Republicanism in Travail

by Hiram Caton

Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution, by Paul A. Rahe; University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

THE REPUBLICAN IMPULSE in politics seems to be animated by two abiding imperatives. The first is to free individuals from arbitrary encroachments of government. The second is that citizenship, as participation in public affairs, has some special efficacy toward human fulfilment. The two notions are often blurred, as happens in the contention that democracy is the only government that provides a reasonable measure of decency and dignity to all.

These impulses so dominate democratic politics that political competition is often expressed in terms of these core values. As a result, free governments are just those in which complaints of oppression, arbitrary exclusion, discrimination and deceit are most vocal and frequent, no matter how great the freedom nor how broad the participation.

Another republican complaint is that the institutions of representative government are so dominated by party that they effectively disenfranchise the vast majority. Such republicans deny that elected officials exemplify energetic citizen participation; they stigmatise parliamentarians as a breed apart, subservient to party bosses and incapable of responding to the public that they purport to represent. Republicans want to restructure government to give the people an authentic voice. They generate numerous schemes for increased

participation, including, characteristically, citizen initiated referenda.

Paul Rahe, a historian at the University of Tulsa, has written a 1200-page book to express his own discontent. He complains that the American deliberative process, especially a Congress eager to avoid the controversial ground of major sociopolitical change, has relinquished to the judiciary its prerogative to make law.

Conservatives castigate Supreme Court dominance as "administrative despotism", as Rahe styles it. Liberals on the other hand applaud rule from above because they view the Court as the instrument for enlightened social choices that the Great Unwashed, in their ignorance and timidity, would never make.

In stating a case for popular sovereignty, Rahe doesn't deny judicial activism all merit. His constitutionalism is sufficiently flexible to appreciate that rule from above may be warranted in some circumstances. On questions of substance, he endorses the most far-reaching decree of the Warren Court, the abolition of racial segregation. But the effect of continued administrative despotism, he believes, is to undermine the principal rationale of free government – the popular exercise of the sovereign power. The ideology of judicial activism discards as obsolete the constitutional wisdom on which the nation was founded. Rahe wishes to retrieve that wisdom so that it may once again inform the nation's business. He also wishes to awaken the appetite for citizen virtue by providing models of its exercise and effectiveness.

If in these days of media dominance a book might stimulate an appetite for politics, this readable, graphic study should do the trick. Neither the long gestation nor the enormous scholarly dedication has robbed the prose of its spontaneity and verve.

THE FIRST PART of the study is dedicated to retrieving the Greek conception and practice of politics, featuring Athens and Sparta as the rival alternatives. The second elucidates the novel politics of the modern classics from Machiavelli to Locke. The work culminates in an examination of the formative period of the American republic, roughly from 1750 to 1800.

The thread connecting the whole is an examination of the Greek notion that man is a political animal, and the devolution of that concept in the practice of modern republics. By understanding how the citizen came to be privatised, Rahe hints, we will understand the causes of the present discontents and perhaps also their remedy.

The description of Greek politics was for me the most rewarding part of the book. The subject has been done many times, yet the author's depiction is fresh. Rahe refuses to soft-pedal on those practices considered repugnant today, and interprets Greek life as a seamless whole dedicated to rearing public-spirited warriors. He shows a virile politics that excluded women from public life, and in Sparta, relegated them to the child-bearing role. But women are not excluded from Rahe's account: he ransacks the sparse sources to convey some sense of their circumstances. Similarly with slavery. This institution freed citizens from unworthy toil, but in Sparta programmed cruelty to slaves was part of the education of young men; Rahe lets the reader feel the human misery that purchased Spartan virtue.

Education to civic virtue was the central concept of Greek democracy. Education was not a training in skills and routines, but a combination of physical culture, musical exercise, and military training meant to instil solidarity, valour and shame. Rahe is especially strong on that embarrassment to classical scholars, homosexual love between youths and their mentors. The homosexual episode in education was believed to enhance warrior solidarity and to lift courage in battle. Another unmodern trait of Greek politics was the low esteem for trade and everything merely mechanical. This was the obverse of devotion to the only activities considered worthy of free men – politics, war, and the celebration of both in poetry and the arts.

