

Freedom as Citizenship: The Republican Tradition in Political Theory

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Introduction

What it means to be a republican is a contested matter. In Ireland, republicanism may be associated with physical force separatism and cultural nationalism, as well as a certain revolutionary austerity and authoritarianism. These partly reflect its genesis in eighteenth-century republican movements, which included revolutionaries as diverse as Jefferson and Robespierre; its growth in the age of European nationalism; and its expression in a constitution influenced by a hierarchical religious idiom. But republican ideas have broader foundations and a longer history than any of these. In this article I survey the central ideas of republican political theory in some of their diverse historical expressions, and outline some of their contemporary claims to attention. These suggest that republicanism speaks also to our current perplexities in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger, judicial tribunals, immigration and increasing cultural diversity.

Republican ideas have a denser meaning than simply the form of government in which power rests with the people instead of a monarch. It should be said that there are almost as many hues of republican thought as there are of liberalism, socialism or conservatism. But all republican arguments seem to spring from a sense of the ineluctable interdependence of human beings, whose survival and flourishing depends on the kinds of social frameworks they inhabit, and who have common, as well as separate and conflicting, interests. The political question with which republicans are concerned is what kind of *freedom* is possible in the light of this interdependence, and how it may be realised. Freedom is understood as a political achievement, not a natural possession of individuals. It is inherently fragile, and requires not only a strong legal framework, but also the civic engagement of citizens, who can come to recognise and act to sustain those interests they share with others. But common interests are easier to overlook and therefore more vulnerable than individual interests; this gives rise to corruption, the key republican

problem. Freedom requires political equality and rests on two dimensions of active citizenship—civic virtue and political participation. Citizenship entails responsibilities as well as rights; self-governing citizens achieve the chance to exercise some collective direction over their lives, rather than complete self-sufficiency.

There is a coherent, though not always continuous, tradition of political thought, often referred to as ‘civic republicanism’, that stretches back to roots in ancient Greece and Rome, and reached its fullest expression between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, when it influenced both American and French revolutionaries. After a period of relative eclipse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the clash of liberalism and socialism dominated the field of political ideas, it is once more the subject of lively debate among political theorists today.

Ancient antecedents: Aristotle and Cicero

The republican tradition has clear antecedents in the classical world of Greece and Rome. While the Athenian *polis*, or city-state, of the fifth to third centuries BC is usually identified as the cradle of democracy, certain key features of republican thinking also crystallised first there¹. Citizens—native-Athenian adult males, irrespective of wealth—formed a self-governing body. In contrast to slaves or the subjects of a monarch, who were both subject to the will of a master, self-ruling citizens were free. Their freedom was exemplified in their equal right to speak in the assembly and serve in office, and their equality before the law. In principle, in the *polis* matters were settled by discussion and decision of all the citizens, not by force. Political equality was realised by appointing people to office for short terms in rotation, often on the basis of lottery. Thus each had a chance—and a duty—to participate in the decisions and practices that framed their lives. There was no state separate from the people. Politics played a central role in a citizen’s life. As the leader Pericles is quoted as saying, ‘We do not say that a man who has no interest in politics minds his own business; we say he has no business here at all’².

The philosopher Aristotle, though sceptical about the equality of all citizens and the direct democracy of the Athens of his time, saw the logic of this form of government. Living in a political community, people can deliberate rationally, among equals, about better and worse ways of organising social affairs. It is in this sense that we can understand his famous statement that ‘man is a political animal’.³ A *polis* is an association which allows people not just to survive, but to develop themselves. He defined a citizen as someone who participates in deliberating, serves in office, and defends the *polis*. His favoured form of government is a ‘mixed government’, which combines elements of

democracy, aristocracy and monarchy, rather than any of these forms individually. Yet ordinary citizens have an important contribution to make in political life, since they have both a variety of perspectives to bring to bear on political deliberation, and personal experience as the end users of political decisions. The person who wears the shoe is the one who knows if it fits. However, he stressed the need for citizens to participate reflectively and to take into account the welfare of the polity as a whole, not only their own particular concerns. In politics, citizens deliberate on and realise the common good they share as members. Citizens of a *polis* are free because they are not subject to a master. Since government is necessary, being free is better understood as ‘ruling and being ruled in turn’ than as not being ruled at all. While freedom excludes domination by another human being, it does not exclude the extensive rule of laws. Whereas a modern neo-liberal perspective sees law as sometimes necessary, but, nonetheless, as always infringing on freedom, for Aristotle law guarantees freedom from personal domination. But laws are not enough to constrain human beings to act well, unless they are absorbed along with education, so that citizens faced with practical choices are naturally inclined to act in the right way.

