

The labour republicans and the classical republican tradition: Alex Gourevitch's *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*

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Alex Gourevitch, *From slavery to the cooperative commonwealth: labor and republican liberty in the nineteenth century*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2015; 213 pp. \$80 (hbk).

Abstract

Alex Gourevitch's *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* is a valuable contribution to republican historiography: in reconstructing the ideas of the 19th century American labour republicans, this work significantly expands and enriches our appreciation of the classical republican tradition. While the labour republicans are convincingly shown to have made important contributions to that tradition, stronger claims that they fundamentally transformed republicanism are less persuasive.

Keywords

Republicanism, slavery, wage-labour, civic virtue, freedom

The revival of interest in the classical republican tradition has generated a wealth of new historical studies over the past several decades. It is fair to say that following the path-breaking contributions of J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner among many others, our understanding of the development of early modern political thought has been fundamentally transformed (Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 1978). But scholars interested in the classical republicans have rarely strayed beyond the basic historical sequence established by Pocock – roughly, from Machiavelli through Harrington to Madison. An occasional nod to Tocqueville aside, the classical republican tradition is often assumed to have run its intellectual course by the time John Adams published his *Defense of the Constitutions* in 1797, and there

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exists little scholarly research into the history of republican ideas after the period of the American framers.

Until now, Alex Gourevitch's *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* dramatically expands our horizons well into the 19th century with a detailed and compelling study of the American labour republicans (Gourevitch, 2015). He argues that contemporary intellectual historians, 'by ending their narrative with the American Revolution', have 'let the curtain fall on the drama of modern republicanism just as a new set of actors took the stage' (10). The labour republicans, it turns out, were no mere passive torch-bearers for a well-worn and fading tradition: faced with novel circumstances, they made their own 'substantial' contributions to that tradition which 'historians of political thought have failed to register' (7). This lack of appreciation may in part be due to the overshadowing contemporaneous rise of liberalism and Marxism, but it may also in part be due to the challenging nature of the sources themselves, scattered about as they are in diverse periodical writings, committee reports, compilations, and forgotten treatises, none of which are readily available in modern editions. In masterfully sifting and collating these materials and reconstructing their main lines of argument, Gourevitch performs an invaluable service, establishing beyond any doubt that the likes of Thomas Skidmore, Ira Steward, and George McNeill deserve membership in the republican cannon. In short, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* is essential reading for anyone interested in that tradition.

I

It was no accident that labour republican ideas emerged specifically in 19th century America, Gourevitch argues. The establishment of stable republican institutions in a society that actively practiced slavery presented contradictions simply too obvious to ignore. It forced consideration of a question earlier republicans had much more easily evaded – namely, whether and how republican liberty might be universalised. Debates over the abolition of slave labour led to serious reflection on the conditions of free labour generally, and thus to a recognition by the labour republicans that unregulated wage-labour was also deeply suspect: in a modern industrial society, labour must exercise genuine control over the conditions of its employment before it can enjoy liberty in the republican sense of non-domination. This was their first major contribution to republican ideas. Reflecting on the obstacles to realising a cooperative commonwealth of free labour led the labour republicans to their second major contribution: a recognition that civic virtue must include the commitment to a principle of active solidarity.

The above summarises the main line of argument in *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*. Chapter one covers the initial debate as to whether republican liberty ought to be universalised, with both the defenders of slavery and its opponents attempting to ground their arguments on republican ideas. That debate was, of course, ultimately resolved in favour of the latter view. The next three chapters explore in detail various attempts to sort out what universalised republican liberty means in a modern industrial society. Some argued that

labour is free in the relevant sense in an unregulated wage-labour market (Chapter two), but the labour republicans eventually concluded to the contrary that, properly understood, republican liberty entails a cooperative commonwealth of self-organising labour (Chapters three and four). Finally, Chapter five explores the contributions of labour republicans to traditional conceptions of civic virtue. Obviously, there is much for contemporary neorepublicans to cheer in the book. Gourevitch wants to go somewhat further than this summary would suggest, however.

The issue concerns the character of the innovations introduced by the labour republicans. Let us contrast two rough characterisations. On the one hand, one might argue, the labour republicans built on and extended the classical republican tradition. They inherited a powerful and compelling political doctrine which nevertheless contained certain blind spots and gaps. In managing to repair some of these, they strengthened the tradition without fundamentally transforming it. On the other hand, one might argue, the labour republicans did not merely build upon, but rather transformed the tradition. They inherited a political doctrine that carried within itself serious flaws and contradictions: by eliminating these the labour republicans produced a fundamentally new and better understanding of republican liberty. We might term these the 'modest' and the 'bold' interpretations, respectively.

While not explicitly contrasting these two possibilities, Gourevitch seems clearly inclined towards a bold interpretation. 'This was no straightforward or unproblematic extension of republican concepts to a new domain', he says (14). It was 'because Americans fought such a vigorous and intellectually productive battle over the relationship between slavery and freedom' that the labour republicans 'uncovered long-standing paradoxes ... in the republican tradition itself', and thus effected 'ideological transformations' leading to 'an inversion of what had once been an aristocratic tradition' (8). But is this the best interpretation? One need not dispute Gourevitch's excellent treatment of the labour republicans themselves to have some doubts, for the latter might seem revolutionary only because they have been held up against a misunderstood classical republican tradition.

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Voltaire once famously remarked that 'the people most enthusiastic for liberty' were precisely 'those who enacted the most severe laws against their serfs', a remark that serves as the epigraph to chapter one (De Voltaire, 1843: 460). Just a few years earlier, Rousseau, with his characteristic weakness for paradoxical formulations, had observed that 'liberty' might perhaps 'be maintained only with the support of servitude' (Rousseau, 2011: 220). Ever since the notion that there exists some deep connection between republicanism and slavery has persisted in some circles. Since this 'paradox of slavery and freedom' (19) constitutes the launching point for Gourevitch's study, it is worth some examination.

Considered at the level of aphorism, the alleged paradox is simultaneously trivial and false. On the one hand, while it is of course true that the ideal of political

liberty first emerged most powerfully in ancient republics – Athens and Rome – that practiced slavery, the observation is trivial. The ideal could hardly have emerged anywhere else, for slavery was a more or less ubiquitous practice in the ancient world. On the other hand, it is simply false that there exists, as any general rule, some historical correlation between republican political institutions and slavery. There have been numerous instances of slave societies – colonial Brazil, for instance – unaccompanied by republican self-government, and likewise numerous instances of republican self-government – renaissance Florence, for instance – that were not slave societies. It is long past time that we consign this popular aphorism to the dustbin.

Fortunately, *Gourevitch* acknowledges these objections and rests his argument on two rather more serious claims. The first concerns the general preference of elites for employing the most compliant, dependent, and inexpensive labour they can find. In a republic, such labour may be in short supply insofar as self-respecting free citizens refuse, to the best of their ability, to work except on fair terms. Elites thus tend to exploit alternatives whenever these are available. In both the ancient world and the antebellum American South, slave labour was an option, and elites embraced it with enthusiasm. In the American North throughout the 19th century, unregulated wage-labour was an option, so elites embraced that instead. In the contemporary United States, migrant or outsourced labour is often an option, and they are likewise used when possible. The ‘paradox of slavery and freedom’ is thus more precisely characterised as a dilemma connecting freedom and dependent labour: the dilemma is that when we extend republican liberty to some class of persons, elites tend to search elsewhere for labour, and we might thus benefit one group only at the expense of another.

Although the dilemma is strictly a practical one, and does not speak to the value of republican liberty as such directly, it would nevertheless be disheartening if there were no way to avoid it. Fortunately, the dilemma exists only insofar as we are not prepared to eliminate the relevant alternatives – slavery, unregulated wage-labour, migrant labour, outsourced labour, and so on. One is here strongly reminded of *J.S. Mill’s* devastating critique of the laws and customs excluding women from nearly any vocation other than wife and mother. To the assertion that society needs women to perform these particular duties, and therefore it is necessary to compel them, *Mill* replies that it is necessary to compel them only because men are not prepared to make family life sufficiently attractive on its own merits. Women should be given the choice precisely because doing so will inevitably produce an egalitarian revolution in the terms of marriage. Likewise, it is not strictly true that free citizens are unwilling to do the necessary work performed by slaves, migrant labourers, and so forth: it is only that they are unwilling to perform that work on the terms elites would prefer to offer. Nor should they, or anyone else for that matter. Far from constituting an objection to republican liberty, this is the best possible grounds for extending it as widely as possible: once everyone is genuinely free to insist on fair terms of employment, elites will have no choice but to offer them.

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This brings us to the second of Gourevitch's claims: namely, that there is nothing *inherent* to the classical ideal of republican liberty that necessitates it being universally distributed. In other words, non-domination not in its nature the sort of good that can only be enjoyed by some if it is enjoyed by all. As it happens, contemporary neorepublicans such as Philip Pettit have offered a variety of arguments to the contrary (see for example 1997: 112); for the most part, however, these rely on a variety of supplementary assumptions, and so for present purposes we may let the point stand.⁴ Gourevitch is quite right to observe that, historically speaking, the classical republicans were thus able to avoid facing the dependent labour dilemma by limiting the scope of their political concern: as a result, 'the sheer conceptual opposition of freedom to slavery did not, on its own, generate a criticism of slavery'. On the contrary, 'the original value of freedom rested on the fact that the free were lucky or deserving enough to avoid the servitude to which others were . . . condemned' (23).

One must be cautious, of course, attributing specific intentions to these earlier writers. The early moderns were simply not in the habit of thinking universally. With all his enthusiasm for the Florentine *popolo*, one would not suspect that Machiavelli is talking about an upper middle class of guildsmen, and thus ignoring the largely disenfranchised working class majority. No doubt it would hardly have occurred to him that he was ignoring them, any more than it would have that he was ignoring women and children as well.

Be that as it may, the blind spot was certainly there, and the particular context of the early American republic was essential to exposing it. Whereas the ubiquity of slavery in the ancient world more or less precluded serious debate, the singularity of American slavery in the modern world strongly encouraged it; the fact that the United States was self-consciously republican ensured that the most persuasive such criticisms would be posed in terms of republican liberty; and comparisons between slavery in the South and wage-labour in the North were, in due course, all but inevitable. Thus it was that some reflective persons came round to the view that republican liberty should be enjoyed by all, and further that this would require significant economic reforms: not just the abolition of slavery, but indeed a revolution in the wage-labour system itself. Those reflective persons were the American labour republicans, and Gourevitch relates the story of their emergence, development, and eventual decline beautifully. They argued that in the absence of strong regulation, robust unions, and extensive redistribution, it cannot be said that the wage labourer exercises much more control over the terms of his or her employment than the slave: the 'sword of want', in Skidmore's vivid phrase, compels the working man to accept whatever terms are on offer (Gourevitch, 2015: 81). In place of existing arrangements, the labour republicans envisioned a cooperative commonwealth of self-governing producers that McNeill hoped would 'engraft republican principles into our industrial system' (Gourevitch, 2015: 116).

These views are – or at any rate, should be – quite congenial to contemporary neorepublicans. Indeed, some (the present author included) have argued for an unconditional basic income on roughly similar grounds (Lovett, 2009), and it is gratifying to discover compelling historical antecedents for such a position. Does it, however, amount to a genuine transformation of the republican tradition or rather only an especially welcome contribution to it? Put another way, did the labour republicans work within the classical republican paradigm, or did they change it?

The case for the bold interpretation rests largely on the above-mentioned observation that republican liberty as traditionally conceived was not an inherently egalitarian good. ‘There was little in the conceptual apparatus or in the broader set of attitudes surrounding republican liberty’, Gourevitch insists, ‘that raised the question of whether it ought to be universalized’ (24). But more or less the same could be said of nearly any other good of political consequence: wealth, rights, respect, happiness, privacy, and so on can each feasibly be enjoyed by some without being enjoyed by all. Now perhaps there are goods that can *only* be enjoyed by a few, either by their nature or under certain conditions. The particular pleasures of active statesmanship might be among these: it is hardly likely under modern conditions of mass democracy that every citizen could experience such pleasures, even if they so desired. If republican liberty was traditionally conceived along Arendtian lines, then it might have been a necessarily elitist ideal (as Arendt herself admits). The labour republicans could not then have universalised republican liberty without transforming its meaning. But this is not how liberty was conceived in the classical republican tradition. Throughout the early modern period, liberty was consistently understood as the mere absence of arbitrary power or domination. There is nothing in that idea that precludes its being universally applied, even if it did not occur to anyone to do so. When the labour republicans finally did, no transformation in the meaning of republican liberty was required.

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Unfortunately, the labour republican movement did not in the end succeed. Simply in terms of intellectual history, they had little influence since there was no Anglophone republican tradition after the 19th century, and the contemporary neorepublican revival has concentrated on the more familiar figures in the Machiavelli through Madison cannon. From the start, it has been assumed by contemporary neorepublicans that any plausible variety of republican doctrine would have to be a universal one, and perhaps a minor source of regret that no figure in the cannon fully recognised that fact. We can now say that some republicans *did* in the end recognise it – indeed, around the same time that some liberals did, in the 19th century. Liberalism, however, had the good fortune to produce a Mill, whereas republicanism was soon forgotten about.

Why did the republican tradition fail? That question is the subject of some controversy. Pettit has argued it was precisely because a universalised liberalism was much less threatening to the social order than a universalised republicanism that political writers gravitated towards the former (Pettit, 1997: 45–50). This story

is lent further credibility by Chapter two of *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, where Gourevitch charts the progress of laissez-faire doctrine in the American courts. Only by changing the conception of liberty so as to be consistent with the unregulated wage-labour system, were the courts able to appropriate the rhetoric of freedom. But at least in the United States, republicanism did not wither without a fight: the labour republicans resisted that redefinition, and correctly showed that freedom from arbitrary power or domination could not be reconciled with unregulated wage-labour. Alas, it was a losing fight. In the process, however, the labour republicans spent considerable time reflecting on what bringing about a genuine cooperative commonwealth would require. This led them to the idea of civic virtue. 'From their earliest incarnation onward, labor republicans married the argument that a free government required virtuous citizens to a belief that workers had to act on their own and the common interest' to realise a cooperative commonwealth (139).

Now among the defining features of classical republicanism was its central concern with civic virtue and its opposite, corruption. Traditionally conceived, the civic virtues are those settled dispositions of character that incline each citizen to perform his or her part in maintaining a well-ordered republic. These might include, for instance, courage to defend the republic in times of danger, moderation in the pressing of factional claims, respect for republican laws and institutions, and so forth. Gourevitch identifies three standard criticisms of the traditional conception of civic virtue: first, 'the politics of virtue is essentially conservative', focused on maintaining the status quo; second, a commitment to civic virtue so conceived is 'necessarily coercive'; and third, 'civic virtue is inconsistent with modern commerce' (138). For the purposes of discussion, I will set aside the third, which has been adequately addressed by Maurizio Viroli, among others (Viroli, 1999: xxx–xxx). Before considering how the labour republicans adapted the traditional conception of civic virtue to their own purposes, however, it is worth examining the first two criticisms. Much as in the case of the slavery and freedom paradox, they evaporate on closer inspection.

Consider the second complaint first. It is telling that Gourevitch, in support of the contention that republicans have endorsed coercive socialisation in virtue, cites almost exclusively contemporary authors. He must do so because no author in the classical tradition ever seriously suggested such a program. None did simply because none could: early modern states lacked the capacity to enact programs of mass socialisation through, for instance, universal public education. (Benjamin Rush, the only historical figure explicitly cited by Gourevitch, was discussing university education for elites.) Clearly, then, this cannot have been what the discussions of civic virtue and corruption in the tradition were about.

The easiest way to see what was actually at stake in the traditional debates is to recast them in contemporary terms as debates regarding what we would term Rawlsian stability. Every configuration of social and political institutions will tend to generate a specific pattern of settled dispositions among those living under its auspices. Sometimes, the settled dispositions thus generated will turn out to be congruent with those dispositions necessary to maintain that same

configuration of institutions, in which case we can say the social order as a whole is stable in Rawls's sense – that is, it tends to generate its own support (Rawls, 1971: 453–458, 567–570). Rawlsian liberals are concerned with congruence because as a general rule they do not want to resort to coercive socialisation: if a liberal social order is to achieve stability, it must do so on its own. The classical republicans, in contrast, were concerned with congruence because instruments of coercive socialisation were not available. The result is the same, however: if a republican social order is to achieve stability, it must do so on its own. The issue was how to tailor republican institutions so as to optimise the required congruence. One strategy might be to select institutions that inspire virtue. Thus, Machiavelli argued that broad, inclusive republics are more stable than narrow, exclusive republics because the former inspire patriotism in the citizens who must fight to defend it (Machiavelli, 1983: xxx–xxx). Another strategy might be to select institutions that economise on virtue. Thus, Madison argued that in a large republic, the multiplicity of factions will reduce need for political self-restraint (Hamilton et al., 2003: xxx–xxx).

The charge that republicans are necessarily committed to coercive socialisation is therefore ill founded. What about the inherently conservative character of republican conceptions of civic virtue? In this case the charge is more or less correct, but misleading. With some exceptions, the classical republican authors lived either in republics under stress (Harrington, Milton, Madison), or in recently failed republics (Machiavelli, Sidney). Concerned with the very survival of republican institutions, it would have been difficult for them to concentrate on any other issue. They asked how might the basic institutions of our republic be reformed (or have been reformed) so as to improve their odds of survival. Machiavelli was decidedly pessimistic regarding the possibility of establishing republic liberty in a community not already grounded in republican traditions. No classical republican – nor indeed, any other early modern political thinker – ever really developed a theory of progressive political action. Even Locke's theory of revolution was conservative in this sense: it discussed how to defend a legitimate constitutional order when faced with the danger of tyranny or usurpation.

The United States of the 19th century presented a new set of prospects. Here was an established, well-ordered republic, facing no immediate danger of foreign conquest or despotic usurpation. Only in that context were thoughts able to turn towards progressive reform – specifically, towards the full realisation of republican liberty for slaves, workers, and women. And here it was that the labour republicans made another important contribution to the republican tradition: they worked out a theory of political action for the dependent classes. Civic virtue thus became 'not a process of maintaining existing free institutions but of conflictual engagement with current regimes of state and property' (164). And while labour had much to gain by reform, without organisation and solidarity it lacked political muscle. 'This problem pushed labor republicans to develop a way of thinking about virtue as a form of solidarity that workers inculcated in themselves, through their own self-organization and education' (149).

Gourevitch argues that in this way the labour republicans ‘significantly transformed’ the classical republican view that freedom requires virtue, making ‘the dependent, not independent, classes the bearers of virtue’ (171). Here again, however, we must ask whether the contribution was genuinely transformative. The focus of the classical republicans on preservation derives largely from the political circumstances they faced, and thus it is not clear in what way the classical conception of virtue is transformed by the addition of solidarity and collective action. Indeed, without having drawn on the labour republicans specifically, Pettit arrived at more or less the same conclusion regarding the importance of progressive social movements in realising republican liberty (Pettit, 1997: 193). While it is interesting to find historical roots to this view, the claim that labour republicans ‘kept alive’ the language of civic virtue ‘by reinventing it’ seems too strong (173).

5

What is the value of reconstructing the labour republican ideas? ‘In current discourse, liberty is most frequently invoked to argue against worker attempts to exercise collective control over their labor’, observes Gourevitch.

Economic freedom is understood to mean less regulation and lower taxes, the freedom of workers to make the contracts they like, and the related freedom of bosses to run the workplace as they see fit. It is certainly something of a surprise to discover that, for a time, vast numbers of people were energised by an account of freedom that ran in nearly the opposite direction. That surprise can translate into self-awareness and critical self-reflection. At the very least, it gives us pause before assuming that the only language for criticising contemporary economic arrangements must come from value besides freedom. Freedom can have a critical, not just apologetic, character (175).

This reviewer cannot have put it better himself. While I have challenged its reading of the classical republican tradition, this is nevertheless a terrific work that cannot be recommended too highly. It fills a significant gap in republican historiography, and it provides welcome support to those contemporary neorepublicans who argue that the conception of freedom as non-domination provides the strongest basis for a progressive program of economic justice.

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