

Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

Panel 2.3 Abstracts

Alienation in Commercial Society: The Republican Perspective of Rousseau and Ferguson

Rudmer Bijlsma

University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

Contact: rudmer.bijlsma@unil.ch

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Ferguson shared a highly critical analysis of the commercial societies of their time. The many citizens who engaged in commercial pursuits were following their self-interest, the two philosophers agreed, and became ever less interested in defending the public cause. Not just the persistence of their freedom under the rule of law was in jeopardy, but also their personal experience of being free human beings living meaningful lives. Commercial society's citizens were alienated from their true selves due to the fragmentation, the selfishness, and insincerity that characterized modern life and its typical modes of human interaction.

This paper explores the common ground in Rousseau's and Ferguson's republican critiques of commercial society by focusing on their analyses of modern alienation. It contributes in an innovative way to the debate on Rousseau's relation to, and influence on Scottish Enlightenment republicanism, which has thus far chiefly focused on the Rousseau-Smith connection. It addresses two (interrelated) aspects of alienation as Rousseau and Ferguson see it.

The first aspect concerns the insincerity that characterizes the new moral vocabulary of politeness, so much valued by contemporaries like Montesquieu, Hume, and Smith. Ferguson and Rousseau see it as a superficial veneer of benevolence, needed to advance one's position and as such disguising actual motivations. The polite disposition is a mere residue of the truer moral sentiments that humans have, or develop, when placed in more wholesome social conditions. Modern society, then, makes us less than human, alienates us from our better selves. For Rousseau, this is also fundamentally related to modern inequality.

The second aspect of alienation the paper scrutinizes concerns the division of labour. Both philosophers see this division as a threat for the person's integrity. Specialization causes us to give up tasks that are essential for our inner and outer freedom. We become dependent on others, Rousseau says, which leads to ever greater inequality. Both thinkers see a particular threat in political and military specialization. A country needs citizens willing to stand up for their liberty through political participation and, if necessary, in war. Such activities also ennoble the spirit, building a moderately proud citizenry of free equals. Like Smith's, Ferguson's critique of specialization has a particularly modern ring with its account of the repetitive, mind-numbing work of the factory worker.

Finally, the paper points to the relevance of Rousseau and Ferguson for contemporary republicanism. Their accounts of alienation suggest that promoting a negative ideal of liberty as non-domination is not enough. This aligns them with later republican proponents of a more inclusive conception of liberty who also see alienation as a socio-political threat (cf. Arendt 1958; Schuppert 2015). Further, their analyses lead them, in part, to an attitude of resignation. Rousseau seems to have believed France to be beyond salvation, while Ferguson thinks that the alienation of the factory worker is a given fact of modern life (as opposed to the elite's alienation, which can be remedied through political participation). So, they compel us to think about our own hopes for modern societies: What degree, and what kinds of republican freedom do we still consider achievable today?

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Jefferson's Revolution: The Discordant and Rebellious Democratic Experience of 1776

Dean Caivano

York University (Canada)

Contact: caivano.dean@gmail.com

The American Republic is in eclipse. It is as though the spirit of 1776, which gave birth to the nation, has dissipated into a thick malaise of hyper-identity politics driven by an abandonment of the creative capacities of individuals and communities. With the “conquering” of the totalitarian system of communism as well as the reconfiguration of the permanent enemy classified by religiosity and ethnicity, the American way of life – and, in turn, American political philosophy – has drifted into a deep slumber of disillusionment, yet fully content and sustained by an abandonment of the principles of equality and freedom.

The logic of American politics has instantiated a schema that no longer interrogates the boundaries and possibilities of autonomy. Democracy conceived as a regime of modes of being articulated by the axioms of non-domination and self-institution reverberates as a discreet murmur in the echo chamber of our inverted totalitarian system of the West (see Wolin, 2008). Political participation is reduced to institutionalized forms of voting and passivity essentially dislodging the ethos of the *vita activa* accentuated by democratic republicanism (see Arendt, 1998; Abensour, 2001). The pulverization of politics from an experience of being-with-others in a rebellious, fleeting, and indeterminate encounter to a sanitized, isolated space of being-with-no-one has facilitated the reduction of democracy to a systematic proceduralism demarcated not by freedom, but by covert forms of domination.

Attempts to revive the ailing republic have ranged from John Rawls' Kantian political conception of justice as fairness to a prioritization of the good over the right within the strain of American communitarianism to a deliberative turn imbued in a discourse theoretical model of democracy (see Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 1984; Walzer, 1990; MacIntyre, 1981; Habermas, 1996). What these projects sought to do – along with challenges offered by post-Marxists and neo-pragmatists – was to ameliorate a theorization of democracy that opened up pathways for political participation within the contours of the American system while simultaneously affirming an essentialist conception of subjectivity.

