



**Doctoral School of
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THESIS SUMMARY

Szilárd Tóth

Freedom, democracy and political community

The republican-liberal debate

Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisors:

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Institute of Political Science

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I. Preliminary research and justification of current research

Liberalism and liberal democracy are in global crises. The possible reasons behind this have been studied by political scientists, sociologists, economists, and many others for decades. As a chief symptom of the crisis is the reduction of political participation – in other words, a weakening of civil society, a growing sense of voter apathy and the rest – it is perhaps unsurprising that explanations of the whole crisis often begin by examining this phenomenon as well. This is especially so with the case of political theoretical approaches. A rather common theme of such approaches is the idea that part of the reason liberal democracy is in crises has to do with the dissemination of liberal values themselves. While liberal theory might be correct moral theory – goes the argument – as a ‘public philosophy’ it does not do the job it is meant to do. Liberals tend to interpret their core ideas in a way that undermines their efforts to promote democracy and the sort of communal integration that is also necessary for a functioning democracy. Such was the line of criticism proposed by communitarians thirty or forty years ago and such is the line of criticism proposed by republicans today. As for the latter group, the question of ‘public philosophy’ has three layers. The first concerns the justification and defense of democratic government. Here, republicans claim that the principal value of liberalism, namely liberty is entirely useless to support democratic government. The second layer concerns how democracy ought to function, or more specifically, how much democratic participation and civic virtue is necessary to ensure a well-functioning democracy. The claim customarily put to liberals is that they do not put a sufficiently large emphasis on such things. Finally, the third issue is how wide scale civic virtue ought to be cultivated. To this end, republicans propose communal integration is society. Such a thing, however, is something liberal theory is less suited to support – or so goes the argument, at least.

1. The aim of this dissertation is to examine to what degree said republican propositions are well founded.

2. The thesis I propose is that republican criticism of liberal theory tends to fail because it is based on a false image of liberal theory.

Being familiar with current international discourse in political theory, it is not difficult to see why anybody ought to bother with engaging with republican theory in this way. It is evidently the case that republicanism is one of the main hot topics in said discourse today. It might even be *the* hot topic for that matter. A huge number of conferences, special issues, books, and volumes seems to support this claim. And arguably, it is no coincidence either that republicanism receives such attention nowadays. Firstly, republicanism as a topic entered philosophical discourse at the end of the nineties at approximately the same time when the liberal-communitarian debate came to an end, more or less. Any theorist holding on to the idea that liberalism is deficient when it comes to defending the relevant communal ties, could identify in republicanism a new set of arguments supporting their claim. A possible indicator for the link between these two discourses is the fact that arch-communitarian Michael Sandel joined the republican camp himself sometime at the turn of the millennium.

A second reason behind the increasing interest for republican theory today is most certainly the fact that republicans themselves propose a number of quite radical and thought-provoking claims in their critique of liberal theory. Still, it needs to be said that they do not pick up the thread where communitarians had left it. A common theme is the idea that liberal theory is somehow deficient when it comes to supporting wide-scale democratic participation and communal integration. But aside from this, republican and communitarian approaches differ significantly. Unlike communitarians, republicans do not claim that liberal theory is deficient due to its alleged insensitivity to certain matters of culture. Instead, they claim that the relevant deficiency has to do with ill formulated political ideals. To be precise, they claim that ever since the mid-19th century liberals have interpreted their chief value, namely liberty, in a ‘wrong’ manner, ridding it of much of its theoretical potential. This is at root of the problem. This is why liberal theory is allegedly less suited to support democracy and the relevant form of political community also.

Importantly, contemporary republican theory did not emerge as an entirely new set of ideas a couple of decades ago. Instead, it is a movement of revival, bringing to the surface an age-old tradition. Its roots lie in historical excavations and studies in constitutional law. These roots have partially been engaged with in Hungarian discourse too in recent years. In 1997, a volume edited by Ferenc Horvay Hörcher was published by Tanulmány Kiadó entitled *A koramodern politikai eszmetörténet cambridge-i látképe* which collected studies by some of the leading figures of the historical research on republicanism such as Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, John Dunn, and Richard Tuck. In 2003, Csaba Lévai published a volume on the American *Founding Fathers* entitled *A republikanizmus-vita: Vita az amerikai*

forradalom eszmetörténeti háttéréről. Before that, in 1997, Lévai also assembled an important source material on the same topic with the title *Új rend egy új világban – dokumentumok az amerikai politikai gondolkodás korai történetéhez.*

