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The republican alternative to contemporary democracy: Political participation and civic virtue¹

Summary. During the most recent years, there has been an interest in the recovery and adaptation of the old thesis of civic republicanism to the new political and social circumstances presently occurring. It is a philosophical and political tradition which, rather than an alternative, can be understood as a complement to liberalism aiming to enhance individual freedom and a more just law in the service of the true interests of the public. Its proponents, however, claim that in order to achieve both purposes it is crucial to have a greater civic engagement of citizens in public affairs and in the community in general. In this paper the author tries to show the benefits to our contemporary democracies if some of these proposals were to be implemented, focusing on the effect on political participation, as well as, the instruments that may be used in order to make the proposals happen.

Key words: republicanism, liberalism, civic virtue, freedom, education

Introduction

Most recently it has been difficult to find a copy of a journal devoted to political, social or legal philosophy which would not include some pages devoted to civic republicanism. There have also been many journalists, analysts, “intellectuals”, and even politicians, who have enthusiastically supported this project to revitalize public life. However, after this initial boom prompted by the publication of a number of influential works – one of the most outstanding was Philip Pettit’s *Republicanism: a theory of freedom and government* – interest in civic republi-

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canism has been gradually languishing, in fact, it has almost but disappeared from the philosophical and political debates.

However, in my opinion, the republican theses and proposals remain as plausible, as feasible, and even, as necessary now as they were then, so I think it is worth remembering them not only in order to publicize them but mainly, to develop them. This is the reason why, in the following pages, I will try to show the benefits that adopting some of these proposals, and especially the republican view of political participation, would bring to our contemporary democracies, as well as, the instruments that could be used to make them happen.

Beforehand, I think it appropriate to point out that although it is common to oppose liberalism to republicanism – as I myself do – in this article for expository purposes, ultimately they are not necessarily antagonistic or incompatible alternatives. Indeed, they differ conceptually in their notion of the individual or of their relationship with the community, however, contemporary republicanism assumes many of the basic assumptions of liberalism – in the same way that once liberalism assumed the republican ones – and is perfectly compatible, at least in some versions, with most of the achievements of contemporary societies, such as fundamental rights or ethical individualism². In short, republicanism can be understood, rather than as an alternative, but as a complement of liberalism. In fact, many of its contemporary proponents speak of a “liberal Republicanism”, which intends to explore individual freedom and to make liberalism more resilient, while understanding that a greater civic engagement of citizens in public affairs, and within the community in general, is essential.

1. The liberal democracy

The ways of imagining democracy throughout history have been many and very different, although the hegemonic one nowadays is the one commonly known as “liberal”, to the point that it is possible to argue that today, “democracy” is an abbreviation of “liberal democracy”³.

This conception of political participation emerged as an alternative to “classical theories of democracy” which, according to the opinion of some, put too much

² M.C. Barranco Avilés, *La concepción republicana de los derechos en un mundo multicultural*, in: *Derechos fundamentales, valores y multiculturalismo*, eds. Ansuátegui Roig, F. Javier, Dykinson, Madrid 2005, p. 24.

³ E. García Guitián, *El discurso liberal: democracia y representación*, in: R. del Águila, *La democracia en sus textos*, Alianza, Madrid 1998, p. 116. It is clear that liberalism is not homogeneous, and there are various ways of understanding it, so when I try to describe the liberal system, I do in a somewhat stereotypical way in order to reflect, rather than the various doctrines, the practice of liberal systems in contemporary democracies.

emphasis on civic virtue of citizens and on their intense, responsible, and rational intervention in public affairs, considering it the best guarantee for the preservation of freedom. However, mainly from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on, this intense involvement began to be seen as unrealistic and also dangerous. It is seen as unrealistic because citizens neither can, nor want, to commit to public affairs with the same intensity with which their Greek or Roman ancestors did, since neither the size of the great modern states permits it, nor are there guidelines for the limitless enrichment opportunities open to the private sector by the new market economy. It is also seen as dangerous because the revolutionaries, both American and French, had already suffered the excesses and abuses that could be caused by popular regimes and are evidence as to how easily they degenerated into tyranny of the majority.

Another formula, therefore, should be found to protect individual freedom from political powers, given that simply putting it in the hands of the majority had been demonstrated as an inadequate solution. The method which seemed more promising for this purpose was to limit the power itself, which would be banned from interfering in a “part of human existence which by necessity remains individual and independent, and which is, by right, outside any social competence”⁴. So what is really important is, not anymore who will hold the power, but the limitations of power to its proper scope of competence, that is, the protection of the innate rights of human beings, by keeping the internal order and security, and by defending the community against external threats. Any other intervention in civil society, any pretense of the collective pursuit of the common good or happiness, will be deemed, thereafter, an embarrassment and an affront to individual autonomy, even in the event that such claims align with the approval of the majority of citizenry.

Among these individual rights that the government should respect and protect are the political rights, whose role would be similar to that of the other rights: to enable citizens to defend their private interests⁵. Thus, the essential purpose of the political participation of citizens would be to influence the action of public authorities in order to direct it towards the promotion of the voters interests. In this sense, according to the liberal conception, Habermas⁶ illustrates that politics has the same structure as a market, where people participate to obtain a maximum benefit. Certainly, it is typical to compare the electoral process in liberal democracies with a market economy based on supply and demand: political parties offer their programs to voters/consumers who will choose among the various offerings

⁴ B. Constant, *Principles of politics applicable to all representative governments*, in: idem, *Political writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 177.

