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RADICAL REPUBLICANISM: THE NEW IDEA OF THE LEFT?

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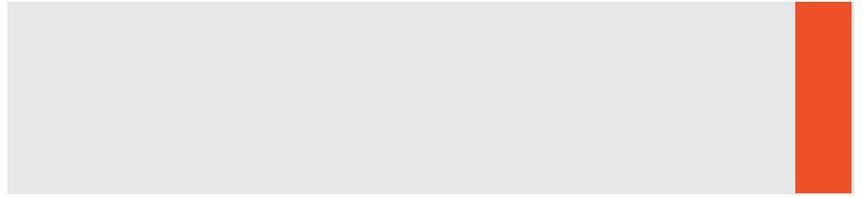
Yiannis Kouris¹

In 2007, Oxford based philosopher, Stuart White wondered whether neo-republicanism is the Left's new big idea. Neo-republicanism is based on an array of ideas such as freedom, equality, civic virtue, political participation and the safeguarding of fundamental rights. In 2007 neo-republican political philosophy was flourishing in Western academic cycles, while the radical Left was attempting to combine a novel progressive social agenda with its traditional ideological commitments.

Recent developments provide additional interest in White's question. Academically, there is a continuously growing literature on neo-republicanism (Lovett, 2018). Politically, the recent financial and ideological crisis has provided- among other things- fertile ground for progressive ideas and alternative policies. For example, in 2007 it would be difficult to predict the SYRIZA administration (2015-2019). Similarly, it would be difficult to foresee that the socialist ideas of Bernie Sanders would be so popular in the US or that Jeremy Corbyn would be elected as the Labour leader in the UK.

This short essay attempts to answer White's question and highlight the connection between radical neo-republicanism and the Left. The radical republicanism approach has tangible merits: it offers a concrete theoretical foundation so as to evaluate progressive policies. Initially, I summarize neo-republicanism's normative basis. Then, I present radical republicanism and policy. Finally, I outline the advantages of the radical republican approach and argue that it can offer a new dynamic to the Left.

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1. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY REPUBLICANISM

The term “republicanism” describes two different but closely related phenomena (Lovett, 2018). First, the term republicanism refers to a historical school of thought. The republican tradition includes thinkers such as Machiavelli, Rousseau, Milton, Wollstonecraft, Madison and Paine. Second, the term “republicanism” refers to a contemporary normative political theory. For neo-republicans the paramount value is political liberty. Neo-republicanism is associated especially with the works of Pettit (1997 and 2012) and Skinner (1998). Republican thinkers developed their ideas towards different directions and often reached contradictory conclusions. However, at the most fundamental level, their thought is based on four common ideas that form the narrow theoretical base of neo-republicanism (White, 2007).

First, neo-republicanism promotes the *common good*. A republican polity must promote the interests of all its citizens and maintain institutional safeguards that prevent oligarchical cliques and particular individuals from dominating public life. Hence, republicanism is closely connected with democracy.² Neo-republican policies and laws must be evaluated- through open public dialogue- by the citizenry (Sunstein, 1998). Neo-republicans hold that the people are sovereign. Popular sovereignty must be protected by institutional safeguards -checks and balances- that promote the common good.

Second, the republican polity must promote the *liberty* of the citizenry. The neo-republican notion of “freedom as non-domination” is wider than the liberal notion of “freedom from interference”. According to the liberal notion of freedom an individual is free insofar her choices are not interfered with. In other words, in the absence of overt force or coercion one is considered to be free. Freedom as non-domination holds that one is free insofar as her choices are not subject to the arbitrary (or the uncontrolled) power of another (Pettit, 1997).³

² Note that some thinkers that are associated with the historical tradition of republicanism were not democrats. Yet, all republican thinkers were committed to the promotion of the common good.

³ Pettit (1997) defines arbitrary power as a power that is not forced to track the interests of those subjected to it. For example, state power is arbitrary when it does not track and promote the interests of the people.



Imagine a woman that lives in a patriarchal society and is financially dependent on her husband. Imagine that this husband does not constrain the actions of his wife in any way. In this scenario there is no overt force or coercion. Under the liberal notion of liberty, the woman is considered to be free. In contrast, under the neo-republican conception the woman is not free as her husband has the power to intervene in her life at will (e.g. if he changes his mind tomorrow).