Aristotle also saw that socio-economic conditions affect the success of the *polis*. Small states in which citizens know one another will be better able to generate common concern and accountability. Inequalities between citizens tend to undermine their political equality and destabilise the *polis*. So he endorsed redistributive measures to counteract this, such as public provision of land or employment, and payment for participating in the assembly and serving in office.

Yet Aristotle offered just two cheers for republican life. He assumed that a somewhat static view of human nature determines the goals of political life, dictating, for example, that some people—non-Greeks, slaves and women—were not rational enough to be capable of citizenship. In addition, while he saw life in a *polis* as providing essential opportunities for self-development, he saw political participation as, ultimately, less fulfilling than the philosophical life of contemplation.

Republican themes were further developed in the larger and more aristocratic Roman republic, notably in the writings of Cicero. Later republican thought has inherited a great deal from Roman sources. The term republic itself comes from the Latin, *res publica*, the public concern; as Cicero put it, the republic is the people’s affair: ‘*res publica res populi*.’ For him, too, the political community is the most important kind of association, and freedom is contrasted to slavery. But reflecting both Rome’s less democratic political institutions and its extensive system of law, he saw freedom as related less to actual participation in self-rule than to the legal

status of citizen and the existence of laws to which all are subject. ‘The law is the bond which makes us free.’ The preservation of property was a central feature of this law. On the other hand, Cicero spelled out more clearly than Aristotle that political life is inherently more valuable than philosophy, and elaborated on the duty of political actors to be concerned with the public good, rather than their own personal aggrandisement. When political life in the republic was threatened by the warlords Caesar, Anthony and Octavian, Cicero advanced an ideal of the active statesman who engages in political rather than military activity, puts duty to the republic before personal concerns, and values honour and respect more than material rewards. He set out ideal virtues of citizens that became the basis for the key republican notion of *civic virtue*, or public spirit: justice, prudence, moderation, and courage. ‘We must be more eager to risk our own than the common welfare, and readier to fight when honour and glory, than when other advantages are at stake.’²⁴ He also recognised obligations to human beings more widely (as Roman citizenship was not limited to those who were genetically or culturally Roman). But his republic was still exclusive, and he had no doubts as to the manly nature of these virtues, implicit in the word *virtus*, derived from *vir*, the Latin for man as distinct from woman.

Aristotle and Cicero together provided many of the common elements that were to frame later republican thinking: the intrinsic value of membership and participation in a political community; freedom, contrasted to slavery, as a political achievement, guaranteed by the rule of law and ‘mixed’ government; the need for a virtuous citizenry, shaped by laws as well as good institutions; the state as a bounded community of citizens who share common goods, distinct in form from family and voluntary associations. The differences between the two thinkers are also reflected, right up to the present, in differing emphases on participation or the rule of law respectively, as constituting republican freedom. For both, however, the value of political freedom was derived from the more important goal of the pursuit of the good, or virtue in the largest sense.

Classical republicans: Machiavelli and Harrington

For more than a thousand years, after the Roman republic was succeeded by the rule of emperors, there was little scope for republican thought or practice. Most, though not all, mediaeval political thinking supported the rule of monarchs rather than the people. An exception was Marsiglio of Padua, who defended popular rule both in church and state. As independent city-states, such as Florence and Venice, emerged in the late middle ages and were threatened by native nobilities and foreign invasions, politicians and thinkers turned to their classical texts for advice

on running and maintaining a free republic. From this they forged an original theory, which we now know as ‘classical republicanism’.

Writing in the early sixteenth century, as Florence was about to fall irrevocably under the control of the Medici family, Machiavelli (now associated primarily with his analysis of power in *The Prince*) expressed a clear preference for republican government. He sees ordered social life as fragile and ephemeral, subject to cycles driven by necessity and chance, which can only be tamed by dynamic political action. In his *Discourses* he argues that republics are better able to deal with this, because they are more flexible, and, while they last, they allow greater freedom and prosperity for citizens. Without envisaging an Athenian direct democracy of all, he advocates a significant stake for citizens in political power in a state where the people ‘neither arrogantly dominate nor humbly serve’.⁵ Rather than pure democracy, this mixed government, or balance of interests between nobles and people, constrains each of them from pursuing purely sectional interests. This is not a harmonious process, as even when they intend the common good each faction interprets it differently, but the struggles between them favour freedom rather than endangering it.

