

Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

Panel 3.3 Abstracts

Cicero and the Origin of Liberty as a Political Ideal

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Of central importance to the republican project has been the exposition of its unique ideal of freedom. Scholars often take for granted that republicanism is inherently connected to some conception of freedom, and that a defining characteristic of republicanism is to present the freedom of individuals and communities as a goal for which a healthy politics would strive. Some of this scholarship traces the genealogy of republicanism to Greek political thought. Yet, an examination of figures such as Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon yields little in the way of an account of freedom as a central objective of good government—as an ideal. At most, the freedom of individuals (i.e. their status as citizens and not slaves) and the freedom of the political community (as not governed by the will of a single individual) are taken as two among many other preconditions for the achievement of the true ends proper to government: the establishment of justice, the cultivation of virtue, or the realization of the good life. How then, did we arrive at a conception of republicanism wherein its essential connection with an ideal of freedom is assumed even by scholarly experts?

In this paper, I argue that we owe the identification of republicanism with an ideal of freedom to Cicero's innovations. I explore how Cicero rejects the common classical understanding of teleology according to which there is a single best way of life for a human being. His embrace of natural human diversity leads Cicero to conceive of freedom for individuals as a central political goal of any just regime. Cicero then develops arguments for why the loss of liberty is a greater political evil than particular failures of justice or virtue. In other words, Cicero elevates freedom from being a precondition for healthy politics into a primary objective of political life, one in need of constant cultivation and vigilant defense. In doing so, Cicero also establishes the grounds for republicanism to appear as fundamentally opposed to sole rule as a kind of tyranny, in contradiction to the more ambiguous place monarchy holds in much Greek political thought.

This paper thus sheds new light on the origins of a relationship taken to be fundamental: between liberty as an ideal and republicanism. It helps us to see better the logic behind the influential rhetoric of legitimacy that has animated virtually all republican politics since.

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Not a tale of two cities: why "neo-Athenian" and "neo-Roman" are misnomers for republicanism

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As with any other tradition of political thought, there are many ways of interpreting and reconstructing the nature, history and traits of republicanism. Currently, there are mainly two broad reconstructions of the republican tradition, which differ on their understanding of the relations between republican freedom, political participation and civic virtue: for the first view, these three values are intrinsically connected (positive freedom); while for the second one, political participation and civic virtue are only instrumentally connected to freedom, and in order to not betray this instrumental function they have to be based on, and restrained by, the law (freedom as non-domination). The first view, espoused by scholars like Arendt or Sandel, is usually labeled "neo-Athenian" or "neo-Aristotelian"; the second one, articulated by Skinner or Pettit among others, is usually named "neo-Roman". This terminology is based on a view of Ancient Athens as an unrestrained assembly democracy; of Aristotelian political thought as particularly concerned with political participation as a way of human self-improvement; and of Ancient Rome as a balanced republic based on the rule of law. This paper challenges those labels, showing that the Roman republican model was pretty much an embodiment of Aristotelian political ideals; and that Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic were not that different in their conceptions of freedom, political participation, civic virtue or the law, but rather in their understanding of the relationship between class, citizenship and government: while Athens had a more egalitarian constitution, Rome was tilted towards oligarchy.

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Aristotle, Community Valuation, and Necessity

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This paper provides an interpretive account of claims to, of, and about value, the history of commercial activities from which they draw, and the imaginations of citizenship that they underpin. In particular, I build an Aristotelian analysis of the concept of 'value' in political discourse as mediating a productive tension between needs and aspirations. As I provide a detailed account of Aristotle's description of the material resources essential to citizenship, I show that grounding his thoughts on necessity and exchange more firmly in his concern with democratic contestation reveals a tension in his argument between abstract debates about justice and more concrete concerns about distribution. Aristotle, I show, required that citizens have a certain threshold of material resources in order to participate in politics, and that that threshold be determined by nothing other than deliberative politics. I do so by providing a detailed account of the way he describes the material resources essential to citizenship. On this basis, I argue that value claims neither center needs nor erase them, but rather delineate the bounds of necessity. Republican images of the role of 'value' within citizenship and the material relationships which underpin them, I therefore argue, present alternative visions of the relationships between political action and commercial exchange which liberal discourses can never fully foreclose.