

## *Virtue and the Republic*

VIROLI: Some political theorists argue that there is a republican tradition of political thought, as distinct from both the liberal and the democratic ones.<sup>1</sup> In the opinion of such scholars, of whom I am one, republican political theory is primarily characterized by the principle of political freedom. Whereas liberalism perceives freedom as an absence of interference and democracy identifies freedom 'in the power to impose rules upon oneself and not to obey rules other than those imposed on oneself' (these are your own words), republicanism considers true freedom to be the absence of any dependency on the arbitrary will of a single man or a group of men. An obvious example is that of a slave, who may suffer neither oppression nor interference, but is still not free, because he or she is dependent on the arbitrary will of another person. Do you believe that we can speak of republican theory and republican political traditions that are distinct from the democratic and liberal ones?

BOBBIO: I have never encountered republicanism or the republic in my experience as a scholar of political thought. I know little or nothing about the theoreticians of republicanism who have inspired you. Let us look at the facts: there is no entry under 'republicanism' in the very detailed index

### *Virtue and the Republic*

and summary of a recently published collection of my writings that runs to about 700 pages.<sup>2</sup> I am very sorry to have to tell you that there is not even an entry for ‘republic’, which is truly surprising. Some years ago, I published an article, ‘Rule of law or rule of men?’ (‘Governo delle leggi o governo degli uomini?’), in which I outlined the history of this question starting from the differences between Aristotle, who was an exponent of the former, and Plato, who was an exponent of the latter. I then briefly describe the various categories of the better-known forms of government by men. The ‘republic’ does not appear anywhere.

As I have told you on other occasions, in my opinion and in that of the great majority of those who have studied politics and law starting with our very own Machiavelli, ‘republic’ is the name of the form of government that contrasts with ‘monarchy’ or ‘principality’. As you very well know, we only have to think of all the debates over the difference between democratic republics and aristocratic ones, and over the superiority of one over the other, which even involved Montesquieu, one of your preferred authors. However, neither of these resembles the republic of republicans, as you acknowledge yourself.

The republic is an ideal form of state founded on the virtues and patriotism of its citizens. Virtue and patriotism were Jacobin ideals, to which terror was then added. In reality, the republic needs terror. You recall the famous speech by Robespierre on virtue and terror. In my opinion, the republic is an ideal state that does not exist anywhere. It is a rhetorical ideal, and it is therefore difficult for me to understand what you mean by republic and republicans. We won’t mention the Italian Republic.

*Res publica* can be used as a general term for a state, any state. There is no problem here: Jean Bodin’s famous work, *De la République*, appears in Italian translation as *Dello Stato* (*Concerning the State*), and it distinguishes and describes a variety of forms of government, names the three classical ones of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, which are all equally *républiques* or *res publicae*.

### *Virtue and the Republic*

V. The most important meaning of ‘republic’ is the classical one attributed to it by Cicero, who wrote that *res publica* means ‘that which belongs to the people’ (*res publica res populi*), and added that a people is not just any mass of persons gathered together, but rather an organized society that is founded on the observance of justice and common interest. This concept of republic, which is clearly very different from Bodin’s in that it excludes absolute power, is also adopted by Rousseau when he writes: ‘I therefore give the name of “Republic” to every state that is governed by laws, no matter what the form of its administration may be: for only in such a case does the public interest govern, and the *res publica* rank as a reality.’<sup>3</sup>

But let’s put definitions to one side. I would like to point out my surprise at hearing you say that you never came across republicanism or the republic during your formation as a political thinker. The reason for my surprise is that Carlo Cattaneo, an important figure in the republican pantheon, holds a prominent place in your intellectual history. It was Cattaneo who wrote that ‘freedom is the republic’ and it was Cattaneo who emphasized that the Italian medieval republics had to be credited with ‘having instilled in the lowliest plebeian a sense of legality and civic dignity’, thus surpassing ancient Athens, ‘whose noble citizenship always had a lower layer of slavery’.<sup>4</sup>

B. I did not see Cattaneo in terms of the concept of republic; I approached him through his federalism, the concept for which he became famous. In other words, I was struck by his federalist concept of a republic as opposed to Mazzini’s unitary one. Mazzini was horrified by this idea of the republic as a federation of tiny republics, which would have taken Italy back to the time of the medieval city-republics (*comuni*), so admired by Bossi.<sup>5</sup> I have never looked on Cattaneo as a republican political writer. To be frank, the idea of republic is so small a part of my thinking and the way I categorize my conceptual

### *Virtue and the Republic*

system that for me Cattaneo is not a republican but the federalist of the Risorgimento, who then expanded his idea of federalism to Europe.

V. I agree, but if we put Cattaneo in the framework of our debate, we have to acknowledge that there are at least two versions of republicanism, the unitary one and the federalist one.