The Hungarian language reception of republican political is very limited, however. None of the works of key contemporary authors like Philip Pettit, Maurizio Viroli, John Maynor, Richard Bellamy, Cécile Laborde, Richard Dagger, or Iseult Honohan has been translated as of yet. As for political theorists writing in Hungarian, only four authors might be mentioned who have dealt with the topic in any detail. They are Attila M. Demeter, Péter Kende, János Kis and Gáspár Miklós Tamás. Importantly though, as most their work dealing with the topic was published ten or fifteen years ago, these publications also do not engage with the most contemporary contributions to the discourse. Rather, they deal with earlier contributions and the history. Demeter's paper is mostly an introduction to the study of republican theory. Péter Kende has written mostly on the essential differences between liberal and republican perspectives. In the mid-nineties, Gáspár Miklós Tamás published a number of short pieces in which he argues for a republican sort of patriotism. János Kis published two papers relevant for our purposes. One of these is an attempt at refuting Tamás's argument, the other explores possible avenues for reconciling republican aims with liberal ones.

What I attempt to do with this dissertation is to fill in a gap in Hungarian research by introducing elements of the contemporary philosophical discourse on republicanism. It is for this same reason that together with Márk Losoncz, we edited a volume on contemporary republican political theory. The volume was published this year at l'Harmattan publishing house. In order to attain said goal, I have done research on discourse on republican theory from the last twenty years as well as interpretations on the history. Hopefully, the dissertation will offer a relatively comprehensive take on said discourse and will be of interest even to the non-academic reader.

II. Applied method

But what exactly is this republicanism I speak of? Historians such as Pocock, Skinner, and others argue that republicanism is a distinct tradition – distinct, that is from other standard political theories such as liberalism, socialism, and conservatism. It has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome, and its main 'bases' were Renaissance Italy, early modern England, as well as revolutionary France and America. It came to an eclipse sometime in the mid-19th

century, giving way for the most part to modern liberalism. Its most important figures include Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, Livy, Machiavelli, James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, John Milton, the *Founding Fathers*, Rousseau, Montesquieu and to a degree, Hannah Arendt. This list, however, continues to grow. Followers and indeed critics of Skinner have argued in recent years that a number of other authors such as Locke, Spinoza, Tocqueville, Hegel, Marx, and Hayek, as well as movements such as the diggers and the levellers may also be counted as parts of the republican tradition. All of this seems to add up to a rather ambitious claim: with a little exaggeration it may even be asserted that republicanism is perhaps the greatest tradition of Western political thought.

What links all these authors and movements is arguably a distinct theory of freedom and a radical critique of dominating power relations. On Skinner's view at least, this is the essence of republican thinking. The bulk of the theoretical systematizing effort has been made by Philip Pettit, however. It is difficult to overestimate the relevance of his work. Republicanism became a key issue in political philosophical discourse only after the 1997 publication of Pettit's seminal work *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. The book was followed by several others. His book dealing with a more abstract theory of freedom *A Theory of Freedom* came out in 2001. Eleven years later, 2012 saw the publication of Pettit's book on republican democratic theory entitled *On the People's Terms*. Finally, in 2014 Pettit proposed a republican theory of justice in his book *Just Freedom*. Pettit's work is without doubt the most important reference point for all discourse on republican political theory. He has a number of followers and an equally great number of critics. Some of the former include John Maynor, Cécile Laborde, Richard Bellamy, Maurizio Viroli, and Iseult Honohan. As for the latter group, to name a few names: Steven Wall, Charles Larmore, Matthew Kramer, Ian Carter, and others.

