

The Culture and History of French Republicanism: Terror or Utopia?

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An everyday republic?

In September 1870, Karl Marx, writing for the International, wrote an address to the French people celebrating the declaration of the Third Republic. Marx had no illusions about the regime, it was a compromise between radicals, moderate royalists and liberals, not the end of history. This alliance had inherited power, rather than achieved it, because of Bismarck's military defeat of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and the inability of the royalists to agree on a king. Yet for all its flaws, the republic was genuinely progressive he argued; it was the best that could be expected of a bourgeois society. Marx went on to wag the finger of theory at the French working class, warning it not to upset the apple cart by opposing the necessarily bourgeois republic in prematurely revolutionary action. The republic was the most progressive political form possible in capitalist society, and would provide the context through which true liberty could be achieved.

A year later, Marx was again writing to the French, this time to celebrate the revolution he had warned against the year before: 'What resilience, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians!', he exclaimed. 'After six months of hunger and ruin, caused rather by internal treachery than by the external enemy, they rise, beneath Prussian bayonets, as if there had never been a war between France and Germany and the enemy were still not at the gates of Paris! History has no like example of such greatness.' Even the level-headed Karl Marx could be swept away by the romance of revolution. The Paris Commune seemed to evade all the strictures of historical necessity. The Red republic could be achieved without reference to its bourgeois form. Revolution could operate its historical magic and allow the working class of France to escape their historical fate.

As we know, Marx's original anxieties about the possibilities for working class revolution were to be borne out. The Paris Commune he

celebrated was to end in a blood bath of 20,000 activists when Paris fell. His first ideas about the bourgeois Republic were to prove more durable, though. With the notable intermission of Vichy, France has remained a republic since 1871 and the political form has provided the context for impressive sets of reforms. We may still be waiting for the end of history to arrive, but, in the interval, France has maintained steady economic growth rates, integrated large numbers of immigrants and provided an effective social security system for its population. The republic even found a way to embrace pleasure as well as duty: one of the most important achievements of the popular front government in 1936 was the introduction of the two-day weekend. Workers strolling the Champs Élysée on a Saturday symbolised the republican commitment to an equality of pleasures as well as rights. The republic has been so successful that other institutional forms, such as monarchy, have ceased to be politically relevant. Republicanism has become the national political culture. As early as 1880, the *Marseillaise*, previously banned as the anthem of bloody revolution, was embraced as the national hymn, and the *quatorze juillet* quickly became the national day.

French republicanism has not just been institutionally and culturally successful: after the demise of socialism, it is the major, if not the only, intellectual alternative to Anglo-American liberalism. The debate between French republicanism and Anglo-Saxon liberalism has been particularly acute within France itself, where the review *Commentaire* and the members of the *Institut Raymond Aron* have led the critique of republicanism. This very debate, between liberal and republican, is testimony to the health of political life in the country. France continues to attempt to construct a polity around the idea of the citizen rather than the consumer. Republicanism has been challenged from without and even more radically threatened by the violence of its revolutionary tradition, yet it remains the most complex and sophisticated political tradition in Europe.

That citizen of the French republic still largely lives in institutions inspired by the ideas of the Third Republic. Leon Gambetta's Belleville Manifesto of 1869 was radical in its day, demanding universal lay education, the creation of a mass citizen army, separation of church and state, introduction of the income tax, and abolition of the death penalty. All of its major tenets, except abolition of the death penalty, were to be instituted by the rather conservative men who inherited power in 1871. The 'free, compulsory and lay' school was created by Jules Ferry and the schoolteacher became the iconic figure of the republic for generations. The *grandes écoles*, dedicated professional schools, still produce the *élite* that runs the republic, through competitive examination. The heart and soul of the republic is probably the *école normale supérieure* that trains

the literary and scientific intellectuals who give French public life a particular tenor. These institutions, and many others, create a republican mentality, a recognisable political culture that informs the identity of the population and underpins its politics. To understand French republicanism as a lived experience, one just has to study contemporary France.¹

