

REPUBLICANISM: ONE MORE INQUIRY INTO THE COHERENCE OF A CONCEPT

INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM STEARNS BY HENRIETA ȘERBAN

WILLIAM STEARNS is a political theorist who specializes in the study of political language and political culture. He has taught at a number of universities including the University of Montana, University of Michigan and the University of Bucharest. Stearns and William Chaloupka edited and introduced Jean Baudrillard: The Disappearance of Art and Politics (St. Martin's Press, 1992) and he has contributed to American, British and Canadian Studies (Lucian Blaga University) and Theory & Event (Johns Hopkins University). His current research focuses on the significance of the work of political scientist Harold D. Lasswell to an understanding the psychological dimensions of globalization, and a satirical examination of the practicality of taxing the "have-it-alls" in order to redress vast disparities of wealth, power and the distribution of respect in the United States today.

HENRIETA ȘERBAN: *Republicanism. Should we dust off the concept?*

WILLIAM STEARNS: That is a good question. Some very smart people (historians, political theorists, legal scholars) have been trying to do just that for over 40 years in the United States. We should be clear from the outset — “republicanism” is neither a political movement nor is it the explicit ideology of a particular political party. It’s a scholarly debate, fair enough, but as historian Daniel T. Rodgers once observed, it often relapses into “taxonomic tics” and “intellectualization with a vengeance.” If you dust something for forty years and dust remains, you might want to move to another room and devote your solitudes to another object. I hope I’m not sounding dismissive (OK, I am!) but I see no reason why “liberalism,” “liberal democracy” or “representative democracy” — which don’t need dusting off — can’t do all the conceptual work — and more — than “republicanism.” At least I feel this is true in the contemporary American political context, with all due deference to Rome, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau and the American Founding Fathers. The language of republicanism has something musty about it. The word “republic” itself is one of those “after-thought” terms in contemporary political language — “Oh yeah, we live in a *republic*” — like an answer to a television game show question, or faint memory of a second grade songbook or an old sixth grade civics lesson with a teacher named Sister Columbiana. And consider the word “liberty,” when “freedom” has much more of a contemporary resonance. Both “republic” and “liberty” are more likely associated with banks, insurance companies, gun dealers and fringe right-wing populists in the U.S. than contemporary political discourse.

The language of republicanism is barely alive — more like dry leaves that were once green, to paraphrase Hegel’s description of arid formalism; I think it’s pedantic and factitious, merely “life-like,” “preserved.” My question, then, is:

Beyond defining republicanism as “democratically delegated authority with institutional safeguards against the arbitrary exercise of power,” *what else needs to be said?* “Liberalism,” “liberal democracy” or “representative democracy” are capacious and yet precise enough to do this conceptual work for us today — and they have the added advantage of not needing to be “dusted off.”

Having said that, it doesn’t hurt to do a little “archaeological work”: the words “liberty” and “republic” were once green leaves with identifiable veins of thought running through them. When Benjamin Franklin was walking home after deliberations at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia and approached by a woman for some news, Franklin is reputed to have replied, “It’s a republic ma’am — if you can keep it.” So I’m delighted to have this conversation with you while we keep in mind those reservations I’ve just mentioned, and bearing in mind that in 1807 John Adams, an American Founding Father *par excellence* wrote, “There is not a more unintelligible word in the English language than *republicanism*.”

In the U.S., republicanism resurfaced as a scholarly debate in the 1970s/80s concerning the revolutionary and early national periods in America. Basically, it served to confront two competing paradigms from two books: Charles and Mary Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) and Louis Hartz’s *Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). Both the Beards and Hartz were contesting the “icon approach” to early American history that had tended toward nostalgic adoration of the lofty and original revolutionary ideals of the founding period, say from 1760 to 1789. The Beards argued that the American Constitution was the result of the consensus of dominant elite economic and sectional interests (upper bourgeois and near aristocratic interests) many of whom felt they needed a strong federal government with taxing authority to help them redeem the bonds they purchased to finance the revolution against the British. This was an “elite consensus theory” of the founding of the American republic and one might say that it had some conspiratorial overtones. Hartz, on the other hand, worked his own form of demythologization by deemphasizing American “exceptionalism” and arguing that Americans were “Lockean by birth,” that they had no real social revolution, but rather a war of independence that was characterized above all by its sobriety — moderate, legalistic and non-regicidal. Americans never had the experience of feudalism and they were individualistic and proto-capitalistic from the get-go. This was the “liberal consensus theory” of the founding of the American republic.

