ON CIVIC REPUBLICANISM

Ancient Lessons for Global Politics
Republic is a noun in search of an adjective. Indeed, as a taxonomic term it seems to withdraw a Linnaean level with every generation. Virtually every modern government, regardless of its actual conduct, claims as its primary concern public things, the res publica. As a result, the particular adjective used to qualify the republican claim, liberal, democratic, people’s, and Islamic, becomes necessary to indicate the sort of concern for things public. Of course, these adjectives possess curious qualities. Indeed, in the last two centuries the more emphatic the invocation of the public in name, the less likely in practice that the populace has any share in deliberations on political matters. As a result of this semantic confusion, understanding the republican form increasingly means not only looking across polities, but perhaps more essentially, across time. Here the semantic sleight of hand that characterizes so much modern political description disappears. In the ancient world in particular a government genuinely concerned with public things, a government committed to the very idea of public things stood in stark contrast to its alternatives. It is this essential comparison that illuminates this latest iteration of the Ancient Lessons for Global Politics volumes.

If in our own time the adjective is everything, in the ancient world the noun was all. The very idea of a government concerned with the things public forcefully affirmed the presence of a public concerned with government. To call one’s polis a republic was to stand out against a horizon dominated by oligarchic, monarchic, and imperial alternatives. As Thucydides’s Pericles declares in his funeral oration, “This is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business, we say that he has no business at all.” It is this vision of republicanism, civic republicanism
to be precise, that the essays in this volume address. This collection considers what ancient civic republics can say to modern republics and their citizens. Of course, the ancient republics have been speaking to us, providing lessons, for centuries. Our political, cultural, and even architectural landscape is populated with their lessons. Indeed, the unceasing accretion of republican lessons, from the Renaissance to the present poses challenges to accessing the original teaching distinct from those faced by the earlier “Ancient Lessons” volumes.

These challenges explain why this volume diverges somewhat from the earlier iterations in its treatment of these ancient lessons. We speak a language redolent with echoes of the ancient republics. We not only claim republican forms, but we speak the language of republics. But this language comes to us from sources both ancient and early modern. From the most basic definitions of public and private (res privata, res publica) to the sublime employment of republican name and theme in everything from the Federalist Papers to David’s Oath of the Horatii, republican themes permeate every aspect of our political discourse. As a result, when we draw on republican sources today we necessarily draw on two traditions, the original civic republicanism of antiquity as well as the varied early modern reclamations and restatements that emerged from Florence to the American founding. This inevitable commingling has been with us for centuries. In the very heart of the Renaissance both Erasmus’s The Education of the Christian Prince and Machiavelli’s The Prince explicitly and implicitly drew on recollections of Republican Rome and Cicero’s De Officiis. But just as importantly, both referred to republics more recently lost and lamented. For Erasmus and Machiavelli and ever since, when we recall republics we inevitably recall both ancient and modern republics. We cannot think only of Pericles and Cato; inevitably, we think also of George Washington and Piero Soderini.

On Civic Republicanism reflects this bifocal aspect of the modern republican gaze. It acknowledges that we have so long been taking on the ancient lessons of civic republicanism that it has become impossible to detach them fully from, most especially, the extraordinary recovery and amplification of those ideas in the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Unlike the regimes examined in earlier volumes the experience of empire, oligarchy, and tyranny did not prompt an early modern body of thought equal to the original and ancient lessons. Unlike civic republicanism, most of these other modern incarnations of ancient originals had no deep appetite for learning, no honest engagement with the past,
no sincere republic of letters to sustain them over time and across cultures. So with a few exceptions these essays consider the challenges of modern republics in a manner shared with Erasmus and Machiavelli: they draw republican lessons from republics and writers both recent and remote in time.