This portrait leaves readers in no doubt about what American republicans were rejecting when they rejected the Greek model. In that sense it is integral to the story he tells. But there are loose ends nonetheless, chief among them that the Roman republic receives no thematic attention.

The Romans were certainly political animals, but their social order differed markedly from the Greek. Romans prized the agricultural household as the locus of private life *and* the source of the attachments upon which political virtue was based. The private and political integrity of the free male was rooted in his independence as small landowner and *paterfamilias* of a domicile in which his wife enjoyed status and legal rights. For this reason solidarity mediated by homosexual affinities had no place. Luxury and accumulation were honourable, although admonitions against their corrupting influence were ever on the moralist's lips.

Roughly this construction of citizen roots is presupposed in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* and most American writings that elucidate the moral content of civil society. This is unsurprising since Rome, rather than Greece, bequeathed the paradigms that dominated European political thought.

Though Americans rejected it, the Spartiate model enjoyed a vigorous shadow existence in French political writing, and sprang to life in the French Revolution.

The revolutionaries selected from the Greek model philosophical idealisations of citizen solidarity and devotion to *patrie*, to which all else was subordinate. Of course the attempt to transfer to twenty-five million Frenchmen a model apppropriate to a citizen body of ten thousand led to the first manifestation of mass propaganda, totalitarian terror at home, heroic wars abroad, and finally Napoleonic dominion.

Astonishingly, the French republican episode is not discussed in this long book. Instead Rahe chooses to devote a third of his text to the "Machiavellian moment" as the incubator of modern republicanism. John Pocock used this phrase to identify the Renaissance revival of republicanism and its subsequent diffusion to Britain and America. On his view, the American founding represents the crowning deed of a tradition in which the arms-bearing freeholder was the moral basis of free government. This tradition, which Pocock also calls "civic humanism", is distinct from the Lockean liberal tradition and was, he claims, rather more influential than it.

Rahe does not agree. He espouses the position of Leo Strauss and his students that Machiavelli's thought contains the seed of modern thought generally. He also holds, with many historians, that Pocock overplayed his Machiavelli card. Pocock's statement that the Machiavellian civic humanists were in a "flight from modernity" sums it up: this phrase, though it accurately states the position of civic humanists, cannot describe either the moral or constitutional views of the American founders.

But Rahe seems also to overplay the Machiavelli card. The Florentine's fundamental innovation, he says with Leo Strauss, was to invent political realism, based on the view that moral restraint is ineffective because human beings follow their impulses and appetites; restraint occurs through countervailing impulses, such as fear, awe and pity. It is pointless then for politics to aim for moral virtue or righteousness. The new realistic politics Machiavelli inaugurated, Rahe proposes, is based on institutional fetters that allow maximum latitude for human desires, compatible with a worldly, secular political order. The project is feasible provided that those who superintend it are not checked in their thought or deeds by moral scruples.

The difficulty for this interpretation is that the primary vehicle for the diffusion of tough-minded realism in Europe was not Machiavelli's writings. It was the Society of Jesus.

Founded in 1540, the Jesuits quickly displaced the Dominicans as the guardians of orthodoxy. They soon acquired a reputation for unscrupulous practices and were hated (also among Catholics) for their treachery and intransigence. They substantially influenced royal policy and controlled education in all Catholic nations. They were the architects of a century of wars to restore the faith, guided by their motto, "To the Greater Glory of God".

Jesuit spirituality and achievement constitute a practical refutation of Machiavelli's purported new political science. Central to his revival of the political appetite for glory is his opinion that Christianity "makes men weak" and its converse, that steadfastness amidst the immorality of this world requires the replacement of religion by patriotism. His anti-clericism was fuelled by this belief, which blinded him to the actual politico-moral order that sustained European politics at that juncture. He was unable to discern either the persistence of *homo politicus* in secular orders such as the Knights Templar and religious orders such as the Dominicans and Jesuits, or the potent manliness that religious and secular orders nurtured in Europe. So great was his antipathy to the Church that he could not bring himself to recognise that the Roman Curia had mastered bureaucratic administration; the transfer of these skills to courts was indispensable to the emergence of the modern state.