The republic still needs citizens who have virtue—who put the common good ahead of their own particular interests, are prepared to perform political and military service, and to limit their desires for material wealth. Corruption is the most immediate threat to the republic. This is the tendency to decay, a natural hazard of a ‘body politic’, like any other body. It is accelerated by those who promote their individual interests at the expense of the public good, or who fail to support it actively. Since people will not be automatically public-spirited, a variety of measures to elicit such civic virtue are necessary. Political life should be open to all, and exemplary contributions to the republic rewarded by honour and glory. But such public spirit needs stronger measures—laws, civic education, military training and a civic religion—to keep corruption at bay, and severe sanctions to deal with those who are corrupt. No contribution can be set against penalties deserved for political wrongdoing.

Machiavelli thus redefines the central republican concepts of virtue and freedom. He distinguishes citizen virtue from goodness and godliness; citizens need to adopt a tougher, more heroic, approach to politics, to do whatever is necessary to maintain the republic; humility and other-worldliness only make the world a prey to the wicked. Machiavelli has to be seen as ‘a republican for hard times’, for whom this approach is the only way to sustain political and personal freedom alike.⁶ His idea of freedom allows for the pursuit of a variety of personal goals, and is not determined by a fixed account of human nature.⁷ For citizens do not

subordinate themselves to an entity over and above them; they come to see their deepest interests as those of citizens, bound by a deep commitment to a particular place and people, and the political way of life that they share. This is only possible where they are relatively equal. Finally, while Machiavelli thinks of the republic as a small city-state, he thinks it possible, or even necessary, for it to expand, and does not define citizenship in exclusively racial or cultural terms.

The issue whether a republic can be successfully established in the larger territorial states with which we are familiar was tackled by James Harrington, who brought republican ideas further into the modern world. He wrote his *Oceana* in the 1650s, the period of the English commonwealth (then the standard translation of *res publica*, conveying well the centrality of the common good) after the execution of Charles I. He challenges arguments that government of any kind erodes freedom equally, and that we must recognise a single central sovereign if we want peace. He insists that the citizens of a republic are freer than subjects of a sovereign, because they are not vulnerable to the arbitrary will of a ruler. In a republic all are subject to law; citizens are not subject to arbitrary decrees, and may have a say in making the law. He characterises a republic, memorably, as ‘the empire of laws and not of men.’⁸ Self-government rests on the rule of law and balanced institutions, including a considerable level of popular participation. Mixed government means the balance between two assemblies—a senate (to deliberate) and a popular assembly (to decide). However, because the citizens of a large state are ‘too unwieldy a body to be assembled’, Harrington introduces complex procedures of representation, through a combination of election and lottery among citizens mustered in the militia. Harrington relies more on these institutional procedures and sees less of a contrast between Christian and civic virtue than Machiavelli. So he is more optimistic about the possibilities of sustaining a well-designed republic. A crucial part of his scheme depends, however, on guaranteeing the political equality of citizens by limiting economic inequality. Only those who can be independent of the will of others are capable of citizenship. This has two implications: firstly, those whom Harrington and his contemporaries were unable to think of as independent—for example, women and servants—are excluded from citizenship. Secondly, those who *are* citizens must be protected from the effects of economic inequality by an agrarian law limiting the accumulation of property through inheritance.

Classical republicanism establishes political freedom as the primary value in republican thought, supported by a specifically *civic* virtue. It presents an ideal of active citizenship, which, in beleaguered circumstances, meant military service at least as much as political participation.

But it allows for some degree of diversity, and stresses the collective capacity of civically virtuous citizens to avoid arbitrary rule, to be self-governing, and shape their own destiny.

We gain an idea of just how distinctive this theory was by comparing it with another theory being developed at roughly the same time. This is the theory of natural rights and contract, expressed with different emphases by, for example, Hobbes and Locke. In this perspective, freedom is defined as a natural property of individuals, and the purpose of government is to protect individual rights and interests rather than to promote the common good. To protect the more basic rights of life, liberty and property, people should be prepared to give up their right to self-government. In this view, freedom does not require self-rule in the sense of a say in the laws to which people are subject, so much as limits on the power of government.

A kaleidoscope of new republican views emerged to grapple with the application of republican ideas to large commercial societies. Some questioned the value of civic virtue, pointing out that commerce flourished in markets where individuals pursued their own interests, rather than the common good. Others tried to combine individual rights and limited government with the republican themes of civic duty or virtue, and participation in self-government.

Expanding the republic: Rousseau and Madison

Two particularly important reformulations of republican thought emerged in the eighteenth century: Rousseau rearticulated an ideal of a small republic of free, virtuous, self-governing citizens, from a modern concern for individual freedom. Madison, on the other hand, reworked republican ideas extensively to fit them to the large commercial republic actually under construction in the United States.