⁵ J. Habermas, *Derechos humanos y soberanía popular: las concepciones liberal y republicana*, “Derechos y Libertades”, 1994, no. 3, p. 223.

⁶ Vid. ibidem.

those which best suit them, according to interests or preferences from before the political process and hence not formed as a result of it.

However, once they have cast their votes, the citizens –reduced to simple voters – have little to do with the public sphere, since liberal democracy is, “after all, not the government of the people, but the government of some people authorized by them: the politicians”⁷. So, participation is reduced to the mere process of appointment of the authorities which will rule the community with the greatest discretion without being subject to the views of the electorate, beyond the fact that, if they do not want to be replaced by others, they will have to attend to the demands of the majority of citizens to some extent. Thus, as denounced by Massimo La Torre⁸, a transformation of the superior (voters) in subjects and of those who should be ordered (the representatives) in constituents (legislators) is considered justified because, in the liberal view, the representative resembles a tutor who knows better than the represented themselves the true public interest, and how to approach its realization.

In order to prevent this broad discretion of the representatives resulting in a despotic and tyrannical government, the liberal democratic tradition not only relies on the high moral and intellectual character of the representatives, but also – apart from periodic elections- on the very structure of the political system. Indeed, the separation of executive, legislative and judicial branches is estimated as an effective mechanism of the self-monitoring system which limits the likelihood of an illegitimate or self-interested use of public power. Thus, the virtues of the political system supplement the shortcomings of citizen participation that classical theories of democracy postulate.

But if the liberal government gives citizens a reduced political role, in turn, it does not ask much from them, because nothing is imposed upon the individual beyond the respect for the autonomy of others and the fulfillment of essential civic duties to the very conservation of the community (voting, paying taxes and, if the nation is threatened, coming to its defense). This is the case because, for liberals, the best society is the one that minimizes interference and public demands, which is one where individuals have minimal obligations. In this way, as proven by Felix Ovejero⁹, liberal democracy economizes virtue, since, on one hand, the guarantee of rights is not dependent on civic engagement, that its citizens do not need to become directly involved in the defense of their liberties, and on the other hand,

⁷ Á. Rivero, *Representación política y participación*, in: R. del Águila, *Manual de Ciencia Política*, Trotta, Madrid 1997, p. 211.

⁸ Vid. M. La Torre, *Discutiendo la democracia. Representación política y derechos fundamentales*, “Derechos y Libertades. Revista del Instituto de Derechos Humanos Bartolomé de las Casas”, 1994, vol. 2, no. 3.

⁹ F. Ovejero Lucas, *Democracia liberal y democracias republicanas*, “Claves de razón práctica”, 2001, no. 111, p. 21.

people do not have to bear the “costs” of public life, since this will be in the hands of professionals paid for it.

As already stated, this understanding of public life has been the one overwhelmingly favored since it was spelled out by Benjamin Constant¹⁰ in his famous lecture “On Freedom of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns” delivered at the Athénée de Paris in 1819. In it, the Swiss philosopher said that, unlike the Ancients who the more time they consecrated to the exercise of political rights, the freer they believed themselves to be:

in the kind of freedom on the other hand, in the kind of liberty of which we are capable, the more the exercise of political rights leaves us the time for our private interests, the more precious will liberty be to us [...] Hence, Sirs, the need for the representative system. The representative system is nothing but an organization by means of which a nation charges a few individuals to do what it cannot or does not wish to do herself [...] The representative system is a proxy given to a certain number of men by the mass of the people who wish their interests to be defended and who nevertheless do not have the time to defend them themselves. But, unless they are idiots, rich men who employ stewards keep a close watch on whether these stewards are doing their duty, lest they should prove negligent, corruptible, or incapable; and, in order to judge the management of these proxies, the landowners, if they are prudent, keep themselves well-informed about affairs, the management of which they entrust to them. Similarly, the people who, in order to enjoy the liberty which suits them, resort to the representative system, must exercise an active and constant surveillance over their representatives, and reserve for themselves, at times which should not be separated by too lengthy intervals, the right to discard them if they betray their trust, and to revoke the powers which they might have abused.

2. The republican alternative

Although majoritarian, this conception of democracy is not unanimous, but has been criticized from different intellectual positions, among which “civic republicanism” stands out today. The proponents of this old tradition of thought want to recover the best of it, and that especially means such values as political participation, civic virtue or patriotism, all well understood, of course, as possible and compatible with the lifestyle of today’s society.

Republicans argue that the liberal democracy has many deficiencies, starting with the fact that this is far from being a market as perfect as their proponents want us to believe. Certainly, Felix Ovejero¹¹ states that a properly functioning

¹⁰ B. Constant, *De la libertad de los antiguos comparada con la de los modernos*, in: idem, *Escritos políticos*, transl. M.L. Sánchez Mejía, C.E.C., Madrid 1989, pp. 281-282.

¹¹ F. Ovejero Lucas, op. cit., pp. 21-23.

market requires, among many other requirements, to be sensitive to the very different demands of consumers, or in political terms, there should be political parties and government programs which represent the interests of all citizens, even those whose claims or views are minoritarian, so that they can at least make their voices heard and draw attention to their needs, even if they have little chance of them being finally addressed.

