

A Civic Republican Primer

What Is Civic-Republicanism?

I must have found at least a dozen occasions during the Bush years, and especially during the 2008 presidential campaign, to repeat some variant of this claim:

"American conservatives cannot reconcile their yearning for an ordered, almost sacred liberty with their obeisance to every whim and riptide of corporate-capitalist investment that dissolves and disrupts the ordered liberty they claim to cherish."

Conservative thinkers and political leaders have not always and everywhere been so committed ideologically to corporate capital (or so lavishly bought by it). But their alternative sources of strength have often proved to be even more retrograde, whether in reactionary religious doctrines or in racist presumptions about the proper bases of social order.

Yet many people who are not conservative in these ways do respect and even yearn for a liberty ordered by deeply shared beliefs and virtues that conservatives defend. We wonder how to strike the appropriate balance between a liberalism of individual rights and a republicanism of mutual obligations and of shared faith and disciplines that are necessary to sustain it.

To characterize my understanding of that appropriate balance, let me give the floor to Dan K, a philosopher and frequent commenter at Talking Points Memo, who parsed my comment, quoted above, about conservatives' and others' quest for ordered liberty. Following Dan's comment are links to my work on, or gropings toward, civic republicanism in several venues:

I understood Jim Sleeper's point this way: The term "ordered liberty" is not supposed to be a synonym for some form of libertarianism, but a synonym for what is variously called "civic republicanism", "civic humanism" or "classical republicanism".

The contrast between this outlook and the Republican Party's approaches of today is that civic republicanism envisions an actual republic with an actual functioning government and an actual rule of law. It places some reasonable restraints on both individual *and* corporate behavior but allows a fairly high degree of liberty within that framework, and it is capable of organizing human energies in constructive ways to advance the public good.

Civic republicanism also emphasizes the importance of an enlightened humanistic education and the cultivation of the intellectual and moral virtues necessary to turn the slavish and dependent human beasts fit only for life under despotic governments into self-governing and self-directed citizens.

Something like this ideal is supposed by some to be the founding constitutional ideology of the American republic, while others put more weight on a fairly similar, England-derived classical liberalism. Civic republicanism is supposed to derive from various forms of Roman, and then Italian thinking about government.

"Obeisance to the whims of capital" is supposed to refer to the later capital-R Republican Party's infatuation with laissez-faire economics - an economically extreme manifestation of classical liberalism, and something much closer to what we now think of as "libertarianism".

The liberty here is seen by its critics as anarchic, disordered and fundamentally destructive of sustaining traditions and both public and private virtue. It elevates some men to positions of extreme power and unaccountability, and reduces others to servitude. It destroys the personal virtues of republican citizens, by tempting and corrupting them with the satisfaction of every base desire that unrestrained commerce can supply, and by reducing many citizens to the status of mere "workers". It promotes debt and dependency over frugality and self-reliance. And by fostering tremendous inequalities in wealth, and the inequalities of power those bring, laissez-faire "liberty" makes it virtually impossible to sustain a society of self-governing, equal citizens.

Many neo-conservative figures have purported to be defenders of civic republicanism, and indeed that is borne out by some of their more philosophical writings. which are very historically-oriented and look back for political and moral models to the classical epoch and the ancient virtues.

But neo-conservatism as a movement and ideology is really quite different in character, and the civic republican rhetoric is a bit of a crock, dressing up plutocratic domination and civic irresponsibility in some film-company classical costumes.

Domestically, neoconservative rhetoric amounts to little more than an excuse for cutting back social programs, supposedly seen as antithetical to the cultivation of republican virtues of self-reliance, industry and temperance. But it offers no program for building republican institutions, promoting citizenship, lifting people out of an impoverished and subordinated condition, extending competent self-government, devoting resources to the public good or reining in the abuses of wealth.

And the whole domestic "republic" of neo-conservative fantasy is yoked to a modern industrial state engine driven by the lust for power, aggrandizement and domination, and the satisfactions of the ego that go with them. It trumpets a quite different set of classical virtues - an arrogant Nietzschean dynamism, of the kind promoted by Robert Kaplan, that is quite alien to the modesty and conservatism of republican thought.

The gulf between neo-conservatism and civic republicanism is as vast as the gulf between the arrogant character Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* and the modest Roman farmer, or the stoic Marcus Aurelius.

Major Papers on Civic Republicanism

[Neoconservatives and the American Republic](#). From a talk at Georgetown University, March, 2005
[In Defense of Civic Culture](#), The Progressive Foundation, 1998.
[American National Identity in a Post-National Age](#), essay for *One America?*, an anthology, 2000
[Should American Journalism Make Us Americans?](#), a discussion paper for Harvard's Shorenstein Center, 1998.
[Religion In its Place](#), *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, republished from a contribution to a symposium at the Maxwell School, Syracuse University, 2000. One of my TPM columns, "[A Quiet Read in a Dark Time](#)" (April 1, 2009) flags an unlikely but revelatory exploration of "coercive non-violence" as a viable strategy for Palestinians and Israelis.
Another TPM column of the same day, "[Coercive Non-Violence Isn't What You May Think](#)," follows up by rebutting misunderstandings of the strategy as "pacifist" or "passive." It's anything but that, requiring as much disciplined courage and energy as armies.

Civic Manifestos and Threnodies

[Civic Liberals and Race](#), *Boston Globe*, 1992
[A D-Day meditation on my Dad's generation](#), *Daily News*, 1994
[Duty Bound: Portrait of a young civic republican, 1940](#), *The American Prospect*, 1996
[By Gradual Paces](#), some warnings from the Founders and Edward Gibbon on the eve of Bush's 2004 re-election, *The American Prospect*, 2004
[Ronald Reagan as the Jack Keivorkian of the civic-republican body politic](#), *New Haven Review of Books*, 1997
[Perfect Knowledge and Civic Decline](#), a meditation on the popularity of the teen Guru Mahara-Ji, *The Boston Phoenix*, 1973
[What Jury Duty Should and Shouldn't Be](#), *Dissent*, 2008