

# Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

## Panel 5.4 Abstracts

### ***From Europe to the United States: Frances Wright's Republican Experience***

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Before Tocqueville arrived in America to write his *Democracy in America* (1835), another thinker, Frances Wright, had already made the voyage (1818) across the Atlantic with the intention of studying a new political model. Wright spent almost two years travelling around North America, recording her thoughts and impressions on American institutions and society in the letters she exchanged with Robina Millar, and that she published in 1821 with the title *Views of Society and Manners in America*. Wright's analysis brings to light the distinguishing features and the social, political and historical conditions identified by scholars of the Republican tradition. The first of these features is undoubtedly liberty, in both its positive and negative senses. The second element to underline is equality. In Wright's text emerge the strength of equality and its key role from the point of view of civil and political stability, as well as the homage to the most elementary sentiment of justice. The United States appears to Wright and to her European readers to be a new political model that has concluded the path of recognition of some inalienable rights that had begun in Europe centuries before. The American republic seems also a winning model of statehood that, departing from the paradigm of Machiavelli, finds its own stability not in the mediation of conflict of opposite classes, but in the homogeneity of the population, moving away from the preceding and famous republican experiences of Rome and Florence. The third feature to note is civic virtue. Wright refers to American citizens as 'modern Romans' who all feel to be part of a community, who behave decorously according to the guidelines of a constitution recognised by all; determined to attain the common good, they become naturally virtuous. Finally, the real novelty that makes America a modern republic and that distinguishes it from the simple democracy of the Greeks, is the establishment of representation that allows for the right balance between involving people in the political process and the criteria of competence, between the principle of liberty and that of equality. Despite her great admiration for the American republic, Wright does not hesitate to draw attention to what she considers as two detestable evils: the inferior legal and political position of women and slavery. In a state in which each citizen is his own legislator, where freedom exists in all its declensions, where there is equality, and political and social participation, the subjection of a portion of the population appears a contradiction and involves a slowing down of society's progress. Nevertheless, she is convinced that Republican values would help Americans to understand how much is right but also necessary to recognise the same rights to all the members of the population.

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### ***Republicanism and Feminism: A Plausible Alliance. The Case of Margaret Fuller***

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Margaret Fuller is mainly known as the first American feminist manifesto's author, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845. The article tries to analyse Fuller's work from different perspectives, discussing her claim to women's rights as a part of the antebellum debate around American democracy in the history of political thought. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the principle of equality was very ambiguous: although it was praised as a universal claim through the Declaration of Independence, which formally recognised that 'All men are born equal', it did not apply to women. Women's status as native-born citizens (that is the national entitlement derived from the divine right not to be born subject to the rule of another) did not guarantee them the same rights as similarly situated men born on American soil. While the United States were using a rhetoric that minimised differences between white men, they kept a legislation that promoted legal differences between men and women. 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. 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 feminist allied.

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### ***The Republican Roots of Liberty: A European Perspective***

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The republican theory of liberty is the result of an assorted intellectual tradition whose origins, depending on the historians, can be found in ancient Greek and Roman times. Although the discourses on its birth have relevant theoretical implications, their common feature can be summarised in a specific and demanding concept of liberty, different, if not antithetical, to that of liberal theory, which defines liberty as non-interference, while for republicans liberty is non-domination. However, the first paradigm omits an element that for republicans is crucial and decisive: individuals, in fact, are not and cannot be subjected to the arbitrary and discretionary will of others. Therefore, the extension of liberty does not stop in front of power's interference but it is threatened by power, if this is irresponsible. The historical landmark of this concept can be found in the dispute between Hobbes and Harrington. Libertas is assured by the law, which safeguards the life of every individual and of the whole city, so that the difference between Lucca and Constantinople does not lie in the same areas of freedom that individuals of both cities are granted, but in the quality of those spaces. The sultan is the owner of the life of his vassals, insofar as they might spend an existence 'free' from his domination's interferences. While the citizens of Lucca may suffer interferences from the magistrates of the city, they are free from every possible abuse of power. Basically, republicans revive the ancient idea of Cicero, according to whom liberty does not consist of having a benevolent tyrant, but in not having anyone. In this regard the historical and philosophical paradigm of republican liberty has important implications on the topic of rights and fundamental liberties as they start to emerge during the modern revolutions. This is the reason why republicanism may be credibly considered as a theory and a practice that takes seriously the rights of the lower and vulnerable classes. My paper aims to make this last statement conceivable, and show how natural are the historical, legal and philosophical developments between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, which allow women's rights theories to find a coherent reception among republican theories of liberty.