In the political market many demands are displaced since supply is often limited due to the enormous costs involved to compete within it. However, sometimes available policy offers not only do not meet the demands of the small influential minorities, but they do not even meet those of the majority. Indeed, political parties have to serve the interests of the “powerful”, even when these are contrary to those of the majority of citizens, since the powerful are those who, specifically, enable parties to participate in the political market by providing them with access to the media, to the necessary resources for election campaigns, etc.

In addition to all this, one must add the fact that if political parties competing in the market for votes want to grab enough of them to gain power, they have to collect as much interest in their programs as possible. However, in a world of conflicting interests, the interests of some easily clash with those of others, so that the best strategy to be followed by political entrepreneurs will be to offer promises which do not bother anyone, vague programs which do not say anything and that become, thus, blank cheques, without compromise and which, therefore, cannot even be claimed. This will produce the convergence of the parties to the “center”, with virtually identical proposals in its emptiness, so that “consumers” do not know what to buy because the offers do not even specify their content, which turns the electoral process into a choice between managing elites rather than among different management projects.

But even in the event that the electoral market functioned properly, this notion of democracy would still be rejected by the republicans, because, in their view, politics must answer questions concerning values and not simple matters of preference¹². This meaning that the political process should not be viewed as a market but as a dialogue intended for the promotion of the common good. One could argue, therefore, that for republicans, as Philip Pettit¹³ writes – continuing the market analogy – voters should not be viewed as consumers of electoral programs, but as quality supervisors. That is, citizens should not go to the polls to choose, among the alternatives offered, the one which most fits their personal preferences, in the way we choose, for example, among different holiday destinations the one most interesting for our family, but they should go to cast their judgment about which alternative is best for society as a whole, according to the criteria they deem most appropriate.

¹² J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

¹³ Ph. Pettit, *Liberalism and republicanism*, “Australian Journal of Political Science”, 1993, no. 28, p. 172.

Politics, therefore, should not consist of taking decisions which, regardless of their quality or their fairness, meet the immediate interests of the most numerous or the most influential, but in finding the best solutions in each specific case through a process of public deliberation in which participants do not attend with preconceived and immovable interests, preferences and opinions, but with the willingness to undergo a process of critical review in the light of the debate, considering alternative perspectives and additional information.

This is so because republican thought is characterized by a belief in what Cass Sunstein calls “universalism”¹⁴, i.e. the ability to reach, through a process of deliberation among equals, widely shared substantive agreements on the common good. Unlike relativism and skepticism, republicans would argue that it is possible to find a correct answer, if not always, at least in many cases. However, Sunstein¹⁵ recognizes that this does not mean that Republicans believe in a unique public good or deny that, sometimes, citizens given their diverse interests, views, or positions, will be unable to reach an agreement through conversation, so sometimes they will need to reach a compromise. At other times “political losers” will inevitably occur, apart from the fact that there are certain issues which should stay out of public discussion as, for example, religion.

But the main criticism, closely related to the above, is that republicanism addresses the way in which liberals regard democracy through the weak political participation they grant to citizens. In this sense, Flores D’Arcais¹⁶ observed, among others, that nowadays individuals are realizing more and more that they count for less and that politics has become the business of politicians, of a separate class of people often unable to represent or defend either the will or the true interests of citizens. This then leads them to a state of apathy, skepticism and even rejection of politics and politicians, which makes them easy prey for totalitarian ideologies, nationalist, and religious fundamentalism.

This is one of the reasons why the republicans are betting on what Salvador Giner¹⁷ called a “demanding democratic order”, which he defined as “one that incorporates public participation to the greatest extent possible”. Public authorities should promote and encourage political participation in both extensive (i.e., including the greatest number of citizens), and intensive, that is to say, going beyond the simple vote, as citizens must not be considered as mere voters, but as persons continuously involved and responsible in the decisions that affect the lives of their community. In addition to dealing with threats already mentioned above, there are many others advantages that Republicans can give in this type of involvement:

¹⁴ C. Sunstein, *Beyond the Republican revival*, “The Yale Law Journal”, 1988, no. 97, p. 1555.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ P. Flores D’Arcais, *El individuo libertario*, Seix Barral, Barcelona 2001, p. 108.

¹⁷ S. Giner, *Cultura republicana y política del porvenir*, in: *La cultura de la democracia: el futuro*, ed. S. Giner, Salvador Ariel, Barcelona 2000, p. 141.

through it we can consider ourselves truly free, we ensure that the government takes care of our real interests and welfare and, last but not least, the decisions taken will be better and more fair.

Indeed, one of the most recurrent axioms of the republican tradition is the link between individual freedom and political participation. However, this relationship should not be understood in the classic sense that the government is always ready to cut our freedoms if we are not vigilant and do not participate in public life aware and informed. Generally speaking, it does not appear that the famous sentence coined in 1790 by the radical Irish judge and politician John Curran is valid nowadays: “The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance”, since at this point it seems fair to agree with Constant that individual liberties are reasonably safe by means of systemic controls and public opinion¹⁸.

