Book Review: *Radical Republicanism. Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage* by Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2020, 268 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-879672-5

REDESCRIPTIONS
Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

BOOK REVIEW

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Over the last 25 years, republicanism has reasserted itself, both as a recovered tradition in the history of political thought and as a challenge to liberalism in political theory. Anyone even vaguely familiar with this development will now expect me to say that behind this resurgence of interest in republican thinking lies the work of historian Quentin Skinner and philosopher Philip Pettit, on what it is to be a free person in a free state. The fact that two figures tower over the debate in the way that Skinner and Pettit do is testimony to the fact that this is still an emerging field, finding its feet.

Shattering the numbing binary of Berlin's negative and positive liberty, Skinner and Pettit posited political freedom understood as 'non-domination' (the term favoured by Pettit 1997) which differs from the liberal 'non-interference' in its focus on subordination and dependence rather than, or in addition to, acts of coercion. A person who is subordinated to the arbitrary will of another is unfree by that fact alone, even when there is no actual interference. A slave is unfree because he has a master, not because his master restrains him. The status of personal liberty is politically possible only in a republic, where citizens set the law for themselves through representatives or delegates who are democratically accountable. Thinking about political freedom in this way shifts our focus from separate instances of obstructing actions (who did what to whom?) to the relational circumstances in which lives are lived and the experiences of humiliation and fear that come with precarity and vulnerability to power. But is this view of freedom enough to establish republicanism? Is it distinctive to republicanism? Is this not what feminists have been saying all along?

Skinner traces the origin of this concept of freedom to the Roman jurists. He prefers the term 'neo-roman' and insists that there is nothing specifically republican about it (Skinner 1998). Prior to the liberal era (if we want to call it that), it was commonplace to think of freedom in this way, as a juridical status in relation to those who govern, and it needn't have anything to do with rejecting monarchy or embracing civic virtues and political equality. Pettit however

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explicitly puts freedom as non-domination forward as a definitional republican idea, while his individualist focus on free choice and reluctance to incorporate the idea of collective political participation in what he, together with Frank Lovett, has articulated as the 'neorepublican research program' (2009) can make his approach look like a variation of liberalism rather than a challenge to it. Anyone linking republicanism to 'the active and equal political participation of citizens', as the editors to this volume do in the opening paragraph of their introduction, will find the dominant Pettit-paradigm wanting.

So, what are distinctive normative republican commitments, what different roles have those commitments played in political history, and can they pose significant challenges to the inegalitarian status quo? Those are questions that the volume *Radical Republicanism* sets out to explore. Acknowledging that there are different strands of republicanism – some not very radical at all – the volume provides a historical and theoretical excavation of republicanism as a critical and egalitarian approach to political society and an agenda for profound change. It is a much-needed undertaking. Those who want to develop a radical republican theory fit to address injustices in our own time find a rich historical resource here.

In their introduction, the editors set out the program of what they take republicanism to be and what makes a republican position radical. They regard liberty understood as non-domination as one core republican commitment; another is popular sovereignty as a foundational principle of justice. Civic virtues sound old-fashioned to our ears but are indispensable if politics is to be for the common good of all, since citizens actively deliberating and participating on equal terms is necessary in order to find a common ground of what the common good is.

The emphasis on joint deliberation under free and equal circumstances makes the republican project demanding yet open-ended: there is not *one* answer, not *one* final list of rights and goods that a free people will settle on, but there is a set of conditions that has to be in place already for whatever they settle on to be just. One is reminded of relational egalitarians like Anderson (1999, 2017) and Wolff (2010) who tend to theorize over *in*equality rather than equality, since on non-formal accounts of equality, it is difficult and potentially repressive to settle on what an equal society actually looks like; the important point is that inequality is oppression, not bad luck or lack of trying. I don't want to make too much of the analogy, but it is worth pointing out that writing the history of radical republicanism is to write a history of resistance to oppression, to tyranny and authoritarian rule. It is in the role of opposition that radical republicanism gets its sharpest contours.

It remains an open question what a *positive radical* republican theory would look like today, beyond obvious commitments to robust democracy and political equality, but economic justice must be a prominent concern. In their rich introduction, the editors stress that a radical republican theory needs to extend non-domination to economic and social arenas and to grapple with popular sovereignty, social movements, political participation, and structural economic justice. Let's call it the 'radical republican research program'. It will be interesting to see how it takes off.

The morally corrupting effect of both luxury and poverty is a historically established insight amongst radical republicans: how can there be civic virtue and joint political deliberation (or a society at all) if people are segregated by hierarchies of wealth? We know that money buys power as well as goods. And for non-domination to hold across all spheres of human existence, it must surely be the organising principle not

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only for political institutions but also for economic ones, notably where most people spend their days: in the workplace.

