlsian sense. Whatever else people may want, they will want to be free from domination because they then will have the ability to make plans, to speak with independent voices, and simply to be *persons*: 'everyone – or at least everyone who has to make his or her way in a pluralistic society – will want to be treated properly as a person, as a voice that cannot be generally ignored' (1997: 91).

Republican political institutions, then, must ensure the political equality of self-governing citizens. To this end, neorepublicans call for a more *deliberative* form of politics [see further Chapters 11 and 12]. As Cass Sunstein puts it, 'republicans will attempt to design political institutions that promote discussion and debate among the citizenry; they will be hostile to systems that promote lawmaking as "deals" or bargains among self-interested private groups' (1988: 1549). This is not to say that republicans believe that citizens would easily or quickly come to agreement about what the common good requires if only government could be freed from the stranglehold of interest groups. The point, instead, is that reviving the republican conception of politics as the public business means rejecting the 'economic model' of politics, according to which individuals and groups bring their preferences, already fixed, to the political marketplace, where they use their political capital and bargaining power to strike the best deals for themselves. On the republican view, politics of this sort is a form of *corruption* that reduces the citizen to a consumer seeking to promote his or her personal interests. Steps must be taken, then, to limit the power of private interests, to prepare people through civic education to take the part of the public-spirited citizen, and to provide them with arenas or forums in which they may engage in debate and deliberation on the public business.

Deliberative politics will succeed, however, only if there is a sufficient supply of civic virtue; otherwise debate and deliberation will be little more than a vain display that distracts attention from the 'real' politics of bargaining for personal advantage. This is the fourth theme of the neorepublicans: civic virtue is necessary if self-government is to be sustained. But the neorepublicans also tend to believe that civic virtue is either in decline or in jeopardy, and they frequently place the blame on liberalism. As Sandel says, 'the civic or formative aspect of our [American] politics has largely given way to the liberalism that conceives persons as free and

independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties they have not chosen' (1996: 6). This 'voluntarist' or 'procedural' liberalism, as found in the works of liberal philosophers such as Rawls and the decisions of liberal jurists, has fostered a society in which individuals fail to understand how much they owe to the community. The chief purpose of the state is thus taken to be the arbitration of conflicting claims of individuals in pursuit of their disparate conceptions of the good life. Such a society will be self-subverting, Sandel insists, for it 'fails to capture those loyalties and responsibilities whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are – as members of this family or city or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic' (1996: 14). Where such loyalties and responsibilities cannot be sustained, self-government cannot survive. Hence the need for a republican revival.

Taken together, these four themes suggest that republicans today have a powerful and coherent political theory – more powerful and coherent, in my view, than communitarianism. But there is a fifth theme running through the writings of the new republicans, and on this point they seem to divide. This theme is the relationship of republicanism to liberalism. In general, neorepublicans share the communitarian conviction that many liberals give too much attention to individual rights and too little to civic duties. This is particularly true, they hold, of libertarians and those who maintain that liberalism must be strictly neutral with regard to competing conceptions of the good [see further Chapter 9]. In response, some scholars with republican sympathies see a need to recall the 'civic' or 'republican' elements in liberalism (e.g. Holmes, 1995; Terchek, 1997; Spragens, 1999) or otherwise argue for the adoption of republican liberalism or liberal republicanism (Sunstein, 1988; Burt, 1993; Dagger, 1997). But others insist, with Pettit and Sandel, that republicanism is different enough from liberalism to justify thinking of them as rival theories. By doing so, however, they open themselves to the objection that Sandel has brought against those liberals who have embraced the ideals of political neutrality and the unencumbered self: that they are engaged in a self-subverting enterprise. Just as a liberal society must be able to count on a sense of community and civic engagement, so a republican polity must be able to count on a commitment to principles generally associated with liberalism, such as tolerance, fair play, and respect for the rights of others. If their zeal for individual rights and liberty sometimes leads liberals to undercut their position by threatening the communal or republican underpinnings of a liberal society, so Pettit, Sandel, and others who oppose republicanism

to liberalism are in danger of undercutting their position by threatening the liberal principles upon which they implicitly rely. (See Dagger, 1999 and 2000, for elaboration of this criticism of Sandel and Pettit, respectively.)

## CONCLUSION

Two conclusions follow from this survey of communitarianism and republicanism. One is that republicanism is superior to communitarianism; the other is that neither historical considerations (Banning, 1986; Isaac, 1988) nor theoretical prudence warrant a sharp distinction between republicanism and liberalism. In developing their theory, though, neorepublicans continue to face difficulties and challenges – two of which I shall briefly discuss by way of conclusion.