Contemporary republicans refer, rather, to the fact that the relationship between freedom and participation is intrinsic, that is, participating in public affairs is a dimension of freedom, not an external consequence of it. Certainly, we can agree with Honohan¹⁹ that personal autonomy depends to a large extent on the social and political decisions affecting the range of possibilities open to individuals. Therefore, if they lack the real possibility of participating in making these decisions, autonomy will be reduced and their individual lives will be constrained by foreign powers.

In other words, we can say that we are free when we, ourselves, decide what our interests are, and how to meet them. There are times when this can be fully achieved at will, without causing a collision with the interests or desires of others. In this case, we are free when we act according to our will without any compulsion or external interference. However, in many cases, our interests clash with those of others, with our partner, our family, our neighborhood and ultimately, with the rest of the citizens of our Republic. In these cases, it is not possible, or it should not be, to have the capacity to impose our opinion or our interests on others, because then we would undermine their freedom. Yet at the same time, we cannot consent, if we really want to be free, to one or more other people to impose their views or interests on us. Therefore, we must agree with them about what is best

¹⁸ Indeed, an indispensable instrument to avert abuses of power and ensure respect for our rights and freedoms is public opinion. Constant states that when certain principles have been clearly and fully demonstrated they themselves become their own warranty, so if it is universally recognized that there is in the world no unlimited power, nobody, at no time, will dare claim such power. According to that writer, experience shows us that nobody attributes to society anymore, for example, the right to take someone's life without trial, and that is why no modern government requires it (B. Constant, *Principles of politics applicable...*, op. cit., p. 182). Isaiah Berlin also expressed that idea in very similar terms in his famous work *Two Concepts of Liberty in Four Essays on Liberty*, Alianza, Madrid 2003, p. 272.

¹⁹ I. Honohan, *Civic republicanism*, Routledge, New York 2002, p. 187.

for everyone, meaning the collective good or what the common interest is. It can be said, therefore, that in such matters we will be free when we are able to speak of and defend our view on what we think is best for us, what we think is good for our common interest; when we, in short, have a certain capacity to influence the decisions of what affects us, even though in the end, our opinion, being shared by a minority or not being shared at all, is defeated.

Another benefit, already stated, which political participation gives us is that, thanks to it, the government will be forced to address our real needs and interests; as Quentin Skinner writes, “unless politicians are persons of exceptional altruism [they] will always be tempted to make decisions that favor their own interests or those of powerful lobbies rather than the community as a whole”²⁰. So if we want to build a genuine democracy, where the government is truly for the people as a result of being composed of the people, it is essential that the work of government is not audited only by institutional mechanisms, but also by the social power citizens exercise over their representatives. This means not only through elections but also through other forms of political participation and expression of citizenship (assemblies, referendums, popular consultations, etc.). In summary, we can agree with Salvador Giner, that “republicanism focuses attention on the political activity of ordinary people, so that we the citizens have to do the everyday policies. The government is not the only one responsible: if they err and persist in the error it is because we allow it”²¹.

And the third major advantage of extensive and intensive participation is that, as a consequence, the laws and decisions would be better and more fair, and therefore society itself will also be better and more fair. This is because – as stated by both Paul Brest and Iseult Honohan²² – actual participation in the political activity and deliberation leads us to listen to other people’s positions and makes us aware of our most remote and indirect connections with them and thus of the consequences our decisions and actions would have for our neighbors as well as of their long-term consequences for the community as a whole. Moreover, Honohan²³ adds that in a republican society, private interests cannot constitute a sufficient basis for political action, but it must be supported by arguments and reasons subjected to public scrutiny, the rulers and citizens will be forced to justify their claims and decisions by appealing to the common good. This requirement, in turn, has a disciplining effect on the type of measures that may be proposed and approved and will contribute to moralizing the government action.

²⁰ Q. Skinner, *On justice, the common good and the priority of liberty*, in: *Dimensions of radical democracy*, ed. Ch. Mouffe, Verso, London 1992, p. 221.

²¹ S. Giner, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²² Vid. P. Brest, *Toward radical republicanism*, “Yale Law Journal”, 1988, vol. 97, p. 1624 and I. Honohan, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

²³ Vid. *ibidem*.

Nevertheless, all these benefits will only be achieved if participation is not only broad and continuous, but also, and primarily, responsible. That means it has to involve a certain concern for others because, as Charles Taylor says “it is not only required that citizens commit to the joint project, but also feel especially connected with other people involved in this project”²⁴. Thus, we are facing no easy task which requires some sacrifice and dedication, since nobody denies that a republican society involves much greater demands for citizens than a liberal one. Demands which, in turn, can only be satisfied if citizens have a certain degree of civic virtue, which thus becomes the cornerstone of the republican order. This is the reason why we can proclaim with Salvador Giner, that the viability of recovery of civic republicanism nowadays depends on the viability of civic virtue²⁵.

Nevertheless, as noted by Viroli²⁶, many contemporary scholars state that civic virtue, as theorized by republicans, is either impossible or dangerous, or both. Impossible, as it may be too demanding for the citizens of our individualistic societies, who are too focused on their private lives, too jealous of their short-term interests, or too tied to different interest groups to serve the common good; dangerous, because according to them any attempt to motivate individuals to take care of their civic duties is to be considered as an attack on individual autonomy and an invasion of privacy, since citizens would be imposed a particular conception of the good life. In addition, liberals argue that any commitment to the common good can be seen as a subordination of the individual to society.