As author of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau may initially appear to be a theorist of natural rights, but he subjects the theory to a far-reaching critique. Natural freedom is only a potential which requires political realisation. Real freedom is 'living according to a law that one makes for oneself'. But individuals are profoundly interdependent on others for their capacities and their achievements. This has negative and positive dimensions. Corruption and inequality exactly parallel social progress, and are rooted essentially in *amour propre*, that is, vanity or psychological dependence on the opinion of others. This, not political authority, is also the fundamental threat to freedom. The question is whether there can be a political society that translates the potential for freedom in all individuals into a social system that does not oppress them: 'how to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with

the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with others, remains as free as before.⁹ Since humans must live in society, freedom needs to be politically realised as collective self-rule. Rousseau appropriates for the people the notion of sovereignty, previously claimed by monarchs. In the social contract the people are free insofar as they retain and exercise their right to self-rule. In this way citizens are wholly dependent on each other collectively, but not on particular persons. As citizens, then, they must consider the common good, or ‘will the general will’, when making political decisions. This does not amount to a populist or majoritarian dictatorship—majority votes which are just an aggregate of individual interests represent only ‘the will of all’, and are no better than any sectional interests, failing to express the general will directed to the common good.¹⁰ In addition, the people should not take decisions on particular cases, which should be delegated to administrators.

Like Aristotle and Harrington, Rousseau is keenly aware of the way in which political equality is undermined by economic inequality. While property is an expression of freedom, there must be constraints on its unlimited accumulation. ‘No citizen should be so rich as to buy another, and none so poor that he is constrained to sell himself.’¹¹ In addition to relative equality, Rousseau’s republic requires close bonds between the citizenry, generated in part by education and collective activities, which replace the military drill of classical republicanism. But while it was neither essentially totalitarian nor militaristic, Rousseau’s republicanism specifically excluded women from citizenship. What was corrupt for men—depending on the opinion of others—was virtuous for women, who should be dependent, staying at home to support and rear republican citizens. ‘What will people think? is the grave of a man’s virtue and the throne of a woman’s.’¹² For this he was taken to task by Mary Wollstonecraft, who outlined an account of republican virtue that would apply to men and women alike as equal citizens. Finally, Rousseau, himself, was torn between his idea of a republic in which citizens became wholly absorbed in collective life, and the ideal of individual self-reliance he portrayed in his *Emile*.

Although Rousseau failed to reach a consistent theoretical solution, he posed the central problem of combining individual freedom with social interdependence. He himself did not hold out much hope for the future of republics. With the possible exceptions of Corsica and his native Geneva, most states were too large, and their people too irrevocably corrupt. He was opposed to violence, but the contrast he drew between the possibility of human freedom and the actuality of domination and corruption fuelled the outrage of the French revolutionaries, who implemented a republic inspired by, but remote from, his ideal.

A quite contrasting approach was adopted by James Madison, writing during the debates on the ratification of the American constitution in the 1780s.¹³ For him, freedom is the security of individuals and their property from arbitrary interference, and is achieved through legal and constitutional measures rather than through the active participation of all the citizens. But he still thought of government as a process of collective self-determination, in which realising the common good of citizens requires civic virtue.¹⁴ He argued that freedom and civic spirit can coexist in a form of government that combines federalism, representation and separation of powers. In a large federal state, the particular interests, or factions, feared by previous republicans tend to cancel one another out. Unlike Rousseau, he did not address the issue of economic inequality as a political issue, although he was aware that it gives rise to factions. His radical departure from previous republicanism was in redefining a republic as a form of government based on *representation*, and in distinguishing it from democracy in which the people govern themselves. The danger of an ignorant or biased majority is reduced when the people are represented indirectly through a process which distils out the able and public spirited. This, at least as much as the problem of large numbers, is the reasoning behind Madison's elaborate systems of representation, including electoral colleges and other indirect election procedures (and excluding lottery). The problem of corruption is further contained through a reworked form of mixed government: the 'separation of powers' between federal and state governments, between congress, president and courts, and between Senate and House of Representatives. Thus Madison advanced a republican theory that, as well as encouraging public spirited citizens, relies heavily on institutional solutions.