B. It seems to me that the republic of republicans, of which you are one, is a form of ideal state, a 'moral paragon', as Montesquieu's republic has been called, and his republic influenced the French revolutionaries. It is an ideal state that exists nowhere, or exists only in the writings of the authors you quote, who are so heterogeneous that it is difficult to find their common denominator. They include Livy, Mazzini, Cattaneo and who knows how many medieval and modern writers. Some of these were genuinely political writers and historians who, like Machiavelli, wrote commentaries on Roman history, which was perceived as a model history. They were discussing the state as it should be and not as it is. These were either dreams of an ideal future or nostalgia for an ideal past.

V. I grant you that without any difficulty. Supposing that the republic of republicans is a moral ideal, could it perhaps be the case that it is an important moral and political ideal in a period like ours that is so short of political ideals capable of sustaining civil commitment and acting as a reference point for political action?

B. This is the same argument that we have discussed on several occasions in relation to your book *From Politics to the Reason of State*.<sup>6</sup> In politics I am a realist. You can only talk politics if you keep a clinical eye firmly on history. Whether it is monarchical or republican, politics is the struggle for power. To talk of ideals, as you do, is in my

### *Virtue and the Republic*

mind to engage in rhetoric. Even when your writers of great renown spoke of republics, politics was what was actually happening on the ground, as it always has been since the times of the Greeks. I can understand politics as the struggle for power, but if you speak of politics whose goal is a republic based on the virtue of its citizens, then I wonder what exactly this citizens' virtue is supposed to be. Tell me where you can find a state that is founded on the virtue of its citizens and does not have recourse to the use of force! The definition of the state that continuously recurs is the one whereby the state holds a monopoly on the *legitimate* use of force, and that force is necessary because the majority of the citizens are not virtuous but corrupt. That is why the state needs to use force, and that is my concept of politics. This type of politics differs from the politics of those who feel they can speak of states founded on the virtue of their citizens. As I have said, virtue is a Jacobin ideal. The reason for having states, including republics, is to curb immoral citizens, who constitute the majority. No real state is founded on the virtue of its citizens. Real states are governed by a written or unwritten constitution that establishes the rules of behaviour precisely on the assumption that its citizens are not generally virtuous.

V. You explained the nature of civil virtue and the reason why it is necessary in republics when you said that the purpose of states 'is to curb its immoral citizens'. Precisely because the main purpose of states is to check the arrogant, the ambitious and the corrupt, citizens have to be able 'to keep a firm grip on freedom' and to desire it too, as Cattaneo wrote quoting Machiavelli.

B. I too have quoted that passage from Machiavelli many times!<sup>7</sup>

V. The meaning of that passage is that to keep a check on the corrupt you need not only good laws but also citizens

### *Virtue and the Republic*

who are distinguished by civic virtue. My republicans and your mentors are in agreement. Machiavelli and Cattaneo come together on this point: if you do not have citizens who are willing to be vigilant, committed and capable of resisting the arrogant and serving the public good, the republic dies and it becomes a place in which a few dominate and the others are subject to them.

B. In one of the first articles published after the Liberation in the Action Party's newspaper, *Giustizia e Libertà*, I wrote that democracy needs good laws and good behaviour. What is good behaviour if not what you in an overly rhetorical manner call 'virtue'?<sup>8</sup>

V. Of course, civic virtue is not, in my opinion, the desire to sacrifice oneself for the fatherland. It is a civic virtue for men and women to wish to live in dignity and, as they know that you cannot live in dignity within a corrupt community, they do what they can, when they can, to assist the common freedom. They carry out their professional activities without unlawful advantage and without profiting from the need or weakness of others. They lead a family life based on mutual respect, so that their home resembles a small republic rather than a monarchy or a group of strangers held together by self-interest or the television. They fulfil their civic duties, but they are by no means subservient; they are capable of mobilizing themselves to prevent the approval of an unjust law or to force those in power to deal with matters of common interest. They are active in various kinds of associations (professional, sporting, cultural, political and religious). They follow national and international political developments, and they want to understand but not be led or indoctrinated. They wish to know and discuss the republic's history and reflect upon its historical memory.

For some, the principal reason for this commitment arises from a sense of morality, or more specifically from their indignation over discrimination, corruption, arrogance,

### *Virtue and the Republic*

vulgarity and the abuse of office. In others there prevails an aesthetic desire for decency and propriety. Still others are motivated by legitimate interests, such as the desire for safe roads, pleasant parks, well-maintained squares, monuments that haven't been vandalized, proficient schools and proper hospitals. Indeed some become committed because they want to be respected, receive public accolades, sit at the top table, speak in public and be first in line at ceremonies. In many cases, these motives operate together, and one strengthens the other.

This type of civic virtue is not impossible. We could all think of many people who respond to this description of the citizen who has a sense of civic responsibility and who have only done good for their communities and themselves.

B. To speak of civic virtue is important in order to resist the indifference and political apathy that unfortunately now prevail in our country for reasons that are quite understandable and need not be repeated here. In the period following the Liberation, there was enthusiasm and a desire to become involved as a reaction to the policies that were imposed from above under fascism. Everyone gave their own contribution. There is a need for good moral standards and a virtuous citizenry.