Conversely, the republicans have a number of arguments to refute all these allegations. So, Adrian Oldfield²⁷ responds to liberals saying that their fears are unfounded, because far from undermining individual autonomy, the fact that governments encourage individuals to fulfill their civic duties, provided they are not imposed by force, will, on the contrary, enable them to achieve a degree of moral and political autonomy much greater than that guaranteed by the simple recognition of individual rights. This is all because thanks to the aforementioned arguments, they will be able to truly govern themselves and to consider themselves genuinely free.

In addition, as Gargarella²⁸ points out, this promotion of civic virtue must not be seen as an intrusion into private ethics, because, unlike, for example, communitarianism, republicanism does not demand citizens commit to respect a “ro-

²⁴ Ch. Taylor, *Por qué la democracia necesita el patriotismo*, in: M.C. Nussbaum, *Los límites del patriotismo*, Paidós, Barcelona 1999, p. 146.

²⁵ Vid. S. Giner, op. cit., p. 148.

²⁶ Vid. M. Viroli, *Republicanism*, Hill and Wang, New York 2003, p. 69.

²⁷ Vid. A. Oldfield, *Citizenship and community: Civic Republicanism and the modern world*, Routledge, London 1990, p. 6.

²⁸ Vid. R. Gargarella, *Las teorías de la justicia después de Rawls: un breve manual de filosofía política*, Paidós, Barcelona 1999, p. 180.

bust moral conception”, but only to certain values “institutionally circumscribed”. I mean, republicanism is not interested in the particular way in which citizens live or in their ideals of good, provided that they maintain an active commitment to the public good, to the fate of others and, ultimately, to the fate of their community. Among others, Oldfield²⁹ abounds in this view:

it is not a question, here, of a community setting itself some overriding purpose, or of establishing one exclusive path towards the good life [...] The community, after all, is composed of diverse autonomous beings, different in their capacities, talents and functions [...] the good life for one is not necessarily the good life for another, but the good life for each must include activity which sustains the political community [...] it is thus a question both of establishing rules or norms of conduct in accordance with which each citizen will pursue his or her own independently determined good life, and of specifying those activities which are necessary to make the individual pursuit of the good life possible.

On the other hand, the answer to the criticism that the subordination to the common good is an oppressive practice is given by Honohan³⁰. She acknowledges that it is undeniable that the notion of common good is not a very popular concept nowadays and is usually even rejected as collectivist and potentially oppressive. However, in her opinion, there are a number of ways in which it can be used, that are not inherently oppressive, although this requires that instead of talking about a single common good, we should talk about a number of common goods from which we all benefit, such as peace or a healthy environment, which cannot be effectively promoted by individual citizens, or even by political institutions alone, but requires the joint action of everyone. The common good, therefore, should not be seen as something different and superior to the citizens, but as the good of all of them as members of a political community, which sometimes can differ from their immediate good as singular individuals. Consequently, the priority of public over private does not reflect the good of the majority over the minority, but a dichotomy within each citizen, because each has both a private and a public interest. A person who puts their private interests before the public is actually short-sighted and unable to realize what truly suits them because putting the common good before that of the individual is no more than pursuing long-term interests or being more insightful when defending individual interests. This is, to sum up, an instrumental conception of civic virtue, since, as Oldfield³¹ writes, citizenship has nothing to do with altruism, but with the recognition of society's goals as your own goals.

²⁹ Vid. A. Oldfield, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

³⁰ Vid. I. Honohan, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-159.

³¹ Vid. A. Oldfield, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

3. Is civic virtue feasible nowadays?

Republicans also reject the criticism directed at them for at least two centuries, according to which, an intense and committed political participation is not possible. Critics say citizens lack the aptitude, information and civic spirit needed to determine the common good, so a division of labor is better in which this function corresponds to those truly ready to perform it: politicians. However, republicans are convinced that nothing prevents citizens from taking care of public affairs to a much greater extent than they do today, being fully aware that civic virtue is scarce³², yet convinced that it can be increased by creating the appropriate juncture. And, moreover, republicans are not anticipated to build the “new man”, a mission that has been demonstrated not only dangerous, but also impossible³³, but their reflections on how to encourage virtue are addressed to “ordinary people”, and more particularly, to modern people, with their specific circumstances. In this sense, Giner³⁴ reminds us that, civic virtue is a modest claim: it does not demand holiness, it demands only obedience to legitimate law, some interest in what happens in national and international politics, not to be guided or indoctrinated and, above all, a certain capacity for active participation in public affairs.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that individuals meet their daily obligations to others. They meet their obligations as parents, as neighbors, as friends or as professionals, therefore, why would they not be able to fulfill their obligations to their community? This is the reason why civic republicanism has perpetually wondered how to encourage citizens to commit to their community, that is, how to make them public-spirited (or politically virtuous). First of all, we should identify the requirements necessary for virtue to flourish. And once again, Professor Honohan³⁵ provides the answer: individuals need opportunities (i.e., decentralization of political power), resources (knowledge, information, time, and welfare) and, of course, motivation to take active citizenship seriously.

So first of all, we have to multiply the opportunities for responsible self-government by citizens. Everyone should be able to say and do anything, that is, the institutional arrangements should be created so that everyone could potentially take part in making political decisions. And for this purpose, there are two most significant measures to be taken by public authorities: first, to promote greater decentralization of political power, providing, for example, the cities and towns with the capacity to make important decisions for the life of the community; and secondly, to encourage broad and diverse networks of partnerships of all kinds:

³² Ibidem.