There are few more contested paths in the history of political theory than that which leads from ancient to modern civic republicanism. For decades scholars have contested the character of this relationship and the substance of the debt owed to the ancients by early modern civic republican theorists. The question is essentially one of fidelity. There can be no doubt that early modern restatements of civic republicanism adopted terminology, metaphor, structure, and example from their ancient precursors. What remains unsettled is the use to which these were put. One school of thought, most prominently represented by Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock, has argued for a deep continuity between ancient and modern. Pocock in particular has famously argued of Harrington that he provided the intellectual means “whereby the county freeholder could equate himself with the Greco-Roman polites and profess of a wholly classical and Aristotelian doctrine of the relations between property, liberty and power.”² This interpretation has been vigorously challenged by the work of scholars such as Harvey Mansfield and Leo Strauss. Strauss, Mansfield, and others have argued that close reliance on and careful reading of ancient sources is not in and of itself evidence of continuity with those sources. In essence, they argue that close engagement and fidelity are two different questions. Mansfield goes further to suggest that indeed such close engagement may serve to reveal important differences.³ Both approaches have rallied impressive textual evidence to support their interpretations. At this juncture neither approach has landed a knockout blow. As such the question, for the purposes of this volume and in terms of broader inquiry, remains very much open. As a result, this volume participates in this debate only inasmuch as our contributors approach the question from a variety of positions on the spectrum between Pocock and Mansfield. Given the breadth of subjects covered, chronologically and culturally, such agnosticism on the question seems only reasonable. We may settle the character of influence for Machiavelli or Madison, but the precise admixture of inspiration, fidelity, and subversion across the span of early modern civic republicanism seems, at this juncture at least, beyond the capacity of human knowing.
If the modern portrait of civic republicanism appears to our eyes as an inseparable diptych this collection adds a third panel to the picture. The essays concern themselves with the lessons of republicanism both ancient and early modern. They consider the original ancient lessons, their various influential restatements, and lastly their real relevance for current questions of civic virtue, public life, and popular politics. These essays seek to apply the insights of Cicero and Machiavelli, Sparta and Geneva.

It is this approach that distinguishes this volume from valuable work done, both in political theory and in intellectual history, on the legacy of civic republicanism. There are countless scholarly works on ancient republican thinkers. In terms of their modern reception the two-volume collection *Republicanism* edited by Skinner and van Gelderen (2002) and Paul Rahe’s monumental *Republics Ancient and Modern* stand out as central to our understanding of the relationship between ancient republican thought and early modern ideas and practice. But, as the series title suggests this volume seeks to go a step further, to apply the lessons of both ancient and modern republicanism to the modern condition, to the current state of the *res publica*.

The collection begins with Athens in crisis. Timothy Burns’s essay considers the picture of public life Pericles presents in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*. As Burns notes, even in the ancient world of civic republics the comparison between regimes provided a central element of self-understanding. In service of such understanding the austere and pious Sparta stood as an alternative to republics like Athens where self-concern unchecked by piety remained an ever-present risk to the public pursuit of the good of the city. This idea of the good of the city, the end or purpose of politics quickly emerges as a defining element of civic republics. With this idea of ends, purpose, and direction we turn to the Athens of Aristotle in David Roochnik’s essay. Roochnik considers the role not of transcendence but of immanence in the republican sense of polis. His essay compares ancient and early modern attempts to, almost literally, *ground* civic republicanism. Roochnik explores the extent to which civic republicanism demands a sense of space and therefore direction, questioning whether Aristotle’s contention that the civic republic requires a “small and bounded space” is any longer tenable.

We stay with Aristotle and Athens, but move from place to process and participants in the essays that follow those of Roochnik and Burns. Michael Weinman explores the Aristotelian understanding of
work (ergon), of the citizen’s work in pursuing a life in accord with reason. This work, Weinman argues, is most likely to succeed when conducted in concert with others, most obviously within a civic republican milieu. Weinman contends that this Aristotelian conception of civic work provides a way through the modern debates about place and community, liberalism and communitarianism, opened earlier by Roochnik and Burns. The discussion of work naturally suggests the discussion of the worker taken up by Wendell John Coats Jr. Coats, in developing the question of republican character in both its ancient and modern iterations, begins to draw out a distinction between the collective deliberation of popular democracy and the political participation civic republicanism demands. Revisiting concerns canvassed by Aristotle regarding Athens and Tocqueville regarding America, Coats explores the vital tension and consequences for character of the distinction between self-interest rightly understood and a civic commitment to a common good. Crystal Cordell Paris builds on the distinction between democratic deliberation and republican commitment. She begins her exploration of this terrain with an account of the Aristotelian conception of citizenship and its relationship to political deliberation. In her exploration she illuminates not only the qualities of civic republican deliberation, a deliberation tied to and embedded in an outcome for a particular community, but its modern and especially Rawlsian alternatives.

