

Republicanism and Political Theory

To Anna Hewitson Laborde and Kaja Bakken Maynor
who were born as this book was being prepared
and Elias Bakken Maynor
who was there from the start

Republicanism and Political Theory

edited by

Cécile Laborde and John Maynor

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Chapter 1

The Republican Contribution to Contemporary Political Theory

Cécile Laborde and John Maynor

A thorough assessment of the republican contribution to contemporary political theory is long overdue. Republican themes have been deployed by political theorists, with increasing theoretical sophistication and political acumen, for the last three decades or so. Yet the general feeling among professional political theorists has been, in the words of Bob Goodin, that “we were right to have a look, and we were right to reject” republicanism (Goodin 2003). The present volume purports to convince critics such as Goodin that republicanism is worth a second look and that, if there are good reasons to reject it, they need to be comprehensively articulated by critics of republicanism. It is our belief that republicanism has not been taken as seriously as it deserves in Anglo-American political philosophy because of the wrong-headed claim, attributed to some of its defenders, that – like conservatism or socialism before it – it is able to provide a comprehensive alternative philosophy to the dominant philosophy of liberalism. This claim is wrong-headed in two important ways. First, by judging republicanism exclusively in terms of its wholesale compatibility or incompatibility with liberalism, it denies the *sui generis* specificity of the conceptual connections and normative proposals of the former. Second, by focusing on the pre-liberal origins of republicanism, it obscures the fact that most contemporary republicans take seriously what we may call the circumstances of liberal modernity – moral individualism, ethical pluralism, and an instrumental view of political life – and seek to adapt old republican insights to them. In this (limited) sense, they may indeed be called liberal republicans.

The thought behind this volume is that, because such categorizations are often uninformative, the current terms of engagement set by the liberal-republican controversy should be avoided altogether, as they have

too often resulted in mutual caricature. For example, our first section critically assesses the republican contribution to the understanding of the concept of liberty, asking whether interference or domination should be considered as its antonym. Yet it does not take a stance on whether liberalism *per se* is committed to the “pure negative” conception of freedom as non-interference, nor does it say anything about the centrality of negative liberty to contemporary liberalism. Side-stepping fruitless ideological controversies in this way allows us to go to the heart of the conceptual and normative disagreements between republicans and their critics. We hope that the pieces assembled in this volume will allow republican ideas to be looked at in their own terms, and judged accordingly. Put together, they point toward a distinctive theory of *citizenship* organized around the ideal of *non-domination*. This theory is sketched in Philip Pettit’s seminal *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997a), whose influence on republican thought over the last 10 years is amply testified by the contributions in this volume. Pettit’s ideal of non-domination (which the historian Quentin Skinner prefers to call independence) is central to contemporary republicanism. To be free, on the republican view, is to be free from arbitrary power: thus the republican concept of freedom offers a parsimonious conceptual basis for the defense of a normative ideal of political citizenship as non-subjection to arbitrary rule. This has led to distinctive republican contributions to debates about the geographical scope, institutional mechanisms, and motivational foundations of political democracy. The ideal of citizenship as an intersubjectively validated status of non-domination has also stimulated original contributions about the nature of republican community, the relationship between rights and power, and struggles about racial, gender, cultural, and socio-economic exclusion in the contemporary world. In the rest of this introduction, we develop these points and, in the process, offer a summary of each contribution to the present volume.

1. Conceptualizing Liberty

The republican revival began as a work of historical retrieval of a forgotten tradition of Western thought. Challenging the conventional view that liberal modernity in the Anglo-American world emerged out of Lockean natural-rights ideology, revisionist historians showed that there was a coherent republican tradition, running from the neo-classical

civic humanism of Renaissance Italy powerfully exhibited in Niccolò Machiavelli, through to the works of James Harrington and the “Commonwealthmen,” and later to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and James Madison, which deeply influenced English thought up to the late eighteenth century, and was a powerful inspirational force during the American Revolution (Baron 1955; Bailyn 1967; Fink 1962; Pocock 1975; Skinner 1978, 1997; Wood 1969). While the tradition as a whole was centrally concerned with the themes of freedom, political participation, civic virtue, and corruption, it was also (perhaps retrospectively) seen as exhibiting two distinct strands. The first, magisterially brought to life by J. G. A. Pocock, endorsed the Aristotelian concern for the good life and argued that human beings could only realize their nature as “political animals” through participation in self-governing communities. More recently, this reading of republicanism has become closely linked with certain writers such as Michael Sandel (1996: 24–5) and Charles Taylor (1995: 192), who favor a strong civic humanist neo-Athenian reading of republicanism. Alongside this tradition of republicanism could be discerned a neo-Roman tradition whose central concern was *libertas* – the powerful ideal of freedom under the rule of law passionately defended by Roman orators such as Cicero.