³³ Vid. H. Van Gunstern, *Neo-republican citizenship in the practice of education*, “Government and opposition”, 1996, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 78.

³⁴ Vid. S. Giner, op. cit., p. 153.

³⁵ Vid. I. Honohan, op. cit., p. 170.

labor, cultural, religious, ecological, sports, neighborhood, etc., which should be endowed with real powers and a decision making capacity³⁶. This “small-scale policy” would be the basis for the citizens to begin in the management of public affairs in areas and topics which are more familiar for them and where their interests are clearer and immediate, which would help them overcome the sense of powerlessness and would develop their sense of responsibility.

Indeed, decentralization will not only provide citizens with opportunities to participate, but, in turn, it will encourage them to do so, since individuals take participation seriously only when the issues discussed affect their interests directly and when they have a real opportunity to be heard and have some impact on political activity. So, as Ovejero³⁷ aptly writes,

if I can make my voice heard, I have a reason to speak. If I talk and I feel that I am listened to I have a reason to continue to participate; do not let us forget that in the collective action the problems arise, almost always, when individuals believe that it matters little whether they cooperate or not, that their participation is worthless. When comparing the undisputed cost of cooperation with the irrelevance of one's action from the public point of view, the cooperative will is discouraged.

In contrast, when you perceive that between your election and the decisions taken there is a non-remote, causal relationship, you take the importance of participation for the success or failure of the community seriously. And indeed, all republican writers have repeatedly emphasized that citizens participating in collective self-government, attending debates, expressing opinions in public councils, electing representatives and overseeing their work, feel the public good as their own and develop an attachment to it similar to the one they feel for their own property.

But it is not enough that citizens have opportunities to participate in public life, they also need a number of resources which enable them to be active agents in their community. Some of these resources, according to Oldfield³⁸, have to do with what the liberal individualism identified as civil and political rights, while others are economic and social, since it is evident that without health, without education, and without reasonable income, for example, the chances of the genuine practice of citizenship is seriously threatened.

It is necessary therefore, firstly, that all citizens have rights that permit them to be conscious, informed, frequent and free participants. In this sense, it is customary to say that republicanism is irreconcilable with the notion of individual rights,

³⁶ Moreover, some argue that this participation and decentralization should also reach business, where number of decisions that immediately affect the lives of workers are made without their participation or their opinions. However, this aspiration, which could be very positive, does not seem very feasible, at least in the short term (vid. ie, C. Sunstein, op. cit., p. 1578 and P. Brest, op. cit., p. 1626).

³⁷ Vid. F. Ovejero Lucas, op. cit., p. 29.

³⁸ Vid. A. Oldfield, op. cit., p. 28.

but this is not entirely true; only if these rights are seen as individualistic, natural and absolute properties of a sovereign person will they be incompatible with the republican conception of political autonomy. Indeed, for the Republicans, the rights are not considered as natural attributes of individuals, but as established and guaranteed by political prerogatives, that is, “ultimately [they] are but manifestations of the dominant political will”³⁹.

Then again, contrary to what might appear at first glance, this concept does not involve any impairment of the value or effectiveness of rights. First, this is because from what could be described as the practical point, this would be one of the theoretical weaknesses of the doctrine of natural rights according to Viroli⁴⁰: “natural rights do not actually become true rights until recognized by society and protected by political power”. Certainly, as noted by Peces-Barba, “rights that originate and are based on morality and running into the law, do it through the state [...], without state support those values do not become positive law and therefore they lack force to guide social life in a way that favors their moral purpose”⁴¹.

Secondly, republicans consider rights as absolutely essential since they are an essential precondition for a genuine deliberative process. Thus, Michelman⁴² reminds us that in the republican thought, the normative character of the policy depends on the independence of mind and judgment, authenticity of expression and diversity, or plurality of perspectives that lead citizens to the “debate of the Republic”. Therefore, this doctrine has always shown a strong commitment to the defense of property rights, freedom of expression and conscience, political participation, etc., which not only guarantee individual autonomy and access to the public life but which facilitate political debate and genuine deliberation.

Now, along with civil and political rights, which at least in European democracies seem safe enough, it is necessary for the recognition and effective guarantee of certain social rights and redistributive measures that provide individuals with a certain level of welfare and guarantee them a certain equality. This is because, as Taylor points out, “a democracy of citizens is highly vulnerable to alienation produced by deep inequalities and the feeling of neglect and indifference that easily arises between marginalized minorities. This is the reason why democratic societies should not be too inegalitarian”⁴³.

This is so, first, because great economic inequalities compromise citizens’ actual independence and favor patronage, which prevents them from going to the public forum with their own criteria and from carefully defending the policies

³⁹ J. Habermas, op. cit., p. 224.

⁴⁰ Vid. M. Viroli, op. cit., p. 60.

⁴¹ G. Peces-Barba Martínez, *Curso de Derechos Fundamentales. Teoría general*, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid – B.O.E., Madrid 1999, p. 105.

⁴² Vid. F. Michelman, *Law’s Republic*, “The Yale Law Journal”, 1988, vol. 97, no. 8, p. 1504.

