1

Beginnings

At a challenging time marked by global transformations and political uncertainty, and at a moment when modern liberalism has discredited one enemy and is embattled with another, its history, character, and prospects have become ever more urgent. The relationship between republicanism and liberalism, which emerged as a central issue for historians of modern political thought some decades ago, presently can aid such a consideration.

At first, this subject defined an important axis of debate among political historians, especially as they discovered republicanism as an alternative to the liberal tradition in colonial America and the early republic.[1] Studies of the links joining liberalism to an older republicanism

[1] See, for instance, Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998; J. G. A. Pocock, "Civic Humanism and Its Role in Anglo-American Thought," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 80–103; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975; Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 29 (1972), pp. 49–80; Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 29 (1982), pp. 334–356; Joyce Appleby, "Liberalism and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly*, 49:1 (1976), pp. 3–26; Joyce Appleby, "The Social Origins of American Revolutionary Ideology," *Journal of American History*, 64:4 (1978), pp. 935–958; Joyce Appleby,

then migrated to political theory and to comparative, cross-national investigations. Animated by strong normative motivations, these works have taken what is, by now, a familiar form, where one or the other is endorsed as the superior doctrine and as a better guide to contemporary politics and society.[2] Speaking directly to the standing

Liberalism and Republicanism in Historical Imagination, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992; Dorothy Ross, "The Liberal Tradition Revisited and the Republican Tradition Addressed," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, pp. 116–131; Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited," *American Historical Review*, 87:3 (1982), pp. 629–664; Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 45:1 (1988), pp. 3–32; John P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986; James Oakes, "From Republicanism to Liberalism: Ideological Change and the Crisis of the Old South," *American Quarterly*, 37:4 (1985), pp. 551–571; Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation," *American Quarterly*, 37:4 (1985), pp. 474–495; Lance Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revised: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 43:1 (1986), pp. 3–19; Richard C. Sinopoli, "Liberalism, Republicanism, and the Constitution," *Polity*, 19 (1987), pp. 331–352; Morton Horwitz, "Republicanism and Liberalism in American Constitutional Thought," *William and Mary Law Review*, 29 (1987), pp. 57–74; Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, 79:1 (1992), pp. 11–38; Milton M. Klein, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench, eds., *The Republican Synthesis Revisited: Essays in Honor of George Athan Billias*, Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1992; Michael P. Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition*, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996; James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; Quinter Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[2] Jeffrey Isaac, "Republicanism vs. Liberalism? A Reconsideration," *History of Political Thought*, 9 (1988), pp. 349–377; Frank Michelman, "Law's Republic," *Yale Law Journal*, 97:8 (1988), pp. 1493–1537; Cass R. Sunstein, "Beyond the Republican Revival," *Yale Law Journal*, 97:8 (1988), pp. 1539–1590; Philip Pettit, "Liberalism and Republicanism," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 28 (1993), pp. 162–189; Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 21–30; Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994; M. N. S. Sellers, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: Republicanism, Liberalism and the Law*, New York: New York University Press, 1998; Stéphane Chauvier, *Libéralisme et Républicanisme*, Cahiers de Philosophie de l'Université

and possibilities of liberalism today, such discussions consider a range of issues that include tensions joining virtue and self-interest, the common and the personal, sovereignty and representation, authority and freedom, law and ethics.

We contribute to this ongoing conversation by way of a historical and textual strategy. In coming to terms with liberal beginnings, we examine the association – or is it a bond? – connecting liberalism and republicanism. We revisit the origins and development of liberal thought to think about how it ascended, despite many challenges, to today's leading position. In so doing, we distance ourselves from an important strand in Anglo-American political theory stressing the disagreements, even the antagonism, dividing republicanism from liberalism.

This literature proceeds along conceptual, methodological, and normative lines based on the assumption of two distinct paradigms. Whereas one is identified by strong notions of citizenship, tight connections between law and ethics, military valor, a sacrificial logic, civic religion, and the priority of collective life, the other is portrayed as devoted to the protection of individual rights, religious liberty, limited government, rule by consent, a division between the right and the good, the heterogeneity of interests, and the centrality of legislative representation. The conceptual line compares and contrasts the two, identifying such distinctions as freedom as noninterference from freedom as nondomination.[3] The methodological weighs up the balance between continuity and rupture in the history of political thought.[4] The normative asks us to evaluate and choose.[5]

de Caen, Caen: Centre de Philosophie de l'Université de Caen, 2000. For a fine comparative assessment of liberalism in the age of revolution, see Mark Hulliung, *Citizens and Citoyens: Republicans and Liberals in America and France*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.