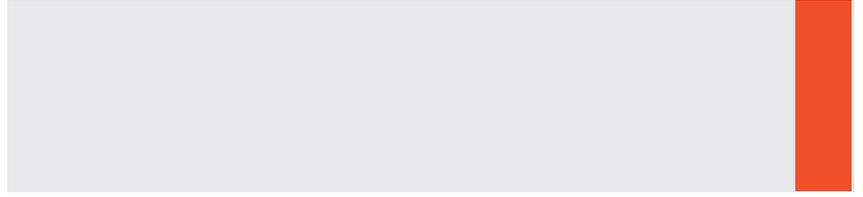
The republican state has a twofold role in promoting freedom as non-domination. First, the state must create and maintain institutional safeguards that preclude particular citizens (or social groups) from wielding arbitrary power. Second, the state must wield its power in a way that does not reduce the freedom of the citizenry.

Third, the republican approach is concerned with the character of citizens and the promotion of *civic virtue*. For example, a virtue that the republican polity attempts to cultivate is participation in public life and decision making. For some republicans public participation is inherently valuable, while for others participation in the demos is valuable only in an instrumental way (Skinner, 1998).

Fourth, republicanism is concerned with the socioeconomic conditions that promote the common good and freedom as non-domination. In particular, republicans are committed to *economic and social equality*. Laws and policies must seek to minimize wealth inequalities in order to prevent power asymmetries that endow particular social groups with arbitrary power. As Rousseau (1920: 87) puts it “no citizen must should be rich enough to be able to buy another, and none so poor that he has to sell himself”.⁴

Similarly, the polity must legislate so as to prevent social inequalities. For example, republicanism offers- since Wollstonecraft’s era- a valuable theoretical tool against patriarchal domination. The same reasoning applies to xenophobic, homophobic, trans-phobic and racist norms and laws that place particular social groups under the arbitrary power of others. The neo-republican state aims to eradicate all institutional structures that enable the above forms of social domination.

⁴ This passage is also cited in White (2007).



2. RADICAL NEO-REPUBLICANISM AND ALTERNATIVE POLICIES

In recent years the radical current of thought within neo-republicanism has been revitalized (O’Shea, 2019; Muldoon, 2019; Bryan, 2019; Roberts, 2017; Leipold, 2017; White, 2011; Gourevitch, 2015). Radical neo-republicanism draws inspiration from the radical history of tradition and puts forward an additional claim: neo-republicanism is incompatible with capitalism.⁵ These anti-capitalist neo-republicans hold that capitalist societies have numerous structural features that reduce freedom (as “non-domination”) in society.

For example, the hierarchical structure of modern corporations creates conditions of domination within the workplace (Anderson, 2017). Employees are under the arbitrary power of their employers and their supervisors as long as they are unable to determine working conditions or change jobs easily. Employers, as well as managers, have the capacity to intervene in the choices of the workers and limit their freedom. Additionally, the neoliberal economic approach has traditionally sought to remove all “barriers” (trade unions, labor rights etc.) from the market, leaving workers acutely vulnerable to the power of employers. Capitalist production continuously generates sizeable profits, which in turn creates corporate giants that have uncontrolled power over the rest of society (through the financing of political parties, control of the media etc.). Finally, profit maximization underpins the capitalist system and often promotes an unhealthy competition that prevents the cultivation of certain civic virtues- such as solidarity and the promotion of the common good- that are central values for neo-republicanism.

This tension between capitalism and radical neo-republicanism has led neo-republicans to formulate alternative ways of structuring society. According to radical neo-republicanism, the state must implement public policies to increase freedom and promote the common good. Wealth re-distribution or the public provision of goods such as education and health are not sufficient under this view. For example, a radical neo-republican education policy would promote freedom as “non-domination” at all levels of education and cultivate certain civic virtues (e.g. elimination of standardized tests, active involvement of students in curriculum development and course selection etc.).⁶

⁵ For the radical history of republicanism see Gourevitch (2015).

⁶ See Suisa (2019).



Some neo-republicans believe that only public ownership of the means of production will lead to an emancipated society (O’Shea, 2019; Gourevitch, 2015). Other theorists are promoting milder alternatives that aim at the democratization of the workplace and the protection of vulnerable workers. For example, Elizabeth Anderson (2017) argues for worker representatives on boards of directors. This proposal resembles the German model. Anderson also argues for a guaranteed universal basic income.⁷ This universal basic income will empower citizens, shielding them from the uncontrolled power of their employers and enabling them to leave an oppressive workplace. Neo-republicans also aim to incentivize alternative forms of production (e.g. workers’ cooperatives). Another policy would require corporations to deposit a percentage of their profits in worker-controlled funds (O’Shea, 2019). The above policies have a common aim: increasing freedom (as “non-domination”) within society and promoting the common good.