In this expansive phase, then, at least two very different answers were offered to the problem of creating republics in large commercial states—one resting more on institutional machinery, and the other more on civic-spirited participation. Madison's theory dovetails with the liberal goal of limiting government power. The success of the American revolution and the excesses of the French revolution gave powerful support to the more liberal example. The issue seemed almost closed by Benjamin Constant's contrast between 'the liberty of the ancients' (participation in public power) and the 'liberty of the moderns' (private enjoyment of independence).¹⁵ Yet significant republican ideas were subsumed in different forms into liberal, socialist or nationalist thought. The republican insights of social interdependence and the political effects of economic inequality were taken up by socialists; the idea of balanced government and the rule of law by liberals; and the idea of collective self-government by nationalists. But, even as the right to vote was extended to

women and the working class, the idea of the value of active citizenship, in the forms both of political participation and civic virtue, was sidelined.¹⁶

Republican ideas today

Since the global realignment of the 1990s, republican ideas have been experiencing a revival. Although socialism appeared to have been routed by liberalism, a variety of voices have expressed concern that freedom is not realised simply by removing government controls, that some important issues are misrepresented as a battle of sectional interests, and that for many people citizenship lacks any real meaning.

Republicanism has appeared to have something to offer to these concerns. But there are certain difficulties with any simple revival of the tradition. While not the forerunner of totalitarianism it has sometimes been made out to be, we have seen that in some expressions it has been open to the charge that it is oppressive, exclusive, militaristic or masculinist. In addition, republican ideas were mainly developed in smaller, more homogeneous societies. It has to be shown that their contemporary expression is not just idealistic and nostalgic. With these difficulties in mind, republican ideas are being rearticulated today in each of the areas of *freedom*, *active citizenship* and the basis of political community in *interdependence*.

While this cluster of ideas forms the basis of a coherent theory, there are significant differences of interpretation and emphasis between interpreters. For some more ‘procedural republicans’, the focus is primarily on securing legal guarantees of freedom from domination, which they understand in a much broader sense than neo-liberals.¹⁷ More ‘communitarian republicans’ emphasise the public-spirited commitment of citizens to supporting the common goods of their political community.¹⁸ For others again, who may be termed ‘strong republicans’, political participation is intrinsically valuable as realising freedom.¹⁹

Freedom

‘Freedom’ is a widely, perhaps the most widely, endorsed value in contemporary societies. But superficial agreement masks deep divergences on how it should be interpreted and realised. Republican theory offers an alternative perspective on freedom to the neo-liberal view which became entrenched in the Thatcher and Reagan years, received a further boost with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and is very widely expressed in debates, for example, on the organisation of new information technology and the internet. In the neo-liberal view freedom is something which individuals possess to the extent that they are not interfered with; and the principal threat to that freedom is government.

The problem with socialism was too much government control; freedom is maximised if government activity is reduced to the minimum. Freedom demands privatising and deregulating, paring down or contracting out public services, and, above all, cutting taxation and increasing individual disposable income.

But contemporary republicans have argued that the liberal concern for interference fails to take account of serious threats to freedom, which do not always come from the state.²⁰ We have seen that in the republican tradition freedom is contrasted to slavery or the domination of one person by another. Anyone subject to the arbitrary power of others is systematically unfree, even if in practice these others do not interfere because they are well-disposed or remiss. Such people are unfree even when not actually interfered with, whether they be slaves to a master, subjects to a monarch with arbitrary powers, wives to husbands, or asylum seekers to immigration officials. Freedom is limited if persistent fear of arbitrary interference forces people to adjust their actions to avert the threat of violence and ingratiate themselves with the powerful.

So realising freedom requires political intervention to limit domination. For civic republicans, the idea that freedom is maximised by limiting government and reducing taxation is far too simplistic. Republican freedom is consistent with being subject to fairly extensive systems of law and taxation if these give stronger guarantees against the arbitrary exercise of power by, for example, employers, officials, teachers or policemen. An effective system of law guarantees freedom. But the state also can be a source of domination, so guarantees against arbitrary interference (in the form of statutory procedures, systems of accountability and opportunities to contest government decisions and policies) are essential. If government must play a role in securing freedom, there must also be safeguards against its acting in an arbitrary manner.

Many thinkers in the republican tradition also emphasised the importance of the conditions necessary for freedom. In particular, they stressed that economic inequalities make some people disproportionately dependent on others. Whereas classical communism tended to focus on economic equality *per se*, and to see abolishing private property as the solution, republicans see a right to property of some kind as part of the conditions of political equality. But a concern for the political effects of economic inequality supports significant redistributive measures to provide for the development of citizen capacities. The right of private property has been politically constructed and sustained, and does not constitute an absolute right to unlimited accumulation. Likewise, the right of freedom of expression is based on the interest in political equality, which justifies, for example, limiting private campaign financing and the

extent of individual media holdings.

Citizens can be secure in their freedom only if they are part of a political system that limits personal domination. But laws alone cannot achieve this. This leads to the second point. Government and laws alone are ineffective without a political culture in which norms are, for the most part, observed in practice. Here, the unfashionable idea of civic virtue, or a standing commitment to the public good, comes into play. This kind of commitment can reasonably be expected only from those who can participate in determining how the common good is defined. These are the two dimensions of active citizenship.

