

REPUBLICANISM

At the most basic level, republicanism is a desire for a republic rather than a monarchy, in which people play an active role in the public arena. As such, it is an ideology that coalesces around a particular conception of liberty. With its ideals of political freedom, self-government, citizenship, egalitarianism and virtuousness, republicanism has a long history from its Athenian and Roman roots to Renaissance Europe to its role in being the revolutionary fodder out of which the French and American Revolutions were kindled. Over the nineteenth century, republicanism continued to provide a robust vocabulary to articulate anti-imperial, anti-monarchical, and anti-capitalist efforts.

For republicans, its central theme, according to Pettit, is “freedom as non-domination.” Within the republican outlook, to be free is to be free from power that is arbitrary. In this rather frugal framework for freedom, the ideal of political citizenship is conceptualised as the lack of subjection to arbitrary control.

In Skinner’s formative study of the history of prevailing political thought, republicanism has antecedents in the Roman concept of *libertas* which has been elaborated on by Italian and English republican theorists over the years. While there has been a republican resurgence since the 1980s, the strength and potential of the republican tradition, it is accepted, has been eclipsed by the domination of the western liberal narrative.

Freedom as Non-Domination

In 1969, Isaiah Berlin had put down two formulations of liberty: “negative” and “positive.” Negative liberty is the freedom to conduct one’s life without interference from others. Interference may be defined in various ways, but its absence is what allows for a life of freedom. Hobbs, Bentham, and Mill are associated with this conception of liberty which is the liberal articulation of the concept. Positive freedom is freedom to self-actualise by having mastery over oneself; it is associated with continental philosophers like Hegel, Spinoza, and Rousseau. Like interference, self-mastery could be construed in various ways and one could face the prospect of being coerced in order to attain this self-mastery, and that would be considered for one’s own good. Critics of republicanism contended that republicans had to choose between these two forms of liberty.

Republican writers like Philip Pettit have rejected the dichotomy of Berlin theorising that liberty is freedom from domination, or freedom as non-domination. In this formulation, freedom is a systemic independence whereby no one is subjected to the arbitrary exercise of power. Non-domination for Pettit is a formulation of freedom distinctive to republicanism. Along with Berlin’s theorisation, Pettit contends this is a third way to conceptualise freedom. He claims that freedom is not the lack of interference or self-actualisation, rather it is the absence of random and unpredictable exercise of power upon a person. This is at variance with the liberal non-interference model where absence of intervention is the main gauge for freedom.

Domination is different from interference in two key ways. First is that it can be present without interference. Using the example of unfreedom that is slavery, one can understand that even if the master is temperamentally considerate, and not prone to interference, one's freedom is conditional upon the master's will and his caprices. As such, one is unfree. Pettit asserts that negative liberty proponents are not able to see that there is a freedom deficit or unfreedom when some have the power to exercise control over others even if they do not use that power or are unlikely to use it. To understand freedom as non-domination, as opposed to freedom as non-interference is to appreciate that increasing the former is to increase the freedom of all, illustrating that it (freedom as non-domination) is an inherently shared, egalitarian notion of freedom.

Freedom is then a social good that is accomplished not through the lack of certain institutions, but via the presence of necessary ones, as well as relevant relationships. Pettit has written of freedom as a "social status" in which are inherent feelings of being secure while recognising others with the same status. This status is an "anti-power" position consisting of positive safeguards, amenities, and propensities which ensure people's inoculation against domination. The Berlinian dichotomy of negative and positive freedom fails to sufficiently encapsulate the positive points of republican freedom. For reciprocal non-domination to be achieved, citizens are to be supplied with essential resources and abilities and they must show certain virtues and a disposition towards others. Because the state is coercive by nature, a republican political formation will endeavour to emphasise the equality of citizens through institutions and use of symbols. Downplaying religion is an example of such measures.

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