

Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

Panel 1.3 Abstracts

A Radical Revolution in Thought: A Slave's Perspective on Republican Freedom and Social Reconstruction

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Republicanism has both a radical and a conservative character. Freedom and equality are promised to everyone subject to government rule on pain of otherwise being considered a slave. Once included as a free and equal citizen, the price of membership is unity through loyalty to the common good. Republicanism was born of revolution, having its origins in the overthrow of the Roman kings and the establishment of the Republic. This event has served to inspire subsequent republicans to resist their oppressors. That the government would make slaves of them was the rallying call that galvanised rebellion during the English, French and American Revolutions. In spite of this radical heritage, republican societies have a long history of oppressing vulnerable groups and of restricting the benefits of citizenship to certain favoured classes. After their respective revolutions, Rome, England, France and the United States remained patriarchal and slaveholding societies. Notwithstanding the contradiction with their own formal ideals, the calls for unity and stability through loyalty to the principles of the republic served to prolong and entrench these patterns of exclusion and privilege rather than to undermine them.

It is salutary to note that, while republicanism is explicitly constructed around a distinction between freeman and slave, its theory has been entirely written by freemen. Slaves themselves have had no influence on the shape and content of republican theory even where it is said to speak on their behalf. Given their direct experience of oppression, the omission of the slaves' perspective in understanding what freedom and social equality mean is both a serious loss to the discipline and a betrayal of core republican principles. This lack of representation does not stem from any deficiency in their writing. I have argued elsewhere that women such as Mary Wollstonecraft (who wrote self-consciously as slaves) and black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass have made major contributions to republican theory.

By adopting a slave's perspective, I shall argue, we can see at least part of the reason why republican revolutions have often delivered independence only for those who could successfully fight for it. As for the remainder, not only are they left in their unliberated state but their condition is made worse by the belief that the revolution had in fact been waged on everyone's behalf. Wollstonecraft and Douglass both argue that revolution rarely goes far enough. While political upheavals may transfer legal and economic power this does not alter the condition of the most disempowered without a corresponding social revolution, something Douglass describes as "nothing less than a radical revolution in all the modes of thought" which flourished under the old regime. This conceptual revolution must necessarily be made collaboratively with input from all sections of the new society, male and female, black and white, rich and poor.

Wollstonecraft and Douglass both use a republican analysis of the way power inequalities come to corrupt the public commitment to the common good and the resulting struggle for control over shared social values. I focus especially on the argument that substantial concentrations of arbitrary power—political, economic or cultural—inevitably lead to the corruption of the background social environment in which public reason is exercised. This distorts the process of contestation and consensus building, not only further entrenching asymmetries of power but leading to a breakdown in public debate that ultimately threatens everyone's freedom. The outcome resembles what is often called today the 'post-truth' political environment.

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Against Interactional Domination

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The paper examines how Fuller challenged nineteenth-century rules and tried, with the publication of her book, to fight women's social domination, which prevented them from becoming free and independent, in the republican sense, in order to establish more equal relations between the sexes. The article will demonstrate that, by using a political language traditionally reserved to men and developing her feminist critique by using republican paradigms, Margaret Fuller can be considered as one example of nineteenth-century political thinkers who made republicanism and feminism allied. I will start with a brief reconstruction of Pettit's seminal account of domination, highlighting his emphasis on the mere capacity of interference as being sufficient for domination. Secondly, I will introduce the mugger case and show why it is different in important respects from other paradigmatic examples of domination like a traditional marriage. Thirdly, I will provide a structural analysis of dominating power that explains why these differences matter. Interpersonal domination, I argue, is a status-based phenomenon, which is structurally constituted. It is not a dyadic relation between dominator and dominated but a triadic one as it also includes peripheral agents who reproduce aligned social norms and practices, which constitute the power of the dominator. Thus, in order to assess the mugger case we need to analyse the wider power structures it is embedded in. If the victims' status is not degraded, for instance by sexist or racist practices, the mugger certainly constitutes a physical threat; yet this is not an instance of domination. Finally I will argue that keeping an account of domination distinct from purely interactional accounts of power matters for three reasons: the first is conceptual clarity. Conceptualizing both as forms of domination risks losing sight of what is distinctive of dominating forms of power: that it is a status-related form of power that does not need to be exercised. Conceptual clarity in this respect is secondly of particular importance for critical social analysis. A critical analysis of social power needs to focus on social ills such as sexism, racism or classism rather than mere interactional wrongs.

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Reconciling Human Rights and Utopian Projects: Republicanism as an Alternative?

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In contemporary politics, we could see that the law's role of a priori setting the future behavior of subjects is weakening. There is a shift to the rule of administrative regulations that do not reflect the challenges of the future, but only react to current events; in other words, politics is becoming a crisis management. Therefore, politics is losing its typical feature, i.e. its characteristic as the gap between law and social facts, where law is a future-oriented abstract normative order. In a similar manner, Costas Douzinas defines the mission of modern law in terms of correcting reality and opening a distance between itself and the order of the world. Today, however, we could see various depoliticizing tendencies which prevent the politics from moving away from the day-to-day framework.

Even though human rights had historically important progressive character, some contemporary theories of human rights contribute to the above mentioned depoliticizing tendencies. This happens when the interpretation of human rights as barriers against the totalitarian elements of progress shifts to their understanding as the antithesis of utopian thinking as such. It is in this sense in which Samuel Moyn critically calls human rights "the last utopia", an individualistic moral alternative that emerged from the ruins of discredited utopian projects, or in which Tony Judt complains about leaving the properly political quests aside in favor of the satisfying morality of human rights organizations. From the 1970s on, we can understand human rights as something what Carl Schmitt called neutral domain of universal consensus which, while depoliticized, also determines the friend-enemy distinction.

Our aim is, however, to reject this idea of neutral domain and thus reconcile (human) rights thinking and utopian imagination. Human rights should still prevent the utopian thinking from its totalitarian deviations, but we would like to emphasize the role of human rights in the construction of subjects rather than their clearly anti-utopian aspects which prevail in their (neo-) liberal interpretation. The institutional framework of liberal democracy has a potential to be filled by utopian projects which contain a blueprint for a future society that are not contradictory to the idea of human rights, but the strictly anti-utopian thought does not allow this potential to fully emerge.

The question we will also deal with is whether republicanism could be helpful in the reconciliation we have outlined. It seems that Philip Pettit's conception of liberty as non-domination offers larger space for discussing future utopian projects than classical liberal notion of freedom. Moreover, patriotic and communitarian elements in republican thought could be compatible with utopian emphasis on the society as a whole. Thus, republicanism could help to revive politics by widening the gap between law and social facts/order of the world.

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Republicanism against Caesarism in Nineteenth Century Europe

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Working within a republican framework in which freedom is understood as independence from arbitrary power, Fuller demonstrated that, since women lacked independence from men, who had arbitrary power over them, they could be defined as 'non-free' or 'slaves'. In addition, according to republican theories, domination can be legal, when individuals suffer unequal treatments under the law, or political, in the absence of the recognition of their fundamental rights. Fuller enriched these statements theorising a third kind of interference: social domination, derived from traditions, cultural values and behaviour patterns that did not allow half of the population to exercise their right to freedom as independent agents and become, in this way, citizenship. According to Fuller, where domination was primarily social rather than political, the legal recognition of women's rights would never bring freedom unless there was also a change in the cultural patterns and the defeat of the patriarchal ideology.