[3] Pettit, *Republicanism*, pp. 51–80, 297–298; Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From Psychology to a Politics of Agency*, New York: Polity Press, 2001.

[4] Quentin Skinner provides a clear defense on the benefits of the study of discontinuities in the history of modern political thought. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, p. 111. But see also Pettit, who refers to the "displacement" of the republican concept of freedom in favor of the liberal one as a "*coup d'état*," a "usurpation." Pettit, *Republicanism*, pp. 41–50.

[5] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, p. 120; Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism*, trans. Antony Shugaar, New York: Hill and Wang, 2002, pp. 12, 64, 95, 102–103.

Presented as mutually exclusive repertoires of ideas, with the one precluding the other, many scholars line up in opposed camps.[6] Republicanism and liberalism are said to have emerged from particular wellsprings, each isolated and insulated from the other, as two "incommensurate" vocabularies.[7] Their historical relations are constructed as a zero-sum game. The victory of the one must imply the defeat of the other.

We reject this false antagonism. We refuse the tendency to read history backward. It is a mistake, we show, to stylize the past as if each tradition possessed a wholly distinct genealogy, thus constituting entirely separate paradigms. By contrast, our burden is to demonstrate that liberalism is not external to the history of republicanism. Rather, we argue, liberalism as we know it was born from the spirit of republicanism, from attempts to adapt republicanism to the political, economic, and social revolutions of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth.

Between 1750 and 1830 – not earlier or later – liberalism took a doctrinal and institutional form that has endured. Liberalism first became conscious of itself as a particular political and constitutional doctrine when the most promising and viable alternative to monarchy was republicanism. Over the course of this period, antimonarchical discourse was predominantly republican.[8] Yet, paradoxically, just as republicans were presented with an unprecedented possibility to limit or even replace the monarchical order on both sides of the Atlantic, a dramatic form of innovation was initiated that soon transcended established republican boundaries.

A close look at this pivotal moment reveals a rich, complex interpenetration joining the two and suggests that underscoring the enclosed individuality of each is far too limited. Instead of simply thinking of republican and liberal ideas as rival, external each to the other, we demonstrate that what we recognize today as liberalism in fact was

[6] Of course, as we discuss in this chapter, we are not alone in examining the close ties often connecting the two traditions.

[7] J. G. A. Pocock, "Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political Thought," in *Virtue, Commerce, History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 47.

[8] Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 22–23.

constituted as a conceptual hybrid both against and within republican terminology, ideas, and aspirations. In tracing this process, we show how republicanism was transformed radically from inside and by introducing new elements from without. Republican discourse, concepts, and motivations were not abandoned but were adapted. By investing new meanings, arguments, and justifications into existing ideas and political forms, a doctrine for a modern republic was fashioned, the core of which was surprisingly liberal.

Without compromising republican principles or abandoning republican language, this tradition unrevised could not have grappled successfully with a series of pressing problems. To remedy this circumstance, contemporary thinkers transformed existing republican resources and, where necessary, supplemented from outside republicanism's conceptual and institutional boundaries, introducing new principles and arguments drawn from other intellectual and philosophical currents, especially those inspired by John Locke and natural-law thinking. These amendments and synergies produced constitutional liberalism, not as an external alternative to classical republicanism, but, in significant measure, as a doctrine incubated within it. Political liberalism burst from the shell of a republican chrysalis.

The more republicanism sought to retrofit itself for modern conditions, the more liberal it became. The more liberal republicanism became, the more its relevance was lost. From the middle of the nineteenth century, in a complex process, liberalism's entanglement with republican thought began to bring their relationship to an end. Liberalism subsumed and transformed key elements of what previously had been a distinct doctrine of government. As a freestanding model, republicanism disappeared.

I

The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed momentous transformations, not just in large-scale economic, social, and political structures, but in the ideas and values that could be utilized to make sense of this new world. Even before the American and French revolutions, the western and northern parts of Europe, as well as North America, wrestled with unprecedented conditions – centralized states, formalized law, commercial capitalism and a new middle

class, religious pluralism, a distinct sphere of civil society, global warfare, colonial conquest, and monarchical insecurity. Concurrently, the West experienced the emergence of innovative currents of thought, including secularism or at least limitations to the sphere of religion, an enlarged status for individual persons, and universal natural rights, and, more broadly, systematic rationality, critical thinking, and scientific methods. This constellation generated a powerful, anxious political question: could a free republic be fashioned and sustained under these circumstances?

