

Radical Republicanism

Democracy, Property and Rights

Over the last two decades republican thought has attracted a growing interest from political, moral and legal scholars. These contemporary theoretical syntheses of ‘neo-republican’ thought have been closely related to intellectual history and the idea of recovering an overshadowed tradition of political thought. In this vein, a classical set of historical moments and places (e.g., ancient Rome, renaissance Italy, civil-war England or revolutionary America among others) and specific political practices within those contexts appear to be the main source of what republicanism meant – and what it could mean today.

However, broadening the comprehension of the republican tradition can and should be done by informing historical and theoretical research from different geographical and chronological coordinates than those commonly seen as canonical. It is by using this broader lens that it becomes possible to outline a historical and theoretical path gathering various political experiences in different countries, thereby constructing a longstanding tradition of anti-oligarchic politics that can be labelled democratic, radical or plebeian republicanism. For these reasons, our special issue occupies a concrete place in the current landscape of the academic study of republicanism. As other scholars have been recently doing, this special issue also reintroduces ‘popular sovereignty as a driving force in republican thought’ (Leipold et al. 2020: 1) and recovers ‘plebeian interpretations’ of republican institutions (Vergara 2020: 44, see also McCormick 2011). The collection of articles that follows seeks to widen the republican tradition both historically and politically, and in addition has a further normative aim. Since, as it has been recently put, we also think that ‘*democratic* republicanism offers a more robust and coherent alternative for the existing liberal consensus’ (de Dijn 2022: 101; our italics).



In such recovery of the democratic insights within the republican tradition, we think that the idea of rights, and more concretely property rights, deserve special attention. On this point, this special issue is also embedded in a recent emergence of a fertile field of research seeking to reconstruct the role that property played in the ideas and practices of historical republicans. Republicans considered accumulations of property – and the other side of the coin, lack of property – an important source of dominion, as a threat to liberty (Bertomeu 2017; Spitz 2009; White 2016). But, most importantly, property rights were also regarded by republicans as a way of guaranteeing the material conditions of freedom (Raventos 2007; Domenech and Raventos 2008). In the case of democratic, plebeian or radical republicans this meant that, when properly institutionalised and spread, property rights could serve to extend republican freedom to social groups traditionally under the dominion of others. This was the case in early modern popular political economies advocating for democratic control of common and public resources (Bosc 2019; Casassas and Wispelaere 2016; Casassas and Guerrero 2022). In the same sense, fiduciary conceptions of property served the purpose of connecting public sovereignty with the legitimation of property rights, acting as an argument for the social embeddedness of wealth and property (Bosc 2020; Lain 2020; Manjarin 2020; Mundo 2017). Lastly, the relationship between republicanism, property and democracy has been the focus of researchers looking for the continuities between republicanism and the socialist movement (Domenech 2004; Gourevitch 2015; Martinez-Cava 2020; Muldoon 2022; O’Shea 2020; Popp-Madsen 2021; Scotto 2020).

In different ways, these recent approaches highlight the anti-oligarchic politics of the republican tradition and concretise the institutional means by which democracy developed within republicanism – that is, how did democratic republicans seek to guarantee the extension of republican freedom to traditionally dominated groups? The articles in this special issue point to three elements: plebeian constitutional design, the distribution of property, and the idea of universal and fundamental rights. The articles are then connected by the abovementioned, common scholarly goal: to broaden historically and normatively the reconstructions of republicanism, a legal and political tradition that strongly shaped Western legal and political thought for the last two millennia.

In her article, Ailynn Torres explores the conceptual disconnection between feminism and republicanism and develops the possibilities of an academic and political conversation between these two apparently disconnected traditions. The text describes the intersections between feminism and neo-republicanism over the past few decades, drawing attention to the mutual growing interest. Then, the article discusses three points in which the conversation between feminism and republicanism can take place: the examination of the relationship between material dispossession, dependence, and freedom; the debates on the public, private, and domestic spheres; and the implications of expanding the notion of autonomy to consider bodily autonomy. Finally, the author considers political participation a feminist and republican virtue. The article concludes with the need for a republican feminist revival.

Social conflict is the starting point of Camila Vergara's contribution. Her article presents a plebeian strand of republican constitutional thought that recognises the influence that socioeconomic inequalities have on political power, embraces conflict as the effective cause of free government, and seeks to channel its anti-oligarchic energy through the constitutional structure. Her article engages with the constitutional ideas of two major modern plebeian thinkers – Niccolò Machiavelli and Nicolas de Condorcet – focusing on the institutional role of the common people to resist oppression through ordinary and extraordinary political action. Then, it discusses the work of two of the most prominent contemporary republican thinkers – Philip Pettit and John McCormick – and contrasts their models of 'contestatory' and 'tribunician' democracy, concentrating on the institutional power of the common people to resist domination. The final section incorporates a political economy lens and proposes to include as part of republican constitutionalism not only contestatory and tribunician institutions but also anti-oligarchic basic rules to keep inequality and corruption under control.