The concern with ends binds together all the essays concerning Aristotle and what begins to illuminate the distinctions between liberal democracy and civic republicanism. The first essays in this collection return again and again not to process but to outcome. All these essays consider the resources that republics ancient and modern draw upon to sustain themselves. These first essays recognize that a civic republic with a common end in mind must always be concerned with the civic means, its place in the cosmos and on the earth, and the faith, character, reason, and rhetoric of its citizens.

With Jarrett Carty’s essay On Civic Republicanism moves into the early modern rejections of ancient civic republicanism. In exploring Machiavelli’s employment of ancient historians, especially Livy and Polybius, Carty provides a compelling account of both ancient and early modern attempts to deal with the instability, fear, and faction that two and a half centuries later James Madison would identify as the central weakness of republican government. Carty considers the extent to which Machiavelli contends that the ancient accounts of instability,
of competing humours within the polis, suggested a republican route from tumult to triumph.

If Carty’s essay considers the role of passions, especially desire and fear, within republics, Ryan Balot’s essay, in exploring the fraught relationship between manliness and courage, considers tumult within the citizen himself. Balot attempts to understand the current resurgence of debate around manliness in modern liberal democracies by tying together ancient accounts of manliness and visions of courage in the first century of the American Republic. Balot’s essay asks the question: What is the character of democratic courage in ancient Athens and modern America? The discussion of courage and manliness and its decline inevitably draws out the question of decline, and more specifically corruption, in civic republican regimes themselves.

Robert Sparling’s paper looks at Montesquieu’s attempt to explain and understand the role of corruption in the action of political principles. Sparling’s essay, in exploring the question of corruption, suggests the beginnings of the modern appreciation of ancient principles. In Montesquieu Sparling finds a thinker exploring the relationship between ancient and modern republics understood as a studied balance between high republican principles and ever-pressing political reality. Sparling examines the extent to which ancient civic republicanism, by the lights of The Spirit of the Laws at least, had become a counsel of perfection. In the next chapter, Marc Hanvelt’s account of courage in the work of David Hume attempts to find a middle way between the discussion of virtue in Balot and Sparling, and its likely corruption. Hanvelt considers the uncertainty and instability at the heart of accounts of both philosophic and political life in early modern Europe and suggests a Humean middle way. He identifies in Hume a conception of philosophic courage that could serve as an antidote to the failings of reclaimed and perhaps corrupted ancient notions of civic and martial valour. Such a conception, Hanvelt asserts, ties Hume to the practice of political courage embodied in Plato’s account of the trial and execution of Socrates by the Athenian republic.

The collection then moves from Athens to its ancient republican alternative: Sparta. At the same time, it inevitably moves from the early modern voices of the likes of Hume and Montesquieu to that most forceful of early modern advocates for the Spartan vision of civic republicanism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Varad Mehta introduces the decidedly mixed legacy of Sparta in the early modern period. The “Spartan mirage” offered peculiar and ultimately deadly temptations to those moderns
who sought not merely to learn from but actually recover something of the community Lycurgus made. For early modern republicans, Sparta represented the ultimate alternative to the self-interested citizen, the ultimate immersion of the citizen in the civic. This immersive account of the demands on citizens of civic republicanism gets its most famous treatment in the philosophy of Rousseau.

Brent Cusher examines in particular the nature of rhetoric, persuasion, and conviction in Rousseau’s account of republican citizenship. Cusher ties together Rousseau’s account of persuasion with the vision of prelude and persuasion that stands at the centre of politics in Plato’s Laws. He considers the manifold ways in which Plato, and after him Rousseau, looked to cultivate in the citizen a commitment to the laws. The discussion of the role of persuasion in civic republican politics brings to the fore for both Cusher and Lee Ward the ancient and modern accounts of civil religion as a medium of civic conviction. Ward turns to civil religion and social institutions, especially the theatre, to illuminate this aspect of the civic republic. He discusses in particular Rousseau’s account of ancient and modern theatre’s role in cultivating or corrupting republican virtue. The classical theatre and the related rituals of political life, as Ward suggests, point a way towards solving or saving the republican reality of Rousseau’s Geneva.