When the academic “republicans” arrived in the 70s and 80s (people like Bernard Bailyn, J.G.A. Pocock, and Gordon Wood) the consensus about the liberal consensus shattered. The “republicans” argued — and I’m skipping over individual differences among them to create a cognitive map — that early America was not just characterized by its liberalism (“possessive individualism” to use C.B. Macpherson’s phrase) but also by an ideology centered on the public good, civic virtue and an appreciation of political participation as a form of self-realization (in other words, its *republicanism*). Well, as the debates heated up, the more jangled the concept of “republicanism” became, though the basic contours of the discussion revolved around “liberal America” vs. “republican America.”

I like the questions posed by my former colleague at the University of Michigan, Don Herzog, who felt the partisans in this intellectual debate might have made it clearer why this issue in American intellectual, social and political history was relevant to America in the 1980s (in the age of Ronald Reagan and George

H.W. Bush). As a political theorist, Herzog suspected that these historical debates were more than just academic squabbles and instead pointed to two very different visions of America. So, when accepting his party's re-nomination in 1984, Ronald Reagan famously referred to America as a "shining city on a hill" (invoking the Puritan John Winthrop) was this beacon of the good life *liberal* (dedicated to individualism and liberty) or *republican* (devoted to virtue and the common good)?

H. Ș.: *So the debates clarified something. Maybe it was the centrality of the public good?*

W. S.: Yes, I suppose that's it. The "republicans," both left and right on the political spectrum, thought that by rediscovering America's republican past they might contribute to revitalizing public life and restoring a sense of community or "civic humanism." One might think of Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) and Robert Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985). It is also worth noting that this was the time (the 1980s) to which intellectual historian James T. Kloppenberg referred in his *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope and the American Political Tradition* (2011) as the period of "the education of Barack Obama." These debates were especially popular in law schools and we shouldn't forget that Obama was president of the *Harvard Law Review*, which placed him front and center of debates regarding what became known as the "republican synthesis" — a recognition of the creative, often "uncivil" coexistence of demands for liberty (defined as freedom from any interference) *and* the common good (usually emphasizing the rule of law and equal opportunity) in the American political and legal tradition. Kloppenberg concludes that the chief intellectual influences on Obama at Harvard consisted of "civic republicanism" (emphasizing reasoned deliberation and compromise) and "philosophical pragmatism" (open-endedness and experimentation). So to condense all of this into a recognizable political perspective, these debates on republicanism may have contributed to "putting politics back in the driver's seat," in influential academic circles at least, which was a rejection of Ronald Reagan's (thoroughly "liberal") catchy one-liner, "government isn't the solution to the problem, government is the problem" — which set the ideological tone of his administration in his first inaugural address. So the conversations around republicanism may have been helpful in confronting crude forms of economic determinism, whether of the neo-liberal or Marxist varieties. But problems remained, as I suggested earlier. Once again, I have to agree with Don Herzog. Many debates about republicanism or the "republican synthesis" seemed to proceed as if liberalism was a philosophical monolith and John Locke was the only liberal — *Locke et praeterea nihil*.

But liberalism is a tradition, not a single view, and like any tradition it is best conceived as a family of disagreements — Hobbes but also Locke, Locke but also Rousseau, and Adam Smith (of *The Wealth of Nations* but also Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*), David Hume, Hamilton but also Jefferson, and of course later, Kant, J. S. Mill, Eduard Bernstein, Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls to mention only a few. Herzog reminded us, playfully adopting an "icon strategy inverted," that not all the American Founding Fathers whom we might call "republican" were wholly laudable characters. Benjamin Rush, for example, medical doctor, signer of the Declaration of Independence, prolific writer, a central figure in American prison reform, felt that republics should be politically

unified and racially homogeneous, rejected every kind of education abroad, felt strongly that Christianity was necessary to a “uniform and peaceable republic,” thought that men should be converted into “republican machines” and that “every man in a republic is public property” (which I know will raise some “red flags” with Romanians who have knowledge or experience with Ceaușescu’s infamous “pro-natalist” policies, when a woman’s uterus was declared property of the Socialist Republic.) Rush sounds a lot like some strident and repulsive “republican” voices in today’s American Republican party — like Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann. So Herzog reminds us that once republicanism becomes identified with a particular political program, it is not always very attractive. (I leave it up to my Romanian friends to determine how comely is *Noua Republica*, which so often sounds like the American Tea Party movement’s invocations of “virtue”...)