Among the many circumstances that have traditionally fuelled social and constitutional conflicts, the unequal distribution of property rights deserves special attention. Bru Laín and Edgar Manjarín point out that neither mainstream economics nor the socialist tradition seem capable of offering a persuasive account of actually existing property rights, nor do they identify the central importance of the commons within the juridical and political development of different

ownership regimes. Their article aims to reconstruct the republican account of property rights by clarifying, first, the extent to which it was shaped by the natural law tradition, and second, how this modern republicanism understood property rights as a kind of moral and institutional fiduciary relationship between the sovereign – all free citizens (principal or trustor) – and particular owners (agents or trustees).

In line with this concern for institutional design, David Casassas and Jordi Mundo also delve into the fiduciary nature of property rights. During the last two centuries, property understood as an exclusive and unlimited dominion became common sense. Before, the idea of property as a fiduciary relationship, which is still present in contemporary social constitutionalism, was closely linked to the view that the exercise of freedom entails the capacity to shape those property rights that channel socioeconomic life. Today, new ways to operationalise this approach must be found. Their article explores the scope of ‘direct strategies’ (the state as proprietor, democratically limited forms of private property, and common property) and ‘indirect strategies’ (the distribution of ‘social power’ through the introduction of unconditional public policy schemes such as basic income) in the recovery of the idea and the practice of collective fiduciary control over the economic realm.

An insightful constellation of property rights, republican democracy and anti-oligarchic politics is to be found at the kernel of the European Workers’ Councils experiences during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen and Andreas Mulvad re-evaluate the historical legacy of republicanism beyond its classical chronological frontier – the early nineteenth century – in the so-called second republican revival within the socialist European tradition, with special focus on the political thought of Antonio Gramsci. By doing so, they offer an appealing account of how these workers’ councils tried to apply a republican understanding of political institutions by establishing, reinforcing and developing workplace democracy and cooperativist political and economic principles.

Marıa Victoria Costa’s article considers why the influential neo-republicans Philip Pettit and Richard Bellamy tend to minimise or deny the role that natural or moral rights play in republican thought. It argues that their specific views about the theoretical role of such rights are motivated by methodological commitments. In Pettit’s

case, the commitments are to consequentialism and formalism, while in Bellamy's, it is to proceduralism. But these commitments get in the way of providing a fully adequate account of the value of freedom as non-domination: one that allows us to determine when citizens actually enjoy this kind of freedom. Finally, the author argues that a full explanation of what it means to enjoy freedom as non-domination must unavoidably appeal to normative notions. In particular, it requires an appeal to either basic rights or to the basic moral rules that ground rights.

Lastly, David Guerrero and Julio Martínez-Cava also explore why the renewed historical and normative attention to republicanism has either skirted around or severely criticised natural rights. Their contribution aims to systematise the philosophic and historiographical reasons that may explain the neo-republican rejection of the tradition of rights. First, the authors identify two archetypal arguments against modern revolutionary natural rights traditionally used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars and politicians. Second, they show how this critical reception of natural rights was integrated in important historiographical and normative developments during the Cold War. Third, they show that the republican revival uncritically inherited these centuries-old commonplace critiques against natural rights. By giving an account of why neo-republicanism disregards natural rights, their article aims to dispute some of the mainstream reconstructions of these two traditions. They claim that reconsidering the relationship between natural rights and republican liberty is one of the first steps to recover and understand many cases of democratic and plebeian republicanism.

This special issue should interest political philosophers, political theorists, and historians of political thought. Moreover, each article sheds new light on concepts of ordinary usage in many fields of social theory: trust, representation and revocability, fundamental rights and natural rights, popular sovereignty, property rights and commons, distributive justice and the material conditions of freedom and so on. In doing so, some of them develop fructiferous historically grounded interpretations of the normative thought of widely read authors such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Burke or Antonio Gramsci among others.

As a whole, these articles outline a common research agenda, namely, that a deep understanding of modernity requires the study of

plebeian republican projects and struggles, which to a certain extent contributed to shaping contemporary market societies. Consequently, this special issue serves as a tool to further one of the main goals of such academic endeavour: to inquire into the normative and institutional foundations of democratic politics – to make sense of some of the most deeply rooted moral intuitions that stand behind popular political experiences. Hopefully, this special issue will enrich prominent debates on republican thought that started several decades ago.

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Guest Editors

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