In my dissertation, I do not deal with questions of history in detail. Such questions are touched upon only in passing, only if absolutely necessary. Instead, I focus on the normative theoretical dimension. The philosophical debate on freedom may be summarized, following Pettit, in the following manner. Liberal negative freedom does not have great use as a moral compass. This ideal demands merely non-interference. This, however, is not sufficient in real life. For 'real' freedom to be attained more is demanded than mere non-interference. What is demanded instead is that everybody have the ability to take control of their own lives. And this has a concrete prerequisite. It demands that power be ordered in an egalitarian manner in society, preventing anybody from attaining the potential to dominate others. This is the criterion of republican freedom. For in a society where there is domination, everybody is in

fact exposed to the dominating agents. Aside from them, nobody is in fact in control of their life. Being in control, however, also means that one may consent to certain interferences in that is what they please. An interesting characteristic of the republican theory of freedom is that on this approach interferences as such are not necessarily restrictions of freedom but only when they are coupled with domination also. If, in other words, they are arbitrary. The basic difference between the two approaches is shown in the table below:

	<i>Interference</i>	<i>Domination</i>
<i>Liberalism</i>	Always restricts freedom.	Does not always restrict freedom. Only if used.
<i>Republicanism</i>	Does not always restrict freedom. Only if coupled with domination.	Always restricts freedom.

What is most ambitious about the contemporary republican research project is that its proponents turn said abstract philosophical difference into a political or ideological difference as well. Pettit and his followers suggest that the key difficulty in all liberal theorizing is that negative freedom is not suited to support democratic government. Such freedom may be provided by a benevolent autocrat too. In principle, it demands neither civic virtue, nor a democratic culture. This is what according to Pettit and his followers leads liberals to an impasse. Liberal negative freedom is not linked to democracy and is ill supplied to motivate political participation. This is why the dissemination of liberal values may prove harmful to the democratic culture of given society and may at the same time contribute – albeit to a limited extent – to the crisis of liberal democracy.

But aside from providing an alternative conception of freedom, the republican alternative is also meant to provide a different, more participative model for democracy. The aim is fighting voter apathy today. Contemporary republicans wish to see citizens engage more in politics – say, participate in deliberation, organize parties and movements, engage in activism, protest, and the rest. In short, then, they aim to refresh democratic politics and civic life. Evidently, this increasingly brings the question of how citizens ought to be motivated to participate to the fore. Most people today value their private lives more than they do political engagement and devote time and energy to the latter only if really necessary. This is definitely a challenge. In order to respond to it, republicans suggest organizing society into a

genuine political community by appealing to civic patriotic motives. According to their speculation, enhanced levels of civic virtue and political activity depend on a high level of civic patriotism in society – a feeling of unity and an awareness of the fact that people depend on one another to secure non-domination.

So, where then lies the alleged ideological-political divide between liberal and republicans? Contemporary republicans engage in philosophical discourse on freedom and democracy in order to claim certain conceptions of these things as distinctly *their own*. One of the places where this ambition comes to the fore is interpretations of the history. Skinner, Pettit, and Viroli base their arguments on a theoretical construction. They argue that republican thought is at heart a theory proposing a distinct theory of freedom and a critique of dominating power. It is on the basis of this assumption that they propose an ordering of different traditions. On their account, every author and movement that subscribes to said ideas is itself to a degree republican – regardless of the fact that in standard historical research, not all of them are counted as republican. This is why in the eyes of Pettit Locke, Rawls, and even Dworkin, the most famous proponents of liberalism, are themselves to a degree republican.

The other relevant sphere when it comes to locating the alleged political-ideological divide between republicanism and liberalism is the sphere of normative political theory. As I mentioned already this is what I engage with in the dissertation. Firstly, a great number of contemporary republicans use the debate on freedom to demonstrate that while liberalism is somehow closer to the ideal of the minimal state, republicanism favors a ‘big’, democratically controlled state that interferes with its citizens extensively. It has even been argued that republican theory is ‘to the left’ of liberalism. Secondly, republicans also assert that compared to liberals, they put greater emphasis on political participation and the civic virtues in general, providing this way a preferable ‘public philosophy’ too. Thirdly, it is suggested that liberal theory is not suited to support the cultivation of the sort of communal ties that are necessary for a flourishing democracy. Or anyway, it is less suited to do this task than republican theory is. Fourth, republican theory is often treated as a tool to transcend ethnic nationalism in favor of a benign form of civic patriotism. Fifth and finally, it has been argued that republican theory has unambiguous policy implications with regards to issues such as multiculturalism, secessionism, and immigration.