⁷ This income will be provided unconditionally and not just in case of unemployment.



3. ADVANTAGES

Admittedly, these ideas, or at least many of them, are not new for the Left. A critique of capitalism has always been at the core of Marxist and socialist thought. In the second half of the 20th century, progressive policies were developed either by Social Democratic governments or by other versions of the Left that aimed to gradually emancipate the most oppressed citizens. However, radical neo-republicanism offers a new dynamic to left-wing thinking and has tangible advantages.

First, radical neo-republicanism offers a theoretical toolkit for assessing modern capitalist societies. The electoral manifestos of left-wing progressive parties can be evaluated through the neo-republican framework. Different political agendas will promote freedom as non-domination on different levels. For example, in 2007 the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) asked the philosopher Phillip Pettit to evaluate their government from a neo-republican perspective (White, 2007).

Second, radical neo-republicanism goes hand in hand with contemporary left-wing movements. The neo-republican state aims to eliminate all institutional structures that support different forms of social domination. For example, the institutional safeguards protecting the working class and the LGBTQ+ movement are based on the same theoretical basis according to neo-republicanism. All republican public policies aim to reduce arbitrary power and domination. Moreover, some “anti-commercial” Republicans, such as Rousseau, offer a purely “green” social vision (White, 2007).

Third, radical neo-republicanism can provide the basis for a progressive left-wing foreign policy. For example, republican ideas can underpin a foreign policy that is pro-European but requires the democratization of the European Union at the same time. EU’s democratic deficit and neoliberal economic agenda creates conditions of domination both *within* and *between* Member States.

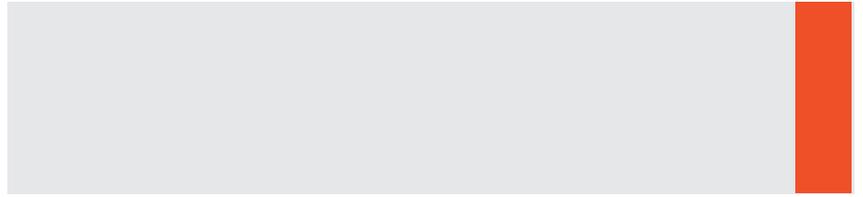


Fourthly, radical neo-republicanism offers us the theoretical framework for dealing with an array of contemporary challenges. During the 4th Industrial Revolution, the Left has to utilize technology for the benefit of society but also reflect and criticize the parts of technological development that only benefit powerful elites. On the one hand, republicanism holds that technologies that promote freedom as “non-domination” can be an integral part of left-wing policy.⁸ On the other hand, big tech corporations need to be radically reformed so as to limit corporate arbitrary power (stronger data protection laws, online sales ceilings etc.). For example, recent research analyses how large corporations collect personal data and use it for targeted (commercial and political) advertising wielding significant arbitrary power over the citizenry (West, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Radical neo-republicanism can be a promising theoretical approach for the Left. The republican theoretical framework combines a strong critique of the neo-liberal capitalist economic model with a novel normative political theory that promotes an alternative emancipatory vision of prosperity. The ability to utilize this theoretical framework in order to evaluate applied policies gives a new dynamic to the contemporary left-wing politics.

⁸For a collection of essays arguing that ITC technologies, such as social media platforms, can be emancipating see Diamond and Plattner (2012).



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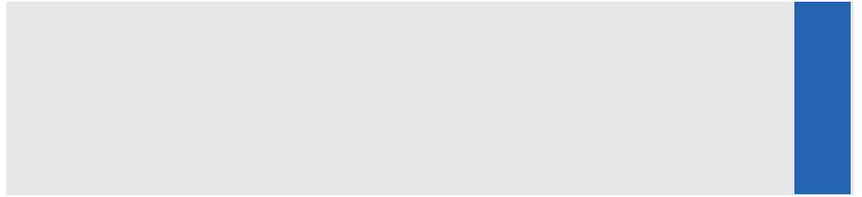
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