After Rousseau, and just as importantly after 1789, civic republicanism both ancient and modern came up yet again for a reappraisal. That reappraisal was perhaps most famously rendered in Benjamin Constant’s speech on the liberty of Ancients and Moderns to the Paris Atheneum. The final three essays in On Civic Republicanism turn back to the individual. This turn, the third appraisal of the ancient legacy of civic republicanism, tempered now by restatements in word and deed of both Athens and Sparta, focuses once again on education, on the citizen. Moving from rhetoric and theatre to literature and history, Neven Leddy tackles Mary Wollstonecraft’s response to Rousseau and Adam Smith, and her analysis of the place of civic republicanism in the education of girls. Leddy explains that for Wollstonecraft the reading of history was key to accessing the tradition of civic republicanism and that civic engagement was a core consequence of a historical education. Staying with the education of children, Jeffrey Wilson’s surprising treatment of Pinocchio and Plato’s Laws explores the imagery of cords and marionettes. Wilson then draws together the proposals of the Athenian Stranger for a new Cretan republic with Carlo Collodi’s commitment to the new Italian republic whose children devoured his
children’s stories. Wilson presents Pinocchio as the story of a puppet who becomes a boy in part at least by becoming a member of a political community. As Wilson points out, Collodi began his story insisting that this children’s story had no king. In Collodi’s story, Wilson contends, Pinocchio becomes both a son and a citizen and can only become the one by becoming the other.

The nineteenth century, as Douglas Moggach observes, entailed a reconsideration of the hoped-for escape from immaturity that Kant had posited and that civic republicanism required. In a very real sense, Moggach sees in the work of both Schiller and Bruno Bauer an attempt to recover the aesthetic route to civic republicanism. Moggach investigates the ways in which, as with Roman republicanism and its decline, the nineteenth-century fate of civic republicanism became repositioned not in dialogue with oligarchy or monarchy but rather as an alternative to mass society. Mass society, characterized by self-interest, private property, and deep heteronomy now stood as both the alternative to and perhaps the inevitable fate of civic republics. Moggach considers in this light the potential, in both ancient and modern accounts, of an aesthetic encounter with the sublime to generate both an individual and common commitment to a shared ideal.

On Civic Republicanism ends with a new concern. Added on to the attempt to understand republics comparatively, to reveal limits and possibilities by looking across communities ancient and modern, the final chapters focus increasingly on the substance of civic republicanism within both cities and citizens. Civic republicanism, in both its ancient original and early modern restatements remains concerned with the virtue of citizens in both senses of the term. The essays concern themselves with not only what a republican regime must provide its citizens but with what its citizens must provide the republic. This symbiosis, captured in Aristotle’s famous requirement that such citizens both rule and are in turn ruled, points towards the most fundamental contrast between civic republics ancient and modern. If ancient republics looked to oligarchies, theocracies, monarchies, and despotisms, and surely all these remain today, nonetheless republican thinkers today engage primarily with a wholly modern form: liberal democracy. Here the stark opposition between res publica and res privata blurs. The distinction between popular and participatory politics lacks the sharp contrasts of the ancient world’s various regimes.

Modern civic republican thought occurs most often within liberal democracies not outside of and in opposition to them. Civic republicanism
today acts most often as a counsel against the worst instincts of liberal democracies, not as an outright alternative to them. As the essays in this collection suggest, most modern attempts to recover the lessons of ancient civic republicanism accept the modern liberal democratic regime. Increasingly, proponents of republican virtue seek to alter the regime within the citizen. From the recovery of character advocated by Wendell John Coats to the restoration of a republican courage, tied either to thought or to masculinity, as with Hanvelt and Hume, to the possibilities of self-change described by Moggach, civic republicanism finds itself in a new dialectical position. These essays seek to understand better lessons both ancient and modern in the service of a new conversation among the citizen, society, and the state.

NOTES