Through its institutions and its culture, French republicanism gives life and meaning to the idea of citizenship. Citizenship extends far beyond participation in the formal political system; in fact, for many French citizens voting is a rather unsatisfactory way of exercising their political role. Instead, citizenship infuses the institutions of daily life, and on occasion can generate extraordinary initiatives on the part of citizens mobilised to address particular problems. This functional, everyday republicanism is tremendously important. Voices within France do question whether French republicanism still has any meaning. If clerics, nobles and right-wing nationalists can embrace the republic can there be any content to republicanism? Yet, viewed from without, it is clearer that republicanism is not an anodyne set of clichés, a ‘museum piece’, as one critic put it. Rather it is the backbone that has given shape to the French body politic in the twentieth century. The adherence of its old enemies to the republic is just evidence of its total cultural hegemony.

Britain provides a good comparison from which we can appreciate the importance of this ideology and set of institutions for France. Both Britain and France have relatively declined as world powers in the twentieth century. This has created problems of identity for English society, particularly. It has also generated an anxious search for Britain’s role in the world. French confidence in its world role, especially given its devastating experience in the Second World War, is astounding by comparison. So is the easy assumption by the majority of French citizens of their national identity and their relatively untroubled participation in the European Union. The objective problems faced by France were and are far worse than those of Britain, which did not have such a direct experience of the German problem. The subjective experience of Britain, and of British individuals, has been far tougher though. Yet empire and nation have proved brittle, and the ‘break-up of Britain’ is widely canvassed. The republic, with its institutions and its citizenry intact, has seen off the worst the twentieth century could throw at it and managed to sustain the curiously conservative, yet adaptive, society that is the French republic.

Beyond consensus

French republicanism is not only this workaday lived culture. French republicanism is also the ‘revolution’. The executions of the communards removed one radical opposition to the emerging Third Republic, but they

could not kill off the revolutionary ideal. The tension Marx felt between the revolutionary romance of the republic and the everyday world of republican institutions remained internal to the republican tradition. Ironically, though the deaths of the revolutionaries inaugurated the republic, the revolutionary moment would save that same republic at vital moments. In the spring of 1898, republican students would leave the 'fortress' of the Sorbonne to fight physically with right-wing nationalists, literally moving from the institutional tradition to the revolutionary tradition. The Dreyfus affair showed that, when threatened, the institutional republicans could rely on the revolutionary tradition to rally even their left-wing political opponents. The class nature of the Third Republic did not deter Jean Jaurès from lending it his support when the issue of justice for Dreyfus was at stake. The revolutionary model of the *levée en masse*, in turn, was to inspire French commitment to defeating the invading Germans in the First World War. Even failed republican initiatives refer to this common ground of revolutionary enthusiasm. When Léon Blum was elected premier of the Popular Front government in 1936, he published *Notre jeunesse*, a memoir of his street-fighting days among the *dreyfusards*, in an attempt to recreate the republican alliance of bourgeois and revolutionary. The importance of this relationship and the consequences if it failed were illustrated by the 'strange defeat' in 1940. The republic was strong and dynamic only when the two wings of the republican church were allied.

Like squabbling sisters, the institutional and revolutionary republics are unhappy with their mutual dependence. Their bad relationship is understandable, as the institutional sister can be something of an old maid and the revolutionary is almost impossible to understand. Moreover, the revolutionary is the elder sibling; in the final analysis, she defines the meaning of republicanism. It is difficult to give a precise meaning to this variety of republicanism because, unlike other ideologies, it is not grounded in a tradition of political theory, but in a political event. Liberalism constructs its genealogy from the natural rights theorists of the seventeenth century, like Grotius and Locke, through Mill, Toqueville and Constant, to contemporary thinkers such as John Rawls. Texts define the meaning of the tradition. This is even more true of Marxism. Republicanism has no founding fathers, no sacred texts; it is instead inspired by the icons, symbols and ideals of the first French revolution of 1789-99.

