
Republican Virtue and America

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Republics Ancient and Modern: The Ancient Regime in Classical Greece, by Paul A. Rahe. *Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994. 380 pp. \$22.95.*

Republics Ancient and Modern, Vol. II: New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought, by Paul A. Rahe. *Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994. 490 pp. \$24.95.*

Republics Ancient and Modern, Vol. III: Inventions of Prudence: Constituting the American Regime, by Paul A. Rahe. *Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994. 380 pp. \$19.95.*

When historians look at political regimes they may focus on a number of variables held significant by the people or by the rulers, or they may focus on the circumstances of the regimes and how they affected the world around them. This is especially common today when historians have adopted a comparative methodology. Political philosophers tend to focus on theorists of regimes, their desire to impart architectonic schemes for modifying or improving organized living-together. Hence the political philosopher will most likely dwell on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, rather

than the practices of Athens or Sparta that reflect certain ideas. Of course these lines are often fuzzy, reflecting the prejudices and limitations of the historian or philosopher. In Paul Rahe we have someone educated in both history and philosophy whose deliberate objective is a melding of these crafts. Although his effort is sometimes uneven (as when he deals with the early modern period, for instance) we are treated to a historical overview of the rise of republican virtue and its adaptation to the major historical epochs of political thought.

Rahe follows Montesquieu's *Spirit*

of the *Laws* in noting that various forms of government are shaped and sustained by their own determinative principle: virtue in a republic, honor in a monarchy, fear in a despotism, and equality in a democracy. Of course Montesquieu was following the typologies given to us by Aristotle. But regardless of the thinker and how he may have adapted it to unique circumstances, virtue has been the defining essence of republicanism.

The curiosity of this typology is that only the republic requires goodness in its subjects as the condition for its existence. The honor of the monarch provides the justification for rulership; he may rule over knaves. Fear is reciprocal in a despotism, and transforms subjects into slaves. Despotisms are typically unstable, because fear either turns into hatred or weakens over time. Until modern liberalism, equality was a procedural condition for democracy, not its outcome.

Contrary to popular belief, democracy and republicanism are morally antipathetical. The Greeks understood democracy as a kind of mob rule (*ochlocracy*) or mobocracy. Democracy has no prescriptive value, no moral restraints. It is a procedural technique for arriving at public decisions. But even the Greeks recognized that democracy required a public space for reciprocal formation of opinions, for persuading and being persuaded. The implicit normative assumption of those who have promoted democracy is the rightness of the diffusion of power, the presumptive authority of the many over the few. Its redemptive capacity is a catharsis bound up with

the very process of straining toward consensus. It is consoling in its consensus-building. The individualism proffered by early liberalism was not an effort to extract wisdom from the masses, but acquiescence. A consensus is not a good, only an agreement. "Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong." Why not? Sixty million Germans were.

Attaching the modifier "liberal" to democracy is a modern prejudice from the Enlightenment, an attempt to hedge the likely corruption of democracy by the ambiguous restraint of "liberalism." But liberalism erred in its belief that the catharsis of consensus-building could sustain democracy in the face of a growing bureaucratic state. Under its principle of equality democracy flattens the souls of its citizens for the sake of letting mere procedure determine outcomes. Technocracy has replaced democratic participation with administration, and thereby undermined the very purpose of liberalism. Law, institutions, and structural diffusions of power are not expressions of populism but signs of moral resignation. Indeed, the apolitics of administration and representation generates apathy in the citizens by driving them from the public realm into the private, the realm of mundane necessity.

When the Greeks distinguished the "idiot" from the *spoudaios* they were elevating public life over private lusts. Similarly, the Enlightenment thinkers tried to set limits to the appetites of the *demes* through the universalist application of reason (substituting *ratio* for the Greek *nous*). In their view, it

was precisely this universalism that made humanity possible. The *philosophes* tried to preclude the “demophilia” that the Greeks feared by arguing for a secularist justification for a collapsing Christian anthropology. The emerging materialist anthropology required a justification and a teleology that would not destroy politics. The failure of the *philosophes* (more implied than diagnosed by Rahe) is visible in the degradation of liberal democracy into a smorgasbord of concepts and ideas, and now feelings (compassion, sensitivity). Indeed, as Christopher Lasch argues in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (1991), liberalism has succumbed to ad hoc justifications for its own power. Having abandoned the universalism that was its ontological justification, liberalism has gravitated toward the kind of parochialism (racial, sexual, cultural) that it originally sought to overcome.

