THE REPUBLIC REDUX

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The idea of republicanism was kindled, as commentators sometimes put it, in ancient Rome – there was great enthusiasm for the notion and for the thing. A derived idea continued through history, in very different situations, to evoke an equally passionate commitment: in the Renaissance, in 17th century England, in 18th century France, and in much of 19th century Europe.

W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan provided an affable satire on the Venetian version of republicanism in their 1889 comic opera *The Gondoliers*. 'We are jolly gondoliers', rejoices Giuseppe. 'Republicans, heart and soul, we hold all men to be equal. As we abhor oppression, we abhor kings: as we detest vain-glory, we detest rank: as we despise effeminacy, we despise wealth. We are Venetian gondoliers – your equals in everything ...' And indeed, in Barataria political opinions were maintained 'with no little heat', a typically republican phenomenon.

Nowadays there is enthusiasm, in Anglo-American political circles, perhaps not for the real thing but anyway for the idea, or rather, for an academic version of this idea.

The new version of republicanism is usually presented as an alternative to classical liberal and to neo-liberal political theories (although, confusingly, there also exists a current of thought called liberal republicanism). But whereas liberals place their principal normative emphasis on the liberty of the individual – a liberty guaranteed in his or her rights to life, liberty and property, and understood as freedom from (unwarranted) interference by others, including the state – republicans in contrast insist on the need for the individual to embody and display civic virtue, as contrasted with the single-minded pursuit of private interest. Authors such as Philip Pettit (in his *Republicanism*, OUP, 1997) have emphasized the importance of this opposition.

Here is how John W. Maynor, author of *Republicanism in the Modern World*, puts the matter: modern republic ideals, he says, 'seek to regulate the way in which individuals' private interests manifest themselves' (p. 74). This means that 'the modern republican project ... violates liberal neutrality' (p. 76); for the republican state thus 'seeks to interfere, albeit in a non-arbitrary manner, with individuals' choices'. This it does, first, by 'promoting certain substantive ideals and values ... and, second, regulating the available life choices' (p. 82). Indeed, republicans propose to 'take self-interested individuals and, as Shelley Burtt argues, "educate their desires" so that they begin to identify their good with that of society' (p. 56).

In his general approach Maynor follows Pettit and the other leading Anglo-American republicans, including Quentin Skinner, though introducing some nuances of his own. The book hardly strikes out into uncharted intellectual territory. Rather, it can be seen as another manifesto for academic neo-republicanism – clear and thorough as far as it goes.

The core of this manifesto is the idea, which Maynor shares with his republican colleagues, of liberty as nondomination.

Dominators are social agents who 'do not consider what others' interests or opinions are before acting' (p. 37). The dominated are those agents whose interests are thus 'not accounted for or tracked'. The point here is not that the dominated suffer harm, nor that they are interfered with, though both may be true, but that they are subject to the mastery of others. In sum: for Maynor, as for other modern republicans, liberty means neither just the absence of interference by others (Isaiah Berlin's negative liberty) nor the realization of self-mastery (something like Berlin's positive liberty) but the absence of mastery (p. 59).

Maynor presents the republican view as an 'alternative conception' of liberty and indeed as an 'attractive' alternative. He believes that it represents an 'improvement' on the liberal ideal. But in what sense? Does it express a truer conceptual analysis (true to what the term 'liberty' really means)? Is it normatively superior (and what constitutes normative superiority)? Or is the superiority of a pragmatic kind (so that belief in republican values, like belief in Rousseau's civil religion, would tend to render our liberty 'more resilient and secure' (p. 204) – whatever the basis, true or false, of the belief itself)? Maynor offers no sustained examination of this question. Indeed, his conclusion appears circular: if we adopt modern republicanism, he argues, if we look to it for inspiration, then 'arbitrary interference [with individuals and groups] can be minimized'. But that our political goal should be the minimizing of such arbitrary interference is of course itself an axiom of republicanism – quod erat demonstrandum, so to speak; but we are still waiting for the demonstration itself.

More curious, in respect to the neo-republican account, is what appears to be a certain political and social innocence intrinsic to its approach. Maynor is concerned – indeed concerned above all – with the ideal of nondomination. Now it is not only Marxists who would claim that our western world is characterized not just by some people sometimes dominating others, but by massive structures of socio-economic domination. Nor is it only Marxists who would hold that this latter state of affairs is expressed and organized in relations of political domination, which are therefore not in the last instance matters of academic debate but expressions of this structural power. For Maynor, in contrast, political domination seems to be an incidental phenomenon. It is, he admits, 'unreasonable to expect that every policy that emerges from a modern republic will be completely nondominating' (p. 156). Where there is however