This question was double-edged. For just as humankind was developing new capacities to think and act freely and to control, perhaps master, the environment, it also had to come to terms with profound losses. A remarkable efflorescence of expectations went hand in hand with the palpable demise of beliefs, manners, and behaviors that had been thought necessary to underpin the growth of liberty. The more modern the world, the more individuals might become free. Yet the same modernity was generating contrary forces threatening this very prospect.

A wide array of thinkers confronted this predicament. How they did so is our subject. From this group, we closely study Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, Germaine de Staël, and Benjamin Constant. Writing in the diverse settings of Scotland, the American colonies and the new United States, and France, they combined in their profound reflections originality with influence in tackling the vexing and rapidly changing features of the modern world. Their texts considered a breathtaking range of themes – literature, moral philosophy, aesthetics, political economy, history, law, and geography. The quest to understand the conditions required for the exercise of freedom in a viable republic unified their different explorations. Of course, they were hardly the only figures searching for answers. Other important intellectuals, including Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, Baron de Montesquieu, Marquis de Condorcet, and Emmanuel Sieyès, also merit detailed examination.

The group we consider, however, was selected for three principal reasons. Even at the time, these persons stood out as preeminent guides to modern politics and policy. Their writings were explicitly motivated to understand the prospects of republican institutions and orientations in rapidly changing circumstances. Each of their interventions in

public life powerfully shaped the content, terms, and vectors of political discussion and debate in that period.

In addition to the here and now, they pursued a more general analytical, normative, and abstract question. What, they wished to know, can republicanism be? Though motivated primarily by the most pressing contemporary questions, they offered broader theoretical reflections regarding the nature of republicanism as a type of regime. They sought to identify constitutive norms and arrangements according to which it might be possible to distinguish republicanism from other types of rule, and between genuine and inauthentic republics.

Our selection further was guided by the way the work of the six authors has been considered by historians of ideas. There are two divergent, even stylized readings. For some, each should be read as a staunch republican, situated within civic humanism. Yet for others, indeed for the majority, they are treated as canonical, even foundational, liberal thinkers.[9]

In focusing on these writers, we began by wishing to explore the meaning and implications of such apparently contradictory characterizations. Soon we discerned that these competing interpretations capture real but only partial truths. We came to realize that they are symptomatic of a deeper and more integral association. As we will see in each chapter, the republican and liberal readings find much textual justification. Close attention to each author reveals a republican language of virtue, corruption, patriotism, and political ethics. Each elaborated characteristically republican themes, seeking to discern what constitutes a good polity. But these thinkers also significantly transcended the bounds of republicanism. Thus, it also is right to call them liberals, a term, of course, not then in use. Unlike classical republicans, they stressed individual interests, freedoms and rights, government by consent, the contingent sources of political activity, a wish to protect citizens from potentially predatory rulers, and skepticism toward organized political authority.

[9] We discuss these assignments in each of the substantive chapters that follow. For alternative analytical narratives of the liberal tradition, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, New York: Knopf, 2004; and Paul Starr, *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism*, New York: Perseus, 2007.

Tracking these concerns, they invented institutional forms, legal arrangements, and ways of talking about politics. By transforming political imagination about society, authority, and power in their time, they initiated liberal beginnings. This originality thus impelled us to revisit their writings. Refusing a simple binary choice, we decided to focus rather on the intersecting trajectories of republicanism and liberalism, all the while remaining attentive to variations in how each thinker navigated this shifting ground.

Our reading has implications. The book focuses primarily on the origins and development of liberalism as a quest to make a republic for modern times. In so doing, we do not proceed as if liberalism is a hermetically sealed, freestanding body of thought with distinct institutional applications that contends with rival doctrines and practices. This historical interpretation undercuts an artificial opposition demanding a stark alternative: opt for liberalism, or for one or another of its competitors. After a review of current historiographical trends that exhibit this excessively severe portrait, we will see how studying the beginnings of political liberalism not only can overcome this choice but also can advance a distinctive argument about the relevance of our reading to urgent problems today, warranting a reconceptualization and renewal of political liberalism.