⁴³ Ch. Taylor, op. cit., p. 146.

considered most beneficial to the community. Moreover, those who just have the basics for survival, can hardly worry about public affairs or feel committed to a society that is not theirs. The result is that those who have more, participate more, and thus exert a greater influence on the government and can thus guide their participation to promote their own interests, closing the circle⁴⁴.

However, contemporary Republicans have their feet on the ground because they do not advocate extreme material equality. The only thing they demand is the adoption of political, social and economic measures which promote the independence of citizens, that is, which preserve a certain welfare level that gives them the necessary time, resources, culture, education and knowledge to perform their civic duties.

This is still not yet sufficient. It is not enough that individuals have opportunities to participate and the legal and socioeconomic conditions required to do so properly, but they also need to be encouraged to fulfill their civic duties, that is, to become true citizens, since as Oldfield writes, “we cannot expect a practice of citizenship to grow merely because politicians and political thinkers wish it, and exhort their populations to effort [...] ‘natural human’ beings, or ‘non-civic’ ones, have to be molded and shaped for their role as citizens”⁴⁵.

Many incentives have been devised by the Republicans for this purpose⁴⁶, however, unquestionably, the main instrument on which all of them have always relied on to instill virtue in the citizens has been education. Then again, civic republicanism has a conception of education much broader than the traditional one because for the republicans, citizens are learning throughout their whole life and training, and it is understood that the appropriate character building to willingly engage in the practice of citizenship, never finishes; further education, thus understood, is not only the responsibility of schools but also of political institutions and of society as a whole.

As already noted, education advocated by the republican intends primarily to teach individuals, from childhood, what it means to be citizens of a political community. It does this in terms of the duties involved and to motivate them to pursue these, to teach them, in short, to perceive the interests of the community as their own, to recognize that the community and its practices and institutions assure citizens the chance to live their own good lives and that they have, in turn, the duty to contribute to its viability.

⁴⁴ Vid. P. Brest, op. cit., p. 1627.

⁴⁵ A. Oldfield, Adrian, op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁶ Among these incentives, a very recurrent one throughout the republican tradition which has been recovered by some of the contemporary proponents, as Pettit s, is public recognition. The professor of Princeton writes: “Can recognition, or its opposite, disapproval, generate civic virtue today, in an individualistic society in which material success is the main goal?”. He thinks so and argues that one of the main reasons for wanting to get rich is precisely to impress or to feel superior to others, hence, if we can make society to value virtue over wealth, many people, eager for reputation and public esteem, could direct their efforts to it rather than to personal success in business (vid. Ph. Pettit, *Liberalism and republicanism*, op. cit., pp. 177-178).

But as the growing complexity of political, social and economic aspects of contemporary life may discourage citizens, along with civic awareness, it is necessary also to provide them with all the knowledge and information about matters relating to society and the government needed to put them in a position to judge, to choose, and to act.

To sum up, the republican conception of civic education, much wider than the liberal one, can be defined, according to the report displayed to the French minister of research in 1998, as “the set of the knowledge and the practices destined to provide each citizen, member of the political body and, therefore, of the ‘sovereign’, with the lights, the concepts and the values that will allow them to exert their prerogatives totally and to fulfil the duties derived from them”. It is necessary, therefore, to teach the people both to defend their legitimate interests and to perform their duties, to obey the law and to respect the institutions, but also to criticize and to correct them, if necessary. Nothing less than that, but nothing more either because, as recognized in the mentioned report, if the education went further on, it would risk falling into totalitarian indoctrination: the Republic has the obligation, not to impose a content to the election of the citizens, but to remind them, and even teach, the bases of civic and political morals.

As we have seen, one of the functions of education is to promote a sense of attachment to the community, that is, patriotism, because, as noted by Oldfield, “for effective civic consciousness, some form of attachment to the nation is essential, though it should be neither aggressive nor xenophobic. In civic education, broadly conceived, ‘a sense of group affiliation’ must have priority over literacy and numeracy”⁴⁷.

The patriotism advocated by republicans is the one that Dolf Sternberg called “constitutional” and whose essence can be found in these words: “the homeland is the Republic that constitutes us. The homeland is the Constitution, which gives us life. The homeland is the freedom (the true freedom) we enjoy when we ourselves defend, use and conserve it”⁴⁸. It is therefore a feeling that should not be confused with nationalism, for if nationalist loyalty is forged around the idea of people, i.e. about the history and culture of a distinct ethnic group that is homogeneous and different from other people, patriotic loyalty consolidates around a system of institutions that, in principle, must be built. Patriotism, civic virtue par excellence, is generated on the basis of emotional and rational adherence to a political system, which is interpreted as the creation of the national genius, although as a result of the agreement of the community. In the case of nationalist loyalty, however, “the bonds of solidarity [...] are created as a result of participation in a common

⁴⁷ A. Oldfield, op. cit., p. 166.

⁴⁸ Vid. J.M. Rosales, *Patriotismo constitucional: sobre el significado de la lealtad política republicana*, “Isegoría”, 1999, no. 20, p. 145.

cultural heritage”⁴⁹. The homeland thus constitutes a community of equal rights to all its members according to the legal status of citizenship, and membership does not require any form of solidarity, except civic solidarity with the community. The Republican patriotism implies, ultimately, adherence to the law and the political system that make the exercise of civil freedom possible, beyond that condition, patriotism is and should be compatible with moral, cultural and ethnical pluralism.

