

Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

Panel 4.3 Abstracts

Could republicanism not be neutral? Rethinking the debate between liberal neutralism and republican perfectionism

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It is generally considered that a liberal state has to be neutral towards comprehensive doctrines. In a liberal framework, it is considered that state neutrality is a necessary condition without which people's freedom and equality cannot be respected (Dworkin, 1978; Rawls, 1993). At the same time, it is a classical republican objection that liberal neutrality may lead to depoliticization and, in the end, may be a danger for freedom itself (Tocqueville, 1825). Republicanism often pretends it is able to avoid the pitfalls of liberalism and it constitutes a credible alternative to liberalism. Perfectionism is one of his main pillar. It is a typical feature of republicanism, whether classical or recent, to assume some sort of perfectionism. Republicans often assume that it is either legitimate or desirable or both for the state to promote some values or virtues. This perfectionism is considered a bulwark against the destruction of freedom to which a neutral state is allegedly condemned. But what kind of perfectionism can be considered legitimate or desirable? And how such a perfectionism can be justified?

I intend to confront these problems, regarding Cecile Laborde's critical republicanism (Laborde, 2008; 2010). Laborde assumes a republican position while rejecting what she thinks to be the orthodox French republicanism. According to her, such a strong and coercive perfectionism should not be endorsed. A republican state should not claim that rational autonomy is the only way to live a worthy life and should not use coercion if people do not live their life according to this value, as Laborde thinks the French law of 2004 that bans hijab from public schools does. Laborde prefers a non-coercive perfectionism and a critical republicanism which admits that a life of piety can be worthy, if it has been freely chosen. Her critical republicanism is nonetheless perfectionist, since it is based on Pettit's concept of non-domination. But why should we accept non-domination to be a political value, while we should reject rational autonomy? For her republicanism to be robust, Laborde should provide a justification of her perfectionism. My claim is that, even if Laborde's reformulation of republicanism is inspiring, her answer to that question and, especially, her "quasi-perfectionism", is not completely satisfactory.

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Personalist Republicanism. Identification of an Old Branch

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Contemporary republicanism is usually interpreted as being divided in two branches. On the one hand we find so-called civic republicanism, on the other hand civic humanism. Another terminology talks about a neo-Roman and neo-Athenian version of neo-republicanism (Laborde and Maynor 2008). I will argue that twentieth century philosophy contains a third variant of republicanism that was never identified as such up until now. This third variant is to be found in the political philosophy of French personalism, represented by authors such as Jacques Maritain (1951), Emmanuel Mounier (1960, 1961) and Paul Ricoeur (1964, 1991). Personalist democracy was, in essence, a political system that was to create a framework for freedom, responsibility and justice in which every human being could discover and realize her vocation, fostering her development into a fully-fledged person. This is the *bonum commune* that politics has to aspire to, and it means that democracy has an exalted mission. At the same time, however, personalism was well aware of the frailty of the democratic system. This is why personalist democracy is also characterized by a fundamental distrust of power, as without boundaries, power lapses from support of the person into oppression. I will argue that the personalist political philosophy meets the defining criteria of modern-day republicanism (Pettit 2012): freedom as the absence of domination, the idea of a mixed constitution and the emphasis on vigilant and active citizenship.

However, the personalist view of mankind distinguishes this philosophy from conventional articulations of contemporary republicanism. This will become evident, first, in the reasons why personalists distance themselves from the core idea in civic humanism, namely that active participation in the self-government of the political community is intrinsically valuable, for self-government has no intrinsic value in personalist thinking. It is a negative argument – the fact that political conditions for the realization of our positive freedom would otherwise be compromised – that connects freedom and self-government in an instrumental manner. Like civic republicanism, the personalist political philosophy can also be understood as an instrumental republicanism. But again the personalist anthropology appears to make an important difference. In both cases, civic virtue is required for instrumental reasons, but civic republicanism is unable to support the required civic virtue by way of a solidary connection to others in the community. The personalists, however, do not share the individualist presuppositions and the implied negative concept of freedom of civic republicans. The anthropology of personhood is what makes the difference because civic virtue could be linked to the attestation of an ethical quest in which self-constancy and solicitude for the other are inextricably tied.