Republicanism did not inspire the French revolution; one could have counted on the fingers of one hand the republicans in France in 1789. Republicanism instead is an attempt to understand and embody the revolutionary commitment to liberty, equality and fraternity. French

republicanism was a total departure from the 'classical' variety, whose genealogy has been traced from the Italian city-states of the fifteenth century, through the Netherlands and England, to its most powerful expression in the creation of the United States. Classical republicanism was not an egalitarian creed. Citizens in the classical tradition were differentiated by their capacity for *virtù* or public service. There was no contradiction between the tenets of classical republicanism and the adherence of many of the founding fathers of the United States, including Jefferson, to slave-holding. Classical republicanism derived political function from social position. The key text of the Atlantic republican tradition, James Harrington's *Oceana*, identified the land-holding barons as the backbone of the republic. Their material circumstances made them independent and incorruptible, therefore they were uniquely suited to the duties of citizenship. The central intuition of the French revolution was that, despite the obvious social, economic and cultural inequalities generated by modern commercial societies, men should be politically equal. Citizenship was not to be derived from social function; citizenship would rescue men from their alienation from one another in society. The French revolution committed itself to the most untrammelled version of individualism, it promised that man could be regenerated, that is returned to his authentic self, through his commitment to the common good. The republic was, in effect, an afterthought, the political form chosen to give shape to this aspiration after the monarchy had proved incapable, or unable, of realising it.

Quite obviously, the aspiration to create a regime in which the citizenry live free and equal lives, in fraternal solidarity with one another, was not fulfilled in the French revolution and has not been fulfilled since. The revolution, and consequently the republic, never found a stable institutional form. The constitution of 1793, written by Hérault de Sechelles, marked the high point of democratic idealism. It envisaged direct voting by the citizenry at local assemblies to approve or disapprove of the actions of their representatives and acknowledged a plethora of social rights. It remained a dead letter, though approved by a referendum, as the government was declared 'revolutionary until the peace' in September and, after the fall of Robespierre the following year, it was renounced and replaced. Subsequent efforts at institution-building were more successful, but less spectacular. The efforts of the Directory laid the basis for institutional republicanism, but even its most enthusiastic supporter would not have claimed that it entirely fulfilled the promise of the revolution. The revolutionary hope of creating a kind of polity that could overcome the alienating effects of modern economics and society remained and remains open, so the forms of the revolutionary republic remain forever over the

horizon of experience. An essential antagonism characterises the relationship of this revolutionary to her institutional sister. Though she may lend her aid at times, she finds every institution to be provisional and inadequate. The best constantly threatens the complete overthrow of the good.

This contradiction, between the actual institutions that the republican tradition has created and its aspiration to master the problem of modern life through creating a new kind of citizenship, has been at the heart of critiques of republicanism from left and right. Edmund Burke recognised that the revolution would inevitably compromise the ‘little platoons’ of social life in favour of ideals from the very first. He came to see the revolution as essentially evil since it respected no historical experience and rendered every form of life meaningless by putting it in question. Hegel saw the revolution as wrong-headed in a similar way. He rejected Burke’s embrace of social institutions as the basis of meaning; he agreed with the revolutionaries that the forms of civil life were partial and conventional. Instead, Hegel argued that the revolutionaries did not understand that the freedom they sought could not be realised in individuals, but only in the principle of the state. Both Burke and Hegel argued that the revolution was fantastical because it sought to bring into question institutions that, by their nature, were above question and truly authoritative. For the left, Marx famously denounced the idea of citizenship as an illusion. The contradictions in capitalist economics and bourgeois society could not be resolved politically, without a transformation of the social and economic base. Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* developed a critique of the very idea of autonomy that was the goal of the revolutionaries. For them, the ideal of citizenship was impossible and dangerous; it was inspired by the vision of rationality as absolute control, and such control could not be achieved. The very hope of attaining such mastery and its inevitable frustration were, for them, the origin of the ubiquitous murderous-violence in modern life. All of these critics converged on the perception that the utopianism of the revolution was dangerously irrational, though they disagreed on everything else.