Active citizenship

a) Civic virtue: ‘Is there no virtue among us? If there be not we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.’²¹

The Irish economic success of recent years is sometimes contrasted with the string of political scandals which continue to shock and entertain. Ireland is not the only country in which standards in public life have become an issue. What started as an investigation of a few individuals has expanded into a network of tribunals where a range of public figures and public servants have been subject to investigation. It now appears that not only a few egregiously corrupt individuals, but pervasive attitudes and practices, undermined the public interest in, for example, good planning and equal subjection to the law on taxation. Corruption has always been a central concern of republican thought. However, legislation alone will not prevent corruption. While procedures for greater accountability are essential, volumes of ethics legislation and strings of inquiries will not safeguard the common good if there is no sense of common concerns and politics is understood as a market place for pursuing individual interests.

Republican citizens are expected to take account of the *common good*, not just their own individual interests. Is this necessarily oppressive? This depends on how we understand the notion of the common good. There is the traditional, rather authoritarian sense of the common good, with Aristotelian and religious roots, which is embodied in the Irish constitution and assumes a naturally determined goal or purpose of human life. In the modern world we cannot assume agreement on a single hierarchy with authority to specify the common good. But there is another sense, of *shared* goods, which citizens enjoy only as citizens, through the social practices in which they participate. These common goods are not fixed and predeterminate. In fact, they may be better characterised as common

concerns, about, say, the environment, culture or heritage, on which people will, necessarily, have different opinions. Thus contemporary republican proposals to reinstate concern for the common good in politics include an emphasis on broadening participation in deliberation on how these goods should be interpreted and realised. While classical republicanism and its Jacobin followers were less sensitive to the potential dangers of oppression and exclusion in a political community, in contemporary civic republicanism there is a strong emphasis both on personal freedom and on active deliberation on what is in the common good in any instance.²² Moreover, republicans do not assume that all political action to realise the common good is to be taken by the state, nor that common interests override all individual interests.

The requirements of civic virtue may often be less heroic than was envisaged by Machiavelli, but no less important. Republican citizens may not be asked to die for their country any more often than liberal citizens. But they are expected to be informed about it, to take account of common concerns, to recognise some limits to the pursuit of individual interest, and, when engaging in political affairs, to be open to exchange with other opinions. These are the preconditions of freedom. Republicans do not substitute duties for rights, but see them as correlated. As one contemporary theorist puts it, ‘unless we place our duties before our rights, we must expect to find our rights themselves undermined’.²³

b) Participation: It is not then inherently oppressive to see politics as concerned with the common good and civic virtue. But calls to virtue and criticisms of citizen apathy are not well grounded unless ordinary citizens are given a larger voice in decision making. So, contemporary republicans will be suspicious of those communitarians who recommend citizens to take up responsibilities without emphasising too the conditions of non-domination and political equality, and the need for spaces in which citizens can contribute to determining how common goods are realised in politics.²⁴ Citizen commitment is reinforced by the sense of efficacy achieved in political participation. This means that as well as strong procedures for making officials accountable and policies contestable, republican politics also needs a participatory and deliberative form of democracy. Though often advocated separately, the two dimensions of active citizenship—civic virtue and participation—are mutually implied.

The sort of participation which advocates of deliberative republicanism propose is not more-intensive opinion polling or aggregating individual preferences on a wider range of issues. The logic of politics is different from that of the market, where the interaction of immediate individual preferences determines outcomes. There are areas of life which we need

to organise differently. Individually rational market choices (like the record car purchases of 2000) can lead to outcomes—in traffic and pollution—that are optimal for no one. As Pitkin puts it, ‘What distinguishes public life is the potential for decisions to be made not merely in the name of the whole community, but actually by the community collectively, through participatory public action and in the common interest. What distinguishes politics is action—the possibility of a shared, collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate, in what otherwise would be the by-product of private decisions. Only in public life can we jointly, as a community, take charge of the history in which we are all constantly engaged by drift and inadvertence.’²⁵ Deliberative politics requires people, when they are considering political issues, to take a broader and more reflective view. It requires of participants that they are prepared to enter into discussion with others, to explain their position and to be open in principle to modify it. But as feminists and multiculturalists have emphasised, in order to respect political equality, deliberative politics needs to expand the kinds of institution and of discourse beyond the legal and parliamentary forms which have prevailed up to now.