The approach and structure of the dissertation is as follows. Given that republican theory emerged at the end of the nineties as a critique of egalitarian liberalism, I believe it adequate to approach republican theoretical tenets through this debate. Contemporary

republicans engage with liberal approaches directly, formulating their positions with opposition to these. My approach is therefore rather straightforward. Consequently, the important question to ask is whether republican theory genuinely offers anything new of content compared to egalitarian liberalism and if it does whether this novelty is an alternative worth pursuing. In other words, the important question to ask is whether republicans attain the very goals they set for themselves. This is what I aim to examine in the dissertation.

III. Results

The results of the dissertation are set out in the bullet points below. The most general conclusion is that republican criticism of liberal theories is often overstated. There is more to liberal theory, broadly understood, than meets the eye. So, the most important thesis I propose is that from the polemic aspect at least, the contemporary republican research project is to a significant degree a failure.

- Republican and liberal conceptions of freedom are indeed different and have different policy implications in the relevant fields. While liberal negative freedom supports the minimal state, non-domination is suited to justify a democratically controlled 'social democratic' state which interferes with its citizens extensively.
- This, however, does not mean that its policy implications place republican theory squarely on the left, broadly understood. Reducing domination is an aim that may in principle be supported by pro-market, 'right wing' economic policy also. This is because to date empirical evidence is unclear on what policies serve such an end most efficiently. There are good reasons to support market deregulation just as there are reasons to support wide-scale redistribution. On Sean Irving's account for instance, even Hayek may be interpreted as a republican.
- But while republican and liberal conceptions of freedom differ, looking at the wider theoretical framework, this does not seem to have great relevance. Republican concerns about the negative effects of domination are shared by a number of liberal approaches

too. Only, they are dealt with autonomy and equality principles rather than a freedom principle. These, however, make liberal theory just as suited to critique dominating power relations.

- It is important not to generalize, though. *Not all* liberal theories are immune to republican criticism. And I do not argue in favor of the opposite either. All I claim is that out of the many variations of egalitarian liberalism, there are some that are immune to republican criticism concerning egalitarian aims.
- A key factor here is interpreting the ideal of equality. It is true that there are conceptions of egalitarianism that are not immune to republican criticism. Such are the distributive conceptions. But on the other hand, there are different conceptions of egalitarianism – namely relational ones – that are immune to republican criticism.
- So, it is far from clear that the philosophical debate on freedom has any implications for policy matters. Contrary to common speculation, the republican-liberal debate has little to do with the left-right axis.
- That's it for the justification of democratic government. What about the manner in which a democracy ought to function? As we might recall, this is the second aspect of the whole issue at hand. Everybody has heard the commonplace according to which compared to liberals, republicans place greater emphasis on the cultivation of civic virtues and the promotion of civic activity. I argue that this is a simplistic approach.
- There are basically two versions of contemporary republican democratic theory. One of them is customarily called neo-Roman. This approach places great emphasis on institutions. The second version is so-called republican populism. Both of them are meant to provide a more participatory alternative to liberalism, broadly understood. I show that

only republican populism attains this goal. Neo-Roman democratic theory is in fact just another version of liberalism.

- I divide the issue of democracy into four elements to show this. First, I compare approaches to the value of democratic participation. Second, I turn to the desired scope of participation. Third, I deal with the question of coercion. Fourth and finally, I compare views on the promotion of civic virtues through non-coercive means. I show that neo-Roman views in fact do not transcend the liberal theoretical framework, broadly understood. Populistic conceptions, by contrast, do transcend this framework.
- This, however, comes at a significant price. As a normative ideal, republican populism is not salient. It struggles with the same sorts of limitations any form of populism struggles with.
- A third issue is how to motivate citizens into democratic participation. It does not matter how strict we are concerning the desired scope of participation: either way, there is going to be a certain level that is deemed absolutely necessary. So, clearly, some people will have to stay motivated. This is an issue of collective action. And it is unclear what the solution is to it. Republicans customarily propose communal integration in society. On their model, a flourishing democracy demands that citizens identify with their political community and show solidarity toward their co-citizens. Firstly, I show that similarly to propositions concerning egalitarian and democratic aims, the republican program of communal integrations fits rather well with the liberal theoretical framework once more.
- Secondly, with regards to this sub-issue, I examine the possible policy implications of the theories – republican or otherwise – that place great emphasis on communal integration. I argue that in a non-ideal scenario the main implication is the defense of the nation state. In the non-ideal world, cosmopolitan and anarchistic approaches that aim to transcend the current state system are incompatible with republicanism. There are two reasons behind