The Terror lends credence to the critique of revolutionary republicanism. Between September 1793, when terror was made ‘the order of the day’, and August 1794, 16,564 people were put to death by the state in revolutionary courts and tribunals, for political crimes.² This massively underreports the numbers actually killed in the west of the country, especially in the Vendée, where a peasant counter-revolutionary revolt was put down with appalling cruelty. Nor does it reflect the thousands that were killed in forms of private vengeance during and after the Terror

itself. The numbers, though significant in themselves and for the history of the regions where violence was most acutely experienced, do not capture the historical importance of the Terror. The real significance of the Terror is the manner in which it seems to prefigure the political violence of the modern world. The French revolutionaries were only the first to find themselves driven to systematic political violence as the goals of their revolution receded. Many others have followed in this path. Since revolutionary republicanism did not acknowledge any institution or tradition as inherently legitimate, there could be no legal restraint on its actions. The sovereign will of the people could not be constrained, and so anything was possible since nothing had inherent value. The temptation to coerce fellow citizens to the new millennium was impossible to resist, and this was intensified by the very openness of the republican ideal. The combination of limitless ambition and absence of specific goals meant the republic was without restraints; it could and did become monstrous.

In 1905, Georges Clemenceau, the one-time mayor of the twelfth *arrondissement* of Paris during the commune, future minister of the interior who would fire on striking workers, and latterly premier of France in the First World War, declared the revolution 'a bloc'. By this he meant that one could not disaggregate the elements of the French revolution to choose the features one found attractive. It came as one piece: popular mobilisation, anti-clericalism and terror, as well as the soundly respectable chamber of 1789. He had little time for self-indulgent regret at the violence that had proven necessary to achieve the goals of the revolution. The revolution was 'mother of us all', and you do not criticise your mother. At the other end of the twentieth century such intellectual blackmail can not be tolerated. The horrors of the twentieth century have made the rejection of political violence an intellectual and moral imperative, and undermined any lingering thoughts about the creative potential of violent action. For us, if the revolution really is a bloc, then the revolution must be rejected. If the aspiration to citizenship really does have the murderous logic attributed to it by its critics, then citizenship is a hollow ideal. If the hope of overcoming the alienation and self-estrangement of modern life leads inexorably to terror, then modern persons might be better advised simply to reconcile themselves to their fate. Better oppressed and estranged than to become a terrorist.

A possible republic

Republicanism would seem to be trapped in an appalling paradox. It proposes citizenship as the antidote to the tendencies toward the atomisation of society and alienation of the individual generated by capitalist economics and bourgeois society. Citizenship is a limited and

moderate response to the problem of modernity. It does not reject it; instead, it tries to nuance it, to capture its dynamism to produce flourishing polities. Republicanism tries to create a privileged space within the modern world. It does not promise complete social equality nor absolute justice in economic affairs, rather it brackets those spheres in favour of a political identity that will compensate for and, ideally, transcend those other inadequacies. Through participation in the sovereign power to make the law, individuals can be returned to themselves as dignified autonomous human beings. The cruel irony is that by bracketing society and economics in this way, by restraining itself to questions of politics, republicanism absolutises political identity. The demands of citizenship, posed in this uncontextualised way, can eliminate all other claims from public consideration. Terror occurs when the pure ideal of citizenship meets an economic or social limit that it cannot acknowledge, when the people are given liberty and still insist on bread. Like Robespierre presiding over the Festival of the Supreme Being even as the revolutionary tribunal accelerated its killing, the impulse to create meaningful political identity can become a deadly, self-regarding cult.

The dynamic within republicanism that threatens to pervert its own commitment to liberty has drawn attention from a number of political thinkers. Directly after the revolution, Benjamin Constant argued that it had failed because it had not respected what he termed the difference between the liberty of the ancients and that of the moderns. Constant did not deny the importance of citizenship, indeed he argued that no version of liberty is possible without the commitment of citizens to defend it. However, he asserted that the private enjoyment of particular choices was the more essential idea of liberty for modern people. Isaiah Berlin formalised this insight with his famous argument that no version of what he called 'positive liberty' is coherent. Positive liberty he defined as any particular definition of liberty, such as the equation of liberty with national independence. Independence might be a good in itself, but it was not liberty. Only negative liberty respects and protects the element of choice between competing moral goods that is essential to any real enjoyment of liberty. Berlin's argument asserts that if people are only free to follow the laws, then they are not free at all. It is when the laws are silent that liberty can be exercised.