Yet deliberative republicanism does not imply that continuous direct participation should replace all forms of representation. Participation may be intrinsically valuable, but it will not be the most important aspect of most people’s lives. It does suggest that public spaces of deliberation, formal and informal, need expansion and support so that government policies may be developed not just out of a bargaining process between individual or sectional interests, but through a process of deliberation on what is in the best interests of all. We need more formal public spaces in which citizens have a real voice in decisions that affect them. In Ireland this would mean, for example, the creation of a genuine regional system, a fundamental reconstruction of the local government system to devolve more local power down to local levels and provide for more participation in workplaces, schools, hospitals and so on. Some more-informal spaces exist to some degree already—and in Ireland parts of the media have played a remarkable role in sustaining these. But such spaces are threatened by commercial pressures, and some voices can make themselves heard better than others.

If politics is about addressing common concerns, the question ‘common to *whom?*’ becomes crucial. What are the grounds for defining the political community? This is the final aspect of republican thought to which I now turn.

Interdependence as the grounds of political community

Republican thought has a distinctive position on the basis and limits of

political community. While liberals see this as grounded in consent and loyalty to the political institutions of a society, nationalists see it as grounded in a common identity. Both of these views are problematic. It is hard to see institutions alone as a reliable focus of loyalty. On the other hand, to say that a political community needs to rest on a pre-political cultural or ethnic community is also problematic, since states rarely coincide with nations and, however borders may be redrawn, cultural minorities will almost certainly remain.

Republican citizenship is distinct from liberal and national citizenship. A republic is a political community of those who have not necessarily chosen one another, but have grown together historically, who share a wide range of reiterated interdependencies and the possibility of collectively shaping their future. This kind of interdependence often results from subjection to a common authority: the republican hope is that the people can assume such authority themselves.

The republican tradition, then, grounds membership in the interdependence and mutual vulnerability of people who share a common fate and common concerns. The republic envisaged by Machiavelli, Madison or the eighteenth-century revolutionaries was understood in terms of those who shared a common political life, rather than in terms of cultural homogeneity. The ‘patriotism’ which these thinkers endorsed originally meant a commitment to the common good of the community in contrast to the self-interest of individuals or groups, not to the citizens of other states. While republicanism and nationalism are often closely associated, they have conceptually distinct bases. Republicanism is based on interdependence rather than commonality. By contrast, the key feature of nationality is a sense of a common identity; whether based on ethnic, cultural or linguistic grounds, this is often rooted in an ‘imagined community’, and does not intrinsically require interdependence in practices between co-nationals. Where nationality is the basis of citizenship, commonality rather than interdependence is what counts; thus, for example, ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union were granted citizenship on moving to Germany, which Turks living in Germany for many years were not eligible to claim.

It is true that nationality has come to be one of the strongest sources of identity for people, and that states of all kinds have tended to rely on these pre-political allegiances to generate commitment. But it cannot be the primary ground of political community.²⁶ The right of collective self-determination presupposes that the unit to be self-determining is clearly identifiable. There is, however, no clear formula for determining the relevant constituency of concern to determine the boundary of a political community. For republicans this is a practical matter which should depend

on levels of interdependence; structures for non-domination and collective deliberation are important for those who have to live together, even if they differ in fundamental cultural beliefs and practices. A sense of ‘identity’ is not enough in itself to justify limited commitments. As Vaclav Havel put it in an address to the Czech people, ‘identity is above all an accomplishment, a particular work, a particular act. Identity is not something separate from responsibility, but on the contrary is its very expression.’²⁷ Identities are not set in stone; to claim a certain identity does not alter the fact that those who are different but interdependent can either build, or fail to build, on their historical situation and to realise better possibilities for the future.

All political units are bounded, in the sense that those who are members are distinct from those who are not. But republican citizenship is less exclusive than nationality. Based on interdependence in practices rather than pre-political identity, it can encompass more diversity of ethnicity and culture than a nationally based state. While nationalists offer a separatist solution to diversity, liberals (and French republicans) offer a neutralist one. This aims to create a public realm that is ostensibly neutral and distinct from any of the particular cultures contained within the state, and to confine difference to the private realm. But recent debates on the inclusion of women and minorities have shown that in practice ‘neutral’ public realms privilege the majority culture. In republican politics, by contrast, the substance of political life is determined in deliberation, not on grounds of an assumed neutrality or predetermined common interest. By rooting politics in interdependence rather than commonality, it offers a better way of dealing with the cultural and moral differences that are pervasive in modern society.