The political philosopher Michael Walzer, always a perceptive thinker, is similarly skeptical of the academic resuscitation of republicanism with its obsessive focus on citizenship and virtue. Walzer, who cares deeply and writes extensively about citizenship, reminds us that there are other values that compete with civic engagement — *work*, for example, which is more than merely the fulfillment of basic needs, and that there are many “partial fulfillments” in society, like those found in churches, the arts, sports, neighborhoods, labor unions, and so on. Walzer is in basic agreement with Herzog who criticizes philosophical republicanism as being woefully inadequate regarding pluralism in society and which tends to express a longing for a society of united purposes and relies on shibboleths that simplistically counter-pose the “common good” to “special interests.” Herzog tartly suggests that we have no good reasons for thinking that moral consensus is what holds society together. Walzer would add that *politics is just one setting among many for the realization of the good life*. He also chides the republicans by reminding them that people are only “intermittently virtuous,” suggesting, rightfully I think, that relying on the bare appeal to become more virtuous is rather weak tea for hard neo-liberal times.

H. S.: *So the concept of republicanism is mushy? Might we better think of it as a striving for a framework for freedom?*

W. S.: “Yes” to the first question and, “I don’t think so” to the second. If it is to have any value today my feeling is that all of this talk about republicanism represents more a striving toward a framework of *authority*. And again, I see no reason why the issues that “republicans” bring to the table shouldn’t be a part of the liberal tradition. On this point I am entirely in agreement with Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida (as presented by Bonnie Honig). This, I think, would be understanding republicanism in a new key.

For Arendt, the practice of authority in modernity — “republicanism” — is the search for legitimating liberal democracy in an age of cynicism about politics and overzealous “theological accounts of the world and ideological accounts that mimic theology,” to use Michael Walzer’s words. Modernity for Arendt is characterized by the absence of “irresistible absolutes” and the challenge to the exercise of legitimate political authority in the modern age is similar to what Machiavelli faced (according to Hannah Pitkin) — namely, that authority should be “exercised in such a way that further politicizes people rather than rendering them quiescent... to avoid riot, apathy and privatization.” “Riot, apathy and

privatization” — such a felicitous phrase! — I can’t help thinking of our contemporary spectacle of anti-political characters going into politics in the United States under the banner of the Tea Party. The self-righteousness of anti-political types can undermine the authority of a liberal democratic republic.

Arendt was interested in the modern crisis of authority or political legitimation when “the loss of religious sanction for the political realm is an accomplished fact” (*pace* Carl Schmitt, one might hasten to add). Ultimately, and tantalizingly, “republicanism in a new key” if I may say so, is the way Arendt explains the grounding of modern authority, the establishment of the American republic as a liberal democracy, the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence, and the significance of the American Constitution, as having no “despotic absolutes,” no “law of laws” (like God, natural law or tradition) no extra-political force as a sanction and ultimate guarantee. A genuine republic, and she thought the American Revolution delivered such a republic, was founded on the authority of “non-foundational politics.” The revolution overtook the Americans’ expectations (after all, they had been speaking the language of the *restoration* of their aggrieved liberties) but in the exhilaration of the exercise of freedom and in political action, they found themselves creating a new world. Their actions had outstripped their theory and the intensity of their new political engagements became an occasion for a radical political education. They discovered that political thought is “human-all-too-human” as Nietzsche might say. And the American delegates who convened to hammer out a new constitution were themselves acting unconstitutionally, authority being conferred on their political action only later by what Derrida called “a sort of fabulous retroactivity.” Contingency, then, was necessary to the exercise of freedom and to its authoritative embodiment in a republican constitution.

What stabilizes this new, essentially risky, political arrangement, a republic, as Honig reads Arendt, “is a common subscription to the authoritative linguistic act of *promising*.” To put it more dramatically, specifically and literally, the words which were the prologues to the Declaration of Independence (“We hold these truths to be self-evident...”) and to the Constitution (“We the People in order to form a more perfect union...”) were *performative speech acts* (J. L. Austin) which were *promises* to be fulfilled and preserved through mindful augmentation and amendment; they were *not descriptions* of an actually existing state of affairs. This is the radical authoritative nature of the legitimation of freedom in a modern republic, *republicanism* if you will. For Arendt the modern republic needed continually to address, and to *resist* attempts to ground political authority in the despotism of a “law of laws.” And in this regard, as Honig reminds us, Arendt had no less than Thomas Jefferson on her side, who famously warned about treating the Constitution with “sanctimonious reverence.” The conservative political philosopher as Leo Strauss recognized a similar quality in Machiavelli’s commitment to the Florentine republic, where the “foundation is a continuous foundation.”

So I think Hannah Arendt provides the most satisfactory answer to those scholars who are skeptical of today’s republicans (like Don Herzog, Daniel T. Rodgers and Michael Walzer, all of whom I largely agree with) who demand more of republicanism today than “vacuous sentimental slogans” and fusty pedantic conceits. Bonnie Honig concludes her article on republicanism, as I am quite happy to do in our interview, with Nietzsche’s *Use and Abuse of History*, where he counsels us to seek “a past from which we may spring rather than that from which we seem to have derived.”