But the truly cruel irony for "the politician" is that he failed to grasp the conditions for the effective practice of the kind of politics to which he gave his name. Machiavelli had no eye for quiet deeds. He never discussed the formation of organisations that nurture trustworthy, skilled administrators. Although government cannot be conducted without them, there is no recognition of this fact in his writings. Thus he railed at the political dominance of the Church, and was perplexed that it competed successfully with virile princes and often enough tamed them. The answer was simple: in government as in battle, superior organisation usually prevails.

BUREAUCRACIES were fostered by the Church. The effort to construct their counterpart for the Court did not make serious progress until well into the seventeenth century. For most of the republicans in Rahe's story, bureaucracies were the cloven hoof of despotism. Nowhere was this view more vehemently espoused than in revolutionary America. The issue arose in the contest over the Constitution, when civic humanists advocating small-is-beautiful government vigorously opposed the establishment of the federal system. They lost that battle, but won the peace by using Congressional power to keep the executive weak. This stalemate endured until the Civil War finally implemented the semblance of a national government.

Since Rahe agrees with the Federalists that Jeffersonian liberty was incompatible with the requisites of government, it is hard to identify the political wisdom that he wishes to recover. Especially notable is his failure to highlight the singular Machiavellian deed of the founding fathers – launching the myth of British tyranny. For a decade prior to the rupture, political oratory had detected tyranny or the intention to impose it in virtually every Crown act. The Declaration of Independence summarised these allegations in a twenty-seven-count indictment addressed to all reasonable men. On examination, not one of the allegations stands up. No people enjoyed freer government or lower taxes than the revolutionary Americans. To cap this, they were not ashamed to take arms against tyranny even as they held 800,000 human beings in slavery.

One senses that this splendid fraud acutely embarrasses Rahe, as it does most historians. He cannot excuse the myth as the ravings of a people captivated by their own hyperbole, for he holds that the founders fully deliberated their deeds. While he urges that they were Machiavellians, he would not ascribe to them a Machiavellian deed, since that would detract from his glorification of them. Thus the nerve he displayed in his treatment of Greek politics falters and he adopts the wisdom of historians: temporise, evade, consign to footnotes.

This very long book does not persuade me that the malaise of American political culture might find a remedy in the resuscitation of the civic virtue and prudence of the founders. Quite the reverse. Their republicanism was adapted to a republic whose largest city held 50,000 inhabitants and whose citizens numbered about three million. Today the population is 250 million and the scale of life is utterly changed. It is unremarkable that things are out of joint. It is amazing that government of such complexity works at all.

Rahe's study demonstrates that the republican impulse has been a long infatuation with a political romance. The French Revolution showed plainly enough that the ideal was incommensurate with the size of modern populations, not to mention the complexity of activities. By continuing to nurture the myth of self-government, modern democracies lay themselves open to the accusation of hypocrisy.

It is pointless to reproach parliamentarians for not representing citizens. This they cannot do, because there is no citizen persona to represent. Instead there is an enormous interlaced variety of interests, and uncontrollable dynamic elements such as population, climatic change, disease and natural catastrophes. To imagine that reconstituted popular assemblies could even grasp this agenda is far-fetched.

Is administrative despotism the ineluctable residue of the failed republican idea? It depends on how we think of the nerve and muscle of actual government, bureaucracies. Freedom-loving republicans stigmatise them as The Enemy. But this prejudice is optional. Public servants are after all fellow citizens and in the exercise of office participate in the conduct of affairs.

It is on the cards to reconceptualise democracy to acknowledge that bureaucratically organised practice is the workhorse of society. The beginning of that reconceptualisation is at hand in the bureaucrat's code of impartial service. The practice of that code (to the extent that it is practised) is the closest approach that modern democracies make to an articulate conception of the public interest.

Abandoning the republican romance as a public myth will not be easy. If a scholar as learned and canny as Rahe cannot recognise *homo politicus* in the Jesuit, there is little hope for the likes of our republicans and critics of managerialism. However, the unreality of the myth is acute and the rewards of rethinking public service employment as civic participation are potentially great.

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