It may be argued that the republic, a political community united around deliberatively determined common goods, is necessarily an exclusive unit; citizens have rights and obligations that non-citizens do not share. The republic is a particular and bounded community, but it is in principle less sharply bounded and more extensible than nationality, since interdependence is a matter of degree and can be constituted by multiple and overlapping relationships. This suggests, for example, that a republican polity may adopt policies towards immigrants different from a nationalist polity. Rather than being radically exclusive, its relatively substantial ties between citizens are compatible with recognising obligations to non-citizens with whom they may be interdependent in other ways.

Just as interdependent individuals can never be wholly self-sufficient, so modern states cannot be wholly sovereign in a world of economic and cultural globalisation, where there are many interdependencies that transcend state boundaries. The idea of a republic outlined here is

compatible with constructing different levels or frames of politics, conceived as forums in which those who face common concerns may have some say in the forces which shape their common future—whether it be local or regional, for example, at the level of Scotland or Corsica, or transnational, like the European Union or the Council of the Isles.

Conclusion

This whirlwind tour of republican theory presents one interpretation of its common themes and internal tensions. It may not offer a panacea for our political ills. Some republican critics of society, from Rousseau to Sandel, have not themselves been optimistic about restoring a political community based on civic virtue. Yet, even if the ideal cannot fully be realised, the ideas provide an important corrective to the widespread but practically problematic assumptions that freedom is a matter of non-interference, politics is the institutionalised conflict of interests, and political community must be rooted in nationality. Republican ideas have a keen edge which we can apply to current debates: conceptions of freedom and citizenship richer than that of mainstream liberalism, but less homogenising than nationalism and other forms of communitarianism.

Notes

¹ If democracy is understood in general terms as government by the people, republicanism means more specifically government in the interests of the people, or in accordance with the common goods they share as members of a political community. Thus they are distinct but tangentially related ideas. To the extent that modern accounts of republicanism take the people to be the best judges of what is the public interest, they have radically democratic implications.

² Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1964).

³ Aristotle, *Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1981).

⁴ Cicero, *On Duties*, p. 33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991).

⁵ N. Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, I. 58 (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

⁶ H. Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press 1984).

⁷ I. Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli' in *Against the Current* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979). Q. Skinner, 'The Republican idea of liberty' in G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990).

⁸ J. Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana and A System of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992).

⁹ J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1968), p. 60.

¹⁰ Rousseau's suggestion that those who disobey the laws can be 'forced to be free' is unfortunate, even if he means by this that they follow their own real interests as citizens. Even if civic virtue and freedom converge, virtue cannot be imposed. The phrase has exposed republicans to accusations of doublethink.

¹¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 96.

¹² Rousseau, *Emile* (London: Everyman), p. 328.

¹³ A. Hamilton, J. Jay and J. Madison, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Mentor 1999).

¹⁴ Thus one important dimension of the current republican revival takes the form of arguments by U.S. constitutional lawyers, showing that the interpretation of the U.S. constitution primarily in terms of reconciling conflicting interests and protecting individual rights—and not as collective self-determination and supporting common goods—is a twentieth-century phenomenon. C. Sunstein, ‘Beyond the republican revival’, *Yale Law Journal* 97, 1988, pp. 1539-1590. See also Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent* (below).

¹⁵ Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988).

¹⁶ An important exception was Tocqueville, who, while essentially a liberal, emphasised the contribution of widespread civic activity in his *Democracy in America*.

¹⁷ P. Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997).

¹⁸ M. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1996).

¹⁹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1958); *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin 1978). B. Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press 1984). H. Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press 1984). C. Taylor, ‘Liberal politics: the public sphere’ in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).

²⁰ Pettit, *Republicanism*.

²¹ Madison, quoted in Sandel, p. 132.

²² See also I. Honohan, ‘The common good and the politics of community’ in J. Dunne, A. Ingram and F. Litton (eds.) *Questioning Ireland* (Dublin: IPA 2000).

²³ Q. Skinner, ‘The Republican idea of liberty’ (op. cit.), p. 309. On one view, republicanism may be more compatible with a form of liberalism other than the neo-liberal and neutralist positions I have criticised here. It did not emerge as an anti-, but a pre-liberal theory, articulated before the sovereign state became the focus of politics. It does not dismiss personal freedom and rights, but grounds these less naturalistically.

²⁴ For an example of a call to civic responsibility, see President George W. Bush’s inauguration speech of January 2001, which indeed follows a pattern set by John F. Kennedy: ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.’

²⁵ H. Pitkin, ‘Justice: between public and private’, *Political Theory* 9, 3: 1981, p. 344.

²⁶ But see C. Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Federalism and Nationalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press 1993), for an argument that in the modern world the nation is the political community in which a republic can exist.

²⁷ V. Havel, *New York Review of Books*, March 5, 1998, p. 46.

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