Republicanism would thus seem doubly damned. Its positive ideal of citizenship offends against negative liberty (no one can be free to refuse to be a citizen), and its inherent dynamic threatens even its own ideals. The inherent logic of a republic is so perverse that the republic is an impossible régime. The difficulties facing citizenship in modern conditions are so profound that it is almost incredible that republics ever

existed. Again paradoxically, it is the very impossibility of the republican model of citizenship that is its saving grace. Republican citizenship is completely unspecified. As we have seen this can have the most deleterious effects; however, it does not have to have these effects. The open demand for civic commitment allows communities to interpret it as they see fit. Republicanism has no determining positive ideal; it demands that citizens engage in public, but is neutral on all the great ethical issues at the heart of modernity. If Berlin demands choice between competing moral goods as an indication of liberty, then no régime is more free than the republic. The republic demands that everyone be a citizen, but the burden of that citizenship is precisely to choose one's side and express it in public. The liberal can guide his or her action by determined rights, the republicans choose their values and risk them in every debate with their fellow citizens.

The unspecified nature of republican citizenship also leaves the revolutionary republican tradition uniquely open to historical contingency. It is at moments like the French revolution, when a population tries and inevitably fails to create a republican polity, that the republican tradition takes concrete form. It is precisely at the intersection of the theoretical demand for a pristine citizenship with the historical efforts to create citizenship that a possible republicanism was created. These concrete images of the republican ideal are necessarily provisional and open to the most intense negotiation; however, they allow republicanism to be more than an aspiration and give it coherence over time. In effect, there are two aspects to the relationship of French republicanism to the revolution. The first is the romance of the aspiration to escape from the conditions of social and economic life; the second is the creation of a specific tradition in the contingencies of political life.

The inheritance of these contingencies to republicanism is too rich and diverse to enumerate fully, but even by looking at only some of the features of historical republicanism, we can see the importance of these contingent moments to the creation of the tradition. The republican has always been a popular régime, associated with the lower classes and their aspiration for equality. This is because the first republicans in the revolution were the *sans-culottes* of Paris. In the summer of 1791, King Louis XVI attempted to abandon Paris and rally a counter-revolutionary movement. After his recapture, the National Assembly decided to brush over his flight and attempt to conciliate him. The *sans-culottes*, the popular radicals of Paris, inspired by the Cordelier Club, instead denounced him and called for the republic. Their campaign was unsuccessful, but a year later they and their allies from the national guard around the country would forcibly remove the monarch by storming the

Louvre palace. The republic was declared a month later by a convention which was called to give moral force to the result of the popular rebellion. The republic was the child of the Paris radicals, and its egalitarianism therefore mirrored their own. The sans-culottes also bequeathed a very direct interpretation of the doctrine of popular sovereignty. In the French republican tradition the people retain sovereignty; it is not located in the constituted bodies. The direct action of citizens always has legitimacy; therefore, a French jury is extremely reluctant to convict José Bové for having blown up a McDonalds. While the act was clearly against the law, the sovereign right of the people to represent themselves in the most efficacious manner is understood to be above the details of any law created not by the people, in any case, but by their representatives. Legality is never an important principle within a revolutionary tradition.

Republicanism inherited far more from the revolution than it contributed to it. Republicanism became a universal tradition, one that sought to appeal to all political communities, because of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Rights had nothing to do with republicanism; rights were a feature of the liberal tradition. One did not have to be a citizen to have rights, even foreigners in a polity enjoyed them. Moreover, the declaration was promulgated long before republicanism acquired any political significance. Rights were declared to be universal and the republic inherited the Declaration, and so had to accommodate it within its practice. The conjunction of the aspiration to citizenship and the language of rights created a model of political rights that was entirely novel and would have the most long-term effects. Jacobinism provided the most comprehensive model for citizenship and for actual political activity. The Jacobin network of clubs all over the country, communicating with one another, co-ordinating their action, and acting practically to create a republic on the ground, became the central historical image of what republicanism demanded even though the inspirations for Jacobinism went far beyond republicanism. Where republicanism could not provide a model for citizenship, the revolution provided actual examples.