In a series of erudite historical writings, Quentin Skinner has demonstrated that neo-Roman thinkers held a distinctive conception of liberty. On the one hand, they did not endorse the Aristotelian view that real freedom consists in self-mastery or self-realization in a community with others. In particular, by contrast to followers of the neo-Athenian tradition, they believed that liberty is not definitionally linked to popular participation. The people, neo-Roman writers from Machiavelli through Harrington assured us, did not want to rule: instead, they wanted not to be ruled, or at least not to be ruled in a particular way. On the other hand, the only guarantee of not being so ruled is to live in what they called a free state. A free state is a state where citizens are not subjected to the arbitrary power of a ruler. It does not need to have the institutional form of a republic (English neo-Roman writers favored a mixed government with a limited monarchy), but it needs to be a republic in the sense that only if rulers are forced to uphold the *res publica*, instead of following their own whim or interests, can citizens enjoy *libertas*. In thus excavating the conceptual foundations of an old ideal – that of the *vivere libero* – Skinner believes that he has identified a coherent way of speaking about liberty which

significantly departs from prevailing assumptions. These are that liberty and political participation can be only conceptually connected on the basis of controversial Aristotelian views about the good life. Not so, according to Skinner: liberty can have a “negative” content *and* only be present if certain “positive” conditions (citizen virtue, non-arbitrary rule, public service) obtain. To be free, on the neo-Roman (or republican for short) view, meant living in a free state. Thus republicans claimed that they had successfully rebutted Hobbes’s denial of the relevance of political forms to liberty, according to which if liberty is seen as absence of interference, then it is the extent and reach of power, not its source, that matters. As Hobbes wryly put it, “Whether a Common-wealth be Monarchical, or Popular, the Freedome is still the same.” Republicans disagreed: in Joseph Priestley’s words, “the more political liberty a people have, the safer their civil liberty.” By 2001, Skinner claimed that he had isolated a “Third Concept of Liberty” (as the title of his British Academy lecture indicated) which opposed “the key assumption of classical liberalism to the effect that force or the coercive threat of it constitute the only forms of constraint that interfere with individual liberty” (Skinner 1997: 84). For republican thinkers, living in subjection to the will of others *in itself* limits liberty (Skinner 2002a: 262).

Meanwhile, these republican insights had been deepened and formalized in Pettit’s *Republicanism* – the book which more than any other has inspired the current revival in republican political theory. Like Skinner, Pettit believes that republican freedom represents a distinct conception of freedom, which he describes as non-domination. Also using Isaiah Berlin’s equation of positive liberty with self-mastery and negative liberty with the absence of interference by others as his starting point, Pettit argues that republican liberty is a third conception of liberty. Pettit’s argument centers on the claim that freedom consists not in the non-interference of others as in negative liberty, nor is it equated with self-mastery as in positive liberty. Instead, Pettit argues that agents are free when they are not subject to the possibility of arbitrary interference, or domination, by others. Importantly, in contrast to traditional liberal approaches, interference, or the absence of it, is not the primary measure of freedom. There are two ways in which domination importantly differs from interference. Firstly, you can be dominated without being interfered with. Consider the classical republican paradigm of unfreedom: slavery. Even if your master is of a benign disposition, and does not interfere with your actions, you are dependent upon his will and vulnerable to his

interference: this is what makes you unfree. As Trenchard and Gordon put it in *Cato's Letters*, "Liberty is, to live upon one's own Terms; Slavery is, to live at the mere Mercy of another." To live at the mercy of another is to suffer unending anxiety about one's fate, to have permanently to anticipate the other's reactions, and to have to curry favor by behaving in a self-abasing, servile manner. Negative liberty theorists are, according to Pettit, unable to see that there is unfreedom when "some people hav[e] dominating power over others, provided they do not exercise that power and are not likely to exercise it" (Pettit 1997a: 9). Thus domination is a function of the relationship of unequal power between persons, groups of persons, or agencies of the state: the ideal of republican freedom is that "no one is able to interfere on an arbitrary basis – at their pleasure – in the choices of the free person." This raises the possibility, secondly and conversely, that you can be interfered with without being dominated. This happens when interference is not arbitrary, for example when it tracks what Pettit has recently called your "avowed interests." For example, while the state interferes in people's lives, levying taxes and imposing coercive laws, it may do so in a non-arbitrary way, if it only seeks ends, or employs only means, that are derived from the public good (the common, recognizable interests of the citizenry).

Pettit and Skinner's conceptualizations of republican freedom have not gone unchallenged. The first section of this volume ("Republican Freedom and its Critics") presents a series of completely new debates between them and defenders of "pure negative" liberty. The four chapters, taken together, offer a highly sophisticated discussion about the proper meaning of the concept of liberty, and chiefly center on the coherence of Pettit's first, and Skinner's main, claim: that there can be unfreedom without interference. While it is no surprise that the most vigorous challenge to republican freedom should have come from advocates of the negative view of liberty as non-interference, it is perhaps more unexpected that the challenge has taken the form of calls for a *rapprochement*. In their chapters, Matthew Kramer and Ian Carter both argue that the pure negative theory of freedom is more capacious than republicans recognize, and is thus able to accommodate domination and dependence, as well as interference, as reductive of liberty. This is because their revised theory of negative liberty diverges from the traditional Hobbesian paradigm in two important ways. First, freedom is reduced by potential as well as by actual interference, as exemplified by cases of subtle coercion, threats, arrogant displays of superiority and