domination – where some agents 'arbitrarily interfere' with others – the republican state will 'confront' them, 'ask them to account for their domination', and may even 'force sanctions on them if they do not recast their ends in a nondominating manner' (p. 86). But who or what is this republican State that will force sanctions on the dominators? How does it come into being and maintain its authority – as an expression not presumably of the socio-economic power relations in society, but of citizen virtue? In other words: when the republicans speak, will the structures listen? Maynor tells us that Bill Clinton (in whose administration Maynor worked as a junior staffer), half way through his first presidency, called up for a weekend retreat a number of republican philosophers; and 'in soliciting the ideas of academics, ... highlighted the important role that political philosophy can play in the development of public policy'. Did Clinton want the academics' advice because he was considering the introduction of a policy for eliminating the structures of social, economic and political domination? Probably not.

Maurizio Viroli is an Italian who, for familiar reasons, was forced to seek fame and fortune abroad, in America, and became professor of politics at Princeton University. He too is an author of a work on republicanism – called *Republicanism* (Hill and Wang, 2001) – animated, as another reviewer put it, with a hopeful faith that the republican tradition has relevance in contemporary politics.

More interesting than this work is the slim volume reviewed here, consisting of a dialogue between Viroli on the one hand and Norberto Bobbio, the grand old man of Italian legal and political philosophy, on the other. (Bobbio since died in January 2004 at the age of 94.) This volume, first published in 2001 in Italian, caused something of a stir on account of a number of critical remarks by Bobbio on Berlusconi and his *Forza Italia* party. But it contains much more.

In essence, it reproduces Bobbio's reaction to Viroli's presentation of modern republican themes. This results in anything but a tame, scholastic debate. I do not know whether Viroli anticipated what he was getting himself into when he set up this dialogue, in which he is sometimes embarrassed – not entirely surprising, perhaps, given Bobbio's brilliance and sure political touch.

Thus Viroli opens with a short statement of republicanism, to which Bobbio responds with the remark that this seems to be a kind of 'ideal state' notion, a notion of something that exists nowhere and even in its idea is perfectly heterogeneous – 'dreams of an ideal future or nostalgia for an ideal past'.

Viroli characterizes republicanism, in not terribly innovative terms, as 'the much sought-after third way between liberalism and socialism'. He defines the state, accordingly, in terms of the virtue of its citizens. But, Bobbio objects, the very meaning of the state lies in its use of (legitimate) force; and force is needed because most of the citizens are not virtuous but corrupt (p. 12).

Clearly, Bobbio doesn't think much of republicanism as a university philosophy. But Viroli persists: he explains the republican view of dependency as a constraint on an individual's will and a violation of his liberty. Bobbio answers: dependency is the fate of all who, in a Hobbesian manner, renounce their independence in order to save themselves. So when Viroli denounces dependency, Bobbio can only answer that 'I simply do not know what you are talking about' (p. 27).

Bobbio is at his most fascinating in various throw-away, but not trivial, remarks on a number of political and historical topics – for instance, as a non-Communist and a non-Catholic, he nevertheless draws attention to the immense positive contributions of both the Communist Party and the Catholic Church. Thus, whereas Viroli insists on the distinction, vital from a republican point of view, between social rights and mere welfare or charity (isn't it better to receive assistance in the name of rights rather than of charity?) Bobbio notes that it is their religious belief that inspires so many to offer practical help to the sick, old and needy: in other words, Christianity is more powerful than secularism. And if there ever was something like a secular mission, it has now disappeared (p. 54). Republicanism can in practice offer nothing comparable; it is now only a utopia. Secularists do not have faith. Bobbio adds: 'I only know of one other ideology that was able to evoke a spirit of dedication and sacrifice ... comparable with ... religious faith, and that was communism.'

Again: modern republicanism is indeed an ideal, which means that it demands what will, as a matter of fact, not be given. It demands civic virtue; but modern societies are dominated by vice. 'The republic', Bobbio writes, 'is an ideal form of state founded on the virtues and patriotism of its citizens. Virtue and patriotism were Jacobin ideals, to which terror was then added. In reality, the republic needs terror', he argues (p. 9). Thus the reality is that the only challenge, in the present-day 'democratic' state, to the power of money is the power of ideology. And 'strictly ideological power has diminished a great deal' (p.79) – which, a contrario, means that the power of money has increased. But money corrupts a republic. So the republic of today, we may conclude, is, so to speak, its own contradiction. Moreover, greater corruption corresponds to great secrecy – the topic of the chapter of 'Hidden Powers'.

New constitutional arrangements, pace Viroli, are in Bobbio's view no solution, for 'there are no longer any shared ideals' that could underpin them. A new democratic elite is needed, but again, is unlikely to emerge – for in this case too, the social conditions are absent. And political philosophy, even of an advanced republicanism variety, cannot compensate for such an absence.

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