One crucial thing, which springs out of several of the chapters and is most explicitly articulated by Sudhir Hazareesingh in his excellent contribution on French utopianism, is imagination as a political force: citizens acting collectively on a vision that things could be very different. Being a radical thinker is not only a matter of tweaking the institutions differently than the moderate lot would prefer, but to dare to seem impractical.

Let me get one complaint out of the way. The volume originated with a conference. Even though the line-up in the volume is, I think, not quite the same, the collection looks more like the record of an event than a curated book. The 10 chapters are divided up in pairs under five sections, but it is not always obvious why a chapter is placed in one section rather than another, or what makes two chapters placed together in one section more similar to each other than to some of the others. Eight chapters are historical and use historical sources to make theoretical and conceptual points, some more obviously theoretically relevant than others. The two chapters that are not historical (Dorothea Gädeke on structural domination and Stuart White on citizen assemblies as a means to strengthening republican democratic values) are both strong contributions within the republican debate, but not obviously very radical. One would perhaps expect some theoretical chapters dealing explicitly with the question what makes republican theory radical.

Dorothea Gädeke refers to her position (*pace* Laborde, 2008) as 'critical', not radical, republicanism. She grapples with the crucial concept of domination and argues – in a critical reading of Pettit – that it should be understood as a structural feature of social reality – presupposing a structural account of power – and not as an interpersonal relation. The argument is persuasive but framed as an attempt to save Pettit from himself. It would have been interesting to see these important points integrated within a radical theoretical agenda, free from a deference to Pettit that pops up here and there in the book.

Most of the contributions do an excellent job in excavating crucial components for a radical republican theory in discussion of historical sources, including sources that are easily overlooked when the history of republicanism is written. I have room to highlight only a few of them. In his chapter on Frederick Douglass, Alan Coffee focuses on the radical as an internal critic of republican thought. Where is the oppressed experience in the republican tradition? As Coffee rightly notes, republicanism makes much of the distinction between the freeman and the slave, but 'its theory has been entirely written by freemen' (48). What do we hear if we listen to the enslaved? One thing we hear is that official inclusion amongst the free is false, a charade, as long as prejudice persists. A radical revolution requires a revolution in thought patterns, not just political rights.

As Guy Aitchison shows in his chapter on resistance and rights, a radical approach also requires a rethinking of what rights are, proceeding from the Levellers' idea of 'self-propriety' meant not (as for Locke) to ground a right to acquisition of property, but as ground for a right to 'be free from arbitrary power' (106). Here is an egalitarian approach where rights as moral claims coexist with duties of solidarity and serve as a 'vocabulary of social criticism'. If rights exist only when they are institutionalized, as Bentham famously believed, they cannot form the foundation of resistance against oppressive institutions. The exercise of rights that institutions deny you is a form of

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rights-based resistance, a performance, if you will, of a freedom that is not there. Resistance, Aitchison concludes, is a right: the moral right to resist oppressive power (117).

Another view from inside the lived experience of the dependent classes is in Alex Gourevitch's chapter on civic virtue from the point of view of labour republicans. They took the republican notion of freedom as antithesis to dependence and 'applied it to the economic sphere', thus turning 'wage slavery' (156) into an argument for transformation of working conditions rather than a reason to cut workers out of politics, as classical republicans were happy to do. Here is a crucial insight for radical republican theorizing; we recognize it from early feminists. As an elite project, republicanism typically rests on the idea that only those who are independent (men with money) can be virtuous. To preserve the moral integrity of the republic, there are therefore good republican reasons to keep women and the labouring majority out of the circle of citizens. It just so happens that this also serves the political and economic interest of the wealthy. The radical point is that poverty and other forms of dependence are indeed a shackle on the mind, but only those with no privileges to lose can see through the masquerade of wealth. For the labour republicans, Gourevitch notes, civic virtues are qualities needed to transform society, not preserve it (153), and they are exercised through organization and acting in solidarity. One is reminded of Hazareesingh's point about the radical imagination: 'resistance to oppression is an integral component of what it means to be human' (237).

This much-needed volume resonates with the importance of accounting for the weight of insights from within the oppressed experience, lest the republican enterprise continues as an elite project, subjecting dependent classes to the epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) of interpreting their freedom for them. With this in mind, I have to point out that the blind spot of this volume is gender and the subordination of women. The republican vocabulary of independence, citizenship, and political rights have been crucial tools of mobilization, for eighteenth-century defenders of women in the republic and the nineteenth-century women's movement alike, yet no chapter is devoted to this, and the editors do not discuss it in their introduction. It is curious. Oh well. Let's roll up our sleeves and attend to it, as the radical republican research programme unfolds.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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