The effects of these contingencies on the features of revolutionary republicanism were not all as positive as the co-optation of the language of rights. The only limit on the will of the people that was acknowledged to be legitimate was nature. One could not legislate against gravity, mathematics or biology. Biology was to be destiny for one half of the human race. Citizenship was understood to be a male prerogative because of the role of women as wives and mothers. By a curiously circular logic, masculinity came to be understood in terms of citizenship and citizenship in terms of masculinity. Joan Scott has analysed just how inhibiting this

identification of masculinity and citizenship was to the emergence of a French feminist movement.³ This particular moment in the history of gender became deeply inscribed in the republican tradition, so much so that women were not allowed the national suffrage in France until 1944. However, with this important exception, the content given to revolutionary republicanism has proved to be remarkably fruitful. For instance, slavery was abolished in 1794, largely in response to the efforts of the slaves in the colonies to free themselves, and so opposition to slavery has been an unquestioned element of French republicanism since. Revolutionary republicanism as a tradition has provided a complex set of exemplars and ideas through which subsequent political movements have been able to understand themselves.

Taken as a whole, French republicanism divides into two main traditions, revolutionary and institutional. The revolutionary strand divides, in turn, into an historical movement and a theoretical position. The richness and complexity of French republicanism derives from the interactions and relationships between the various elements of the tradition. It is impossible to represent this tradition as an ideology. It is far better understood as a form of life, an ecology within which a varied set of resources exist from which citizens can construct their political lives. It is not a stable world. The revolutionary demand for a transcending form of citizenship always threatens to subvert the institutions of the republic and even the historical ideals of the tradition. For much of the twentieth century, indeed, the revolutionary moment was lost to institutional republicanism and instead was found in the communist tradition. French republicanism survived this, and still offers us a strong and vibrant perspective from which to understand the modern world and act within it.

The victory of the French soccer team in the World Cup of 1998 illustrated the health of the republican tradition. The multi-ethnic nature of the team reflected the extraordinary abilities of republican France to integrate new citizens; the team was an affront to any idea of ethnicity. Even more telling was the way in which the victory was celebrated. The crowds that spilled onto the streets of Paris chanted slogans of political identity as they massed around the Arc de Triomphe. A visitor to Paris in July of 1998, who had somehow managed to remain unaware of sport, could have been forgiven for thinking another revolution was under way. '*Zidane président*' and '*tous ensemble ... tous ensemble*' could have been taken as cries in support of a revolutionary leadership and reminders of the sovereignty of the people. Looking around, he or she would recognise yet another new version of the people taking possession of the streets of the capital. Not this time the furniture makers of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine or the members of the Cordelier club crossing the river from their

neighbourhood on the left bank; instead, these were *banlieusards* who jumped on the *Métro* at the final whistle. The children and grandchildren of Polish, Tunisian, Algerian and Italian immigrants took possession of the capital as the provincial national guards had in 1792. What was new was the object that they occupied. The crowd did not storm the Bastille; political power was not in question. Instead, it occupied the fashionable western end of Paris, occupying the site of cultural rather than political dominance. Even in a post-modern world of representation, the republican tradition continues to inspire.

Notes

¹ Of course, not every feature of French life is a reflection of republicanism. Scholars identify five other political traditions in the construction of the polity: legitimism, orléanism, bonapartism, liberalism and socialism. The right-wing nationalist and communist traditions have traditionally been more oppositional. John Steinbeck's *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* satirises the varieties of royalism.

² The figures are derived from Donald Greer, *The Incidence of Terror during the French Revolution: A statistical interpretation* (Cambridge MA, 1935).

³ Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge MA, 1996).