Rahe shows well that, regardless of the thinker and how he may have adapted it to his peculiar circumstances, virtue has been the defining essence of republicanism. Whether virtue is understood in the Greek way as the excellencies of the soul, or in the Christian way as good conduct conforming to God’s will, republicanism has been at war with democracy, a war that is a hidden leitmotif of Rahe’s history of republican virtue. His purpose is not to bury democracy but to rescue popular government from its own dissipations.

An author’s approach to his subject matter is usually informed by an underlying outlook that tells us why the

author does what he does, why he chooses this subject over that one. Rahe is influenced by two seemingly contradictory heroes. In Leo Strauss (*Natural Right and History*, 1950) he finds an explanation for modern despair: that modern political theory has debased man and devalued public-spiritedness. Rahe simultaneously extols the active politics of Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 1958) and the civic mindedness she modeled on Athenian examples. Rahe sees Arendt’s political anthropology as a kind of “polis envy,” tempered by the Aristotelian *vita contemplativa* that marked the philosopher’s *paideia*.

Rahe’s love for public virtue comes through in his recurrent reference to St. Augustine. Rahe adopts Augustine’s view that “a people is a multitudinous assemblage of rational beings united by concord regarding loved things held in common.” Here Rahe is decidedly unmodern and free of the preoccupations of social scientists. He understands that a regime reflects its people, who they are. Rahe’s approach is that of Augustine: “if we wished to discern the character of any given people, we would have to investigate what it loves. . . . It is a better or worse people as it is united in loving things that are better or worse.” Thus Rahe is a political anthropologist, trying to understand the pieties of a people, that which they hold high and low, the sacred and the profane. Rahe confronts the exponents of modernity, Hobbes, Locke, even Marx, who reject the high in favor of the low, what man loves for what he thinks he needs.

Love directs one toward others. It is a transcendence of the self for the sake of others. Needs are inversions of love, subordinating all others for the sake of self. Love begins the community of two or more. On behalf of one, need obliterates the idea of community. Love makes politics possible, need makes it necessary. Love publicizes the self, need privatizes it. The very need—the realm of necessity, in Arendt’s lapidary phrase—that the Greeks felt should be hidden from public life has been the fountain of political rhetoric since the seventeenth century.

The modern theorists of need—Locke (property), Hobbes (power), Marx (materialism)—have been the chief exponents of advancing private wants over public goodness. Each one made his appeal to what the Greeks feared most in the *demes*, a rapacious self-interest. In the Greek typology democracy gravitates into oligarchy as the private interests of the few overwhelm those of the many. The modern theorist’s obsession with institutions, and preoccupation with groups (industry, labor, class, race, etc.), is a concession to interest over goodness. But institutional coercion of “factions” (*stasis*) does not elevate politics but signifies the end of virtue. Virtue gives way to bureaucratic constraints on evil.

Virtue is not goodness, but the means toward goodness. This is evident as soon as we ask, “Courage for what?” Understood apart from moral relations virtue seems little more than vainglory, a form of self-flattery, hence self-interest. But as understood by

Plato, Machiavelli, Calvin, Lincoln, and most recently Christopher Lasch, virtue aims at goodness for others by setting limits to what is permissible. As a public activity virtue prescribes our actions as individual agents in a plural (hence moral) relationship that gives meaning to these actions; the agent is elevated by the public task that demands the action and becomes an exemplar for living. Arendt tells us that “Courage is like Achilles.”

But there is always some ambiguity attending human relationships, because of the ambiguity of human means. Arendt, who followed Plato in this matter, argued that we should judge the worthiness of the act by the larger purpose (*phronesis*) of the actor, rather than the particular intentions of the actor. In the *Republic* (and