However, the rehabilitation of democracy on these fronts failed to look at how flows of power could be reimaged from a bottom-up approach in which the American citizenry instituted their own parameters of self-institution in communion with others. Instead, power was static, positioned between two poles – local and federal – with the hegemonic locus of institutional power being endowed within the seat of the federal government. The republic, in turn, served as a hollowed out shell devoid of a common stage in which the American populace could create new sensibilities, institutions, and modes of being; obliterated by the totalizing sweep of positivism, bureaucracy, and processes of de-democratization.

This paper offers an alternative starting point for uncovering the potentiality of a renewed democratic-republic. Rather than beginning with a liberal understanding qua Louis Hartz's retelling of the expulsion from British tyranny or J.G.A Pocock's republican narrative, this paper presents the American Revolution from a radical democratic paradigm envisioned and articulated by Thomas Jefferson.

By escaping the liberal framing which facilitates a contemporary understanding of American politics as a mechanistic procedural republic or the republican approach which leads to a political plane for the operationalization of the nationalized nation-state, this paper argues that the events of 1776 exists as an articulation of Jefferson's politics of all regime form: a destabilization of the state's hierarchy of power along a plane of antagonistic thought and action by political subjects to institute

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a political community inclusive of all. The American Revolution thus appears as a genuine democratic experience through the actions of social-historical subjects striving for political status by creating a public space that is truly public for all to challenge the state through an explicit questioning of the ontology of state power.

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The new republicanism in The Federalist

Adéla Rádková

Palacky University Olomouc (Czech Republic)

adela.radkova@gmail.com

Although the US constitution has actually introduced a republican state system, we can not find a specific definition of the republic in it. The US Constitution is a deliberately short document. Her authors wanted to create a charter that would survive in times and conditions. However, given the briefness of the Constitution, they felt the need to explain and defend the ideas that had been advocated in it. Thus The Federalist still serve as the primary source of interpretation of the US Constitution. It is therefore my intention to examine the meaning of republicanism in The Federalist. Although I speak of the republican teaching of The Federalist, there is, in fact, an ambiguity in the use of the word in those essays. This ambiguity reflects an ambiguity in the general use of the word in the political theory and discourse of the 18th century. However, more fundamental problem seems to be the so called Madison's "two definitions" of republic from Federalist No. 37 and No. 39. Both of these essays were written by James Madison. I agree, that there is a fundamental difference between these two definitions. I do not, however, believe that it reflects inconsistency in Madison's thinking. I will argue that these "two definitions" reflects Madison's strategy to introduce a new definition of the republic. Thus, in The Federalist, there are two uses of the word republic: 1) its putative meaning in America, the meaning which was embodied in most of the state constitutions and which is the Anti Federalist understanding of republicanism; and 2) The Federalist's understanding of what constitutes republicanism. This second use of republic, represents a significant break on certain crucial points from the then dominant American understanding and is a new republicanism.

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T.G. Masaryk, America, and the Founding of a Republic

Matthew Slaboch

Princeton University (United States)

Contact: msslaboch@indiana.edu

When discussing T.G. Masaryk and his views of the United States, one must distinguish between Masaryk qua philosopher and Masaryk qua politician. As an intellectual, Masaryk was wholly European; American ideas scarcely left an imprint on him. He writes in *Světová revoluce/The Making of a State*: “I admit that I took no pleasure in the American philosophers, neither in the school of Edwards nor in that of Franklin, nor even in the newer tendencies. The epistemology, or theory of knowledge, of William James’s Pragmatism I found...impossible to accept.” In his role as founder of the Czechoslovak Republic, however, Masaryk took a different stance toward the United States. He recounts in his conversations with Karel Čapek that “America furnished me with ample food for observation and study; I learnt there much, very much, of value.” Highlighting what, precisely, Masaryk learned from his visits to the United States is, I believe, a worthy endeavor, and it is one that will bring new attention to this important thinker and leader.

Comparisons might be made between Masaryk and figures better-known in the English-speaking world. Masaryk is the Thomas Jefferson of his people, the man who drafted his nation’s Declaration of Independence. He is at the same his country’s George Washington, a post-independence leader who stood above party interests as a symbol of unity. He is also a Woodrow Wilson, a professor-turned-president who proclaimed the right of small nations to exist. Each of these comparisons is apt, and noting the similarities between Masaryk and any one of his American analogs would be a sufficient starting point for an essay. In my essay, however, I treat Masaryk not as a Jefferson, Washington, or Wilson, but as a twentieth-century, Central European Alexis de Tocqueville. Like Tocqueville, Masaryk experienced life in the United States as an outsider, and he returned home to his native land with certain lessons about democracy. My essay spells out what these lessons were for Masaryk, and how these lessons helped shape the founding of the First Czechoslovak Republic.