II

Distinguished scholars of republicanism as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Gordon Wood, J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Philip Pettit have portrayed a blunt conceptual opposition between two distinct intellectual and political projects that competed with each other.[10] Further, their depiction claims that liberalism decisively defeated and

[10] Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Present*, New York: Penguin Books, 1961, pp. 143–172; Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 424, 545–546, 550–551; J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*, New York: Atheneum, 1971, p. 144; J. G. A. Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 3 (1972), pp. 120, 124–129; Pocock, "Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political Thought," pp. 48–50; J. G. A. Pocock, "Cambridge School and Scottish Enlightenment," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 244–250; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, pp. ix–x, 10, 12, 84–99; Pettit, *Republicanism*, pp. 297–303. Also, see Rowland

replaced republicanism.[11] Viewing this development elegiacally, these authors lament liberalism's victory and wistfully long for a republican renewal.[12]

The most ambitious recent elaboration of this approach is Quentin Skinner's vigorous *Liberty before Liberalism*. Conceptually, it insists that a radical difference distinguishes liberalism from an earlier republicanism. Methodologically, it offers an account of a historical disjunction. Building on his 1997 inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, this tightly argued text chronicles "the ideological triumph of liberalism" and the concurrent "fall within Anglophone political theory of what I have labeled a neo-roman understanding of civil liberty."[13] Informing this treatment is a particular version of the history of ideas based on an assertion that each to the other presents "a rival view of liberty," "a conflict within our inherited traditions."[14] Normatively, Skinner insists that the ultimate "liberal hegemony" has been very costly.[15] A better politics and practice of liberty understood as the absence of dependence has been sacrificed to a thinner, less robust version of human freedom as the absence of interference.[16]

Skinner's retrospective excavation, an effort to "re-enter the intellectual world we have lost," thus imagines a fateful historical "choice"

Betthoff, "Independence and Attachment, Virtue and Interest: From Republican Citizen to Free Enterpriser," in *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin*, ed. Richard L. Bushman, Boston: Little, Brown, 1979, pp. 97–124; Michael Zuckerman, "A Different Thermidor: The Revolution beyond the American Revolution," in *Transformation of Early American History: Society, Authority and Ideology*, ed. James A. Henretta, New York: Knopf, 1991, pp. 170–193.

[11] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Penguin Books, 1963, pp. 215–281; Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, pp. 606–615; Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century," pp. 130–131, 134; Pocock, "Cambridge School and Scottish Enlightenment," pp. 240–243; John M. Murrin, "Self-Interest Conquers Patriotism: Republicans, Liberals, and Indians Reshape the Nation," in *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits*, ed. Jack P. Greene, New York: New York University Press, 1987, pp. 224–229; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, pp. 96–99; Pettit, *Republicanism*, pp. 12, 21, 41–50.

[12] For a critical discussion of the normative claims of republicanism in relation to liberalism, see Alan Patten, "The Republican Critique of Liberalism," *British Journal of Political Science*, 26:1 (1996), pp. 25–44.

[13] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, pp. x, ix.

[14] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, pp. x, 119.

[15] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, p. x.

[16] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, pp. 84, 92–93, 119.

in which "we in the modern West have embraced" the liberal tradition at the expense of the republican.[17] He asks, "Did we choose rightly?" He coyly responds, "I leave it to you to ruminate."[18] This is the basis of his desire to choose, once again, but more wisely, as if the game of selection simply continues.

We challenge this account. The two do not constitute entirely separate realms. Skinner has underplayed how both in fact are complex, as are their ties to each other. When Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson recognized the centrality of commercial society and how it affected republican institutions, values, and practices, they did not turn to a preexisting, fully formed liberal paradigm. Rather, they articulated a new theory of politics while remaining loyal to the spirit of republicanism. In so doing, they became liberal pioneers. When, as men of affairs, Madison and Paine confronted the immediate and pressing responsibility of instituting the globe's first modern republic – a task they expressed in republican terms – they actually established the world's first liberal regime. When Staël and Constant became disillusioned with the revolutionary excesses of classical republicanism, which they previously had endorsed and extolled, their constitutional proposals emplaced at the center of civic discourse in continental Europe a strong concern for individual rights and freedoms. Despite temporal, geographic, and intellectual differences, in each of these instances key features and aspects of republicanism were transmuted into what soon became a distinct liberal doctrine of government. This liberalism, emerging out of republicanism, came to occupy the space that the latter had not been able to fill after the collapse of monarchy.

There was, in short, no simple or radical break in which the one replaced the other. By averring that there was such a clear-cut substitution, Skinner stripped from liberalism key aspects of its republican lineage. To the contrary, modern liberalism was deeply influenced by republicanism. As republican philosophers sought to renovate the ancient republic for contemporary conditions, and as they struggled to modernize it, they invented ideas and institutions that transformed classical republicanism into what we know as liberalism. This effort was not primarily a planned change or, as Skinner argues, a malevolent

[17] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, pp. x, 119.
[18] Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, p. 120.