The first challenge is to respond to those who hold that neorepublicans can never escape the biases implicit in the traditional republican ideal of the citizen as a property-owning, arms-bearing man. This objection is put forcefully by Iris Marion Young, who detects a denial of ‘difference’ in republican attempts to establish a ‘civic public’ in which citizens devote themselves to the common good. ‘This ideal of the civic public,’ Young charges, ‘excludes women and other groups defined as different, because its rational and universal status derives only from its opposition to affectivity, particularity, and the body’ (1990: 117).

The second challenge is to demonstrate the relevance of republicanism in an age of globalization. In the face of the rapid spread of global communications, the rise of the global economy, and threats to the environment that respect no boundaries, political theorists must think in cosmopolitan terms. To a critical eye, however, republicanism may seem to be a nostalgic form of political thinking that is so fixed on the small-scale polities of years long past – on the Italian city-states, the Roman *civitas*, and the Greek *polis* – as to be incapable of responding to the challenges of globalization.

These are challenges that republicans must take seriously. Indeed, they are taking them seriously, as recent republican or ‘civic liberal’ responses to the challenges of ‘difference’ and of globalism indicate.<sup>9</sup> These responses engage the four themes mentioned above, and they rely ultimately on the republican commitment to publicity and self-government – a commitment that cannot be met if too much is conceded to either the politics of difference or cosmopolitanism. There will be disagreement, no doubt, as to the adequacy of these responses. There should be no doubt, however, that neorepublicans are capable of responding to challenges that

their classical forebears neither faced nor anticipated. That their theory contains such resources is, in the end, the best testimony to the importance of reviving republicanism.

## NOTES

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1 The website of the Australian Republican Movement quotes a dictionary definition of a republic as a system in which the people elect representatives, then adds this statement: ‘In particular, a republic refers to a system of government that has no hereditary monarch – a person who holds political or constitutional office purely as a birthright’ ([www.republic.org.au](http://www.republic.org.au), 18 July 2002).

2 Even Sudhir Hazareesingh, who identifies the leading characteristics of French republicanism as ‘[p]articipationism, perfectionism, universalism, nationalism, and revolutionism’ (1994: 68–9), assumes that opposition to monarchy is a defining feature of republicanism: ‘None of the central figures of the revolution was a self-confessed republican, and France was declared a Republic only in September 1792, after the experiment of a constitutional monarchy had been deemed a failure. The proclamation of the Republic was itself accelerated by popular pressure, emanating particularly from such grass-roots organizations as the anti-monarchical *clubs de quartiers*’ (1994: 69).

3 Cf. Everdell in a book entitled *The End of Kings*: ‘The essential republican principle is that no one person shall rule the community, that everyone shall have a part in the public’s business’ (1983: 297).

4 Cicero again is apposite: ‘a public is not every kind of human gathering, congregating in any manner, but a numerous gathering brought together by legal consent and community of interest’ (1998: 19 [Book I, 39]). See also Book III, 45 (1998: 73): ‘there is no public except when it is held together by a legal agreement’; and for analysis and assessment, see Schofield (1995).

5 Historians (Wirszubski, 1960: 9; Skinner, 1998: 45) trace this formula to the Roman writers Sallust, Livy, and Cicero.

6 Note also the challenge Rousseau sets himself in the *Social Contract*: ‘Find a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before’ (1978: 53 [Book I, ch. 6]).

7 A fifth book, Bellah et al. (1985), invoked communitarian themes in the course of a sociological analysis of the American middle class.

8 Note Bell (1993: 4 and n. 14) on the reluctance of MacIntyre, Walzer, Taylor, and Sandel to admit to being

communitarians. See also MacIntyre: 'Contemporary communitarians, from whom I have strongly dissociated myself whenever I have had an opportunity to do so, advance their proposals as a contribution to the politics of the nation-state' (1994: 302); 'Liberals ... mistakenly suppose that those [totalitarian and other] evils arise from any form of political community which embodies substantive practical agreement upon some strong conception of the human good. I by contrast take them to arise from the specific character of the nation-state, thus agreeing with liberals in this at least, that modern nation-states which masquerade as embodiments of community are always to be resisted' (1994: 303); 'In any case the liberal critique of those nation-states which pretend to embody the values of community has little to say to those Aristotelians, such as myself, for whom the nation-state is not and cannot be the locus of community' (1994: 303). See further MacIntyre (1998: 243–50).

9 For responses to 'difference', see Dagger (1997: 176–81), Spragens (1999: ch. 4), and Miller (2000b). For responses to the global or cosmopolitan challenge, see Sandel (1996: 338–51), Miller (2000a), and Dagger (2001).

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