Although patriotism, responsible citizenship, and civic engagement can be instilled from childhood, these feelings will be ephemeral if citizens are not rewarded for their efforts and sacrifices. That means that if they do not find an expression of themselves in the laws and institutions, if these do not meet their true interests, or if welfare policies do not reach everyone, etc, Giner predicts that disaffection movements will emerge and will undermine the democratic organization and will encourage the development of anti-democratic ideologies and attitudes which will make it seem like an exercise of integrity and public virtue; in short, we can say that “citizens respect the Republic if the Republic responds to them”⁵⁰.

In this sense, Viroli⁵¹ also argues that if we want the citizens to love their Republic and its laws, it is essential that public authorities behave fairly. This means that they protect everyone equally, without offering privileges to the powerful and discriminating against the weak. They must firmly punish crimes both large and small, of both illustrious people and the ordinary, neither wealth nor friendship nor belonging to a faction – only merit and ability to serve the common good – can open doors to public honors, to jobs, and to prestigious positions. Yet the rewards and recognition policy that prevails today in too many countries has been, however, largely a patronage policy – meaning that distribution of public jobs, benefits and privileges among those willing to blindly obey a person or faction – this policy creates a corrupt and incompetent elite, and undermines the moral soul of the Republic⁵².

Patriotism, therefore, is a feeling that enables the proper functioning of the institutions and, in turn, is favored by it, since, as shown by all republican authors throughout history, it is easier to make all kinds of sacrifices for a government in which all participate, and to look out for the interest of all, because we know that

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 144.

⁵⁰ Vid. S. Giner, op. cit., p. 160.

⁵¹ M. Viroli, op. cit., p. 97.

⁵² And this becomes even more serious as a result of the fact, as Montesquieu warned, that not being honest most of the leading citizens of a state, it is unlikely that the lower classes be good, that the greater deceived the lower and these are content with being cheated (vid. Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, Gallimard, Paris 1995, p. 122). And Cicero also notes, in this line, that “the upper classes, being corrupt are responsible for more damage to the state, because not only do damage by the fact they themselves are corrupt, but also because they corrupt the people, since they do more damage with their example than with their misbehavior” (Cicerón, *Las leyes*, in: idem, *La República y Las leyes*, transl. J.M. Núñez González, Akal, Madrid 1989, p. 282).

what we do on behalf of the country will sooner or later rebound to our benefit, rather than to that of a few privileged people.

It is certainly a great deal what a republican society requests of the individuals, but it is also a great deal for what it returns to them. In addition, although the civic virtue needed by such a society is harsh to acquire, it is not impossible; citizenship may be an unnatural practice for human beings, but it is not one for which they are congenitally unfitted.

In fact, as Honohan pointed out correctly, apathy of citizens is largely a rational response to the current political conditions, as they feel that their options of choice between political parties and government programs that are truly differentiated are very limited, as well as their opportunities to participate, however “the fact that, despite this, significant numbers of citizens still do vote, suggests that a good deal of participation of some kind is value for its own sake. The increasing range of alternative forms of political activity suggests that a good deal of political energy is channeled into community and environmental politics, and into protest movements”⁵³.

Furthermore, we can conclude, as Olfield⁵⁴ does, that all issues spoken of do not have to be taken exactly as stated, but more as an ideal to which we can aspire to; it is a standard against which we can measure the institutions and practices of our democracy or of our societies, and with which we can guide our own political activity. The concepts of citizenship and community handled here can be compared with those of justice and freedom: we aspire to be just and free although we know we will never be absolutely just and free; nevertheless we do not abandon these ideals nor give up considering them crucial for our society. However, we must not forget that the main obstacle to managing this ideal can be the very holders of the political and economic powers, who, in spite of their frequent calls to the “active citizenship” and calls to recognize the duties we have towards the state, they will likely not be prepared to assume the uncomfortable consequences that civic republicanism, taken seriously, would imply for them.

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Alternatywa republikańska dla współczesnej demokracji. Uczestnictwo polityczne a cnota obywatelska

Streszczenie. W ostatnich latach widać coraz większe zainteresowanie wskrzeszeniem i zaadaptowaniem dawnych idei republikanizmu obywatelskiego do nowych warunków politycznych i społecznych. Poglądy płynące z tradycji filozoficzno-politycznej niekoniecznie są alternatywą dla idei liberalizmu. Mogą być rozumiane jako dopełnienie tychże idei, według których głównym celem liberalizmu jest zwiększenie indywidualnej wolności i bardziej sprawiedliwego prawa w służbie prawdziwych interesów społeczeństwa. Z kolei zwolennicy takiego podejścia twierdzą, że aby osiągnąć oba cele, niezbędne jest większe zaangażowanie obywatelskie w sprawy publiczne obywateli i społeczności w ogóle. Autor podejmuje próbę ukazania korzyści dla współczesnych demokracji w sytuacji, kiedy chcielibyśmy wprowadzić niektóre z tych propozycji w życie. Chodzi głównie o idee związane z uczestnictwem politycznym i instrumenty, za pomocą których moglibyśmy je wprowadzać w życie.

Słowa kluczowe: republikanizm, liberalizm, cnota obywatelska, wolność, edukacja