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What Should Property Rights Look Like in a Republic? Different Answers for Different Republicanisms

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Despite an important renewal of academic interest in both Republicanism and property rights, the conceptual relation between property and republicanism remains blur and multiple. In fact, it might be argued that there are as many different republican conceptions of property rights, as there are types of republicanism. From Rousseau to Pettit, it seems impossible to characterize one approach of property rights as typically republican.

This ambivalence of Republicanism is due to the puzzling relation existing between property and two of its core values, individual liberty and equality. It has always been clear to republican (and neo-republican) thinkers that too great inequalities threaten the very grounds of a republic by undermining the existence of a relative equality between citizens, while on the other hand, this concern for equality was no sufficient reason to ban private property, as most republicans insist that owning a property is a condition of leading an independent life. Also, can individuals use their property rights against the general interest? The question of how to define property rights is therefore central for republicanism: too much liberty in the use of property can lead to abuses or great inequalities undermining equality, but too much equality might reversely undermine the ability of property to promote individual liberty.

Different authors within the republican tradition have taken different positions to solve this equation. But the problem goes one step beyond : they also diverge when it comes to defining what counts as vectors of inequalities and as objects of property. For examples, Rousseau and Jefferson stressed that the crucial object of property was land, contemporary republicans insist on the importance of capital ownership to promote individual liberty, while neo-republican reframe the question in terms of non-domination. Some could even argue that theorists promoting basic income only seek to give every individual “the means of leading a free and decent life” as the performative equivalent of owning a “capital”. The point is that each author seems to have a different idea of what kind of property best promotes individual liberty, and of what kind of inequalities potentially threaten their relevant conception of equality.

Given this diversity in republican conceptions of property rights, this intervention will pursue two main objectives. First, it will aim at identifying what unites the modern republican approaches of private property. It will be argued that they emerge as a radically democratic response to the natural right defense of private property such as those found in Locke’s writings (or more recently in Nozick’s). Second, it will aim at establishing a typology of the different republican positions on property rights. The goal is to clarify our comprehension of the values behind each type of republicanism, and how those values are intrinsically related to a specific conception of property rights. I conclude with a critical discussion of this typology.

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How Different and Self Sufficient is Modern Republicanism?

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New republicans believed that republicanism was not taken as seriously as it deserved, especially in relation to its comparison with the liberalism. According to Laborde and Maynor, this was due to “wrong-headed” claim that republicanism was unable to provide a “comprehensive alternative philosophy to the dominant philosophy of liberalism” (2008). They argue that this claim was “wrong-headed from two important points. First, it judges republicanism as opposed to liberalism from overall compatibility and disregards “conceptual connections and normative proposals” that it provides. Secondly and maybe more importantly, these claims are based on the original (pre-liberal) ideas of republicanism and ignore the touches of liberal modernity on the contemporary republicanism, on issues such as more individualism or ethnic pluralism (2008).

Laborde and Maynor call this reviewed version of republicanism as “liberal republicanism”. In their defense against liberal claims, Laborde and Maynor suggest that republican theory benefited from liberal ideas to mature itself. These benefits, of course, are not one sided; they are mutual and caused a significant “rapprochement” between the two (2008). However, this interpretation is not overwhelmingly accepted by both sides. Some hardliner republicans such as Quentin Skinner and Phillip Pettit, strongly oppose this idea and believe in the self-sufficient completeness of the republican theory, which does not (need to) take anything from liberalism, but actually offers more to expand some existing critical concepts such as freedom (Pettit, 2002; Skinner, 2008). According to Honohan, alleged agreement on the concept of freedom is actually a “superficial” one while there is still deep divergence on its interpretation and realization (2001). Similarly, Slaughter argues that the contemporary republicanism is distinct from both liberalism and communitarianism, and criticizes both ideologies (2005).

In my paper I would like, firstly, to examine the differences and similarities between liberalism and republicanism as well as different concepts of freedom in detail and, secondly, to discuss my findings with other scientists during The Conference.

Here, I will suffice to say that there is no consensus on the liberal-republican rapprochement; modern republicanism addresses critical liberal ideas and re-conceptualizes them with a modern look, either by the help of liberalism or by re-interpreting its own original sources.