this. On the one hand, empirical evidence does not seem to support the idea that international organizations or an anarchistic system may provide a similar degree of democratic control as states do. On the other hand, said speculation concerning the importance of communal ties places a limit on republican theorizing. Namely, in the non-ideal world it is a matter of fact that communal ties that are politically relevant are simply not given to a sufficient degree either on the international level or on the level that would be necessary for anarchistic government. It is only in states the relevant communal ties are there to a relatively high degree.

- For radical cosmopolitans, then, republican theory is not of much use. This would only be different if current realities changed. Namely, if the currency of state-linked political loyalties expired and gave way to other loyalties – say, cosmopolitan ones.
- The conclusion is far from ideal. Republicans today are egalitarians and this commitment of theirs favors cosmopolitanism. No doubt, the dilemma would be solved if it were possible to establish a cosmopolitan system that is democratically accountable and is supported by relatively strong communal ties. The aim of stability would not support a different course of action than egalitarian aims. But this would be so only in an ideal world. In the non-ideal world, there is no republicanism without patriotism.
- None of this means, however, that egalitarian aims are somehow secondary. Republican patriotism is moderate. It does not imply that moral responsibilities cease to exist at the state border. Instead, it means only that egalitarian and ‘associative’ perspectives clash in republican theory and that this is something one should be aware of. Moderate patriotism is not about reconciling egalitarianism with patriotic discrimination altogether. That would be impossible anyway. Instead, it is about defining when patriotic discrimination is permissible. It is difficult to answer this question in the abstract. The alleged virtue in patriotism is that it may provide republican government with a degree of stability. Its inherent danger is that it may contribute to increasing global inequalities. The virtue in egalitarianism is that it counts all human beings as relevant. Its inherent danger is that

overemphasizing it in politics may lead to the destabilization of republican government. But both egalitarian and associative perspectives need to be regarded as relevant if said virtues are to be promoted and said dangers minimized. It will be left to practical reason to sort out the prioritizing in any given situation.

- The overwhelming majority of states today are nation states. Does this mean that the case for republican patriotism is at the same time a case for nationalism also? Not so according to some republicans. I argue that they are mistaken. The root cause has to do with the structural build-up of the nation state itself – namely, the fact that it is not neutral from an ethnocultural point of view. This is why patriotism will almost always have an ethnocultural element too. So, for this reason, an important policy implication of republican theory today is in fact the defense of the *nation* state.
- But clearly, the lack of ethnocultural neutrality is cause for alarm from an egalitarian perspective. Leaving the state system intact, dealing with such concerns demands a degree of support for multicultural policies. This conclusion needs to be supplemented with two points of clarification, though. Firstly, republicans derive support for multiculturalism from the egalitarian element of their freedom ideal. Given, however, that said egalitarian element is not special to republican theory, it is also questionable that republican justifications of multiculturalism provide any novel contribution to the debate on the justification of multiculturalism. Secondly, republican support for multicultural policies will always face a concrete limit. This is because multicultural policies may pose a challenge to cultivating civic patriotism insofar as it institutionalizes and politicizes a cleavage in society.
- Concerning secessionist claims, the conclusion is similar. The attainment of non-domination as a criterion does not supply an unambiguous solution to the dilemma concerning whether it is multinational federations or secessionist movements that ought to receive support, generally speaking. The most it can supply is a moral compass to judge procedures for mediating such claims.

- Finally, the conclusion is similar concerning immigration also. Firstly, non-domination as a criterion does not tell us whether a state's sovereign right to pass decisions on entry is legitimate or not. Neither does the wider republican theoretical framework tell us. Secondly, different republican models – both the ones supporting state border controls and the ones rejecting them – are derived from the non-domination ideal. As the latter is not special to republicanism, it is once again questionable whether republican theory brings anything new to the table with regards to the issue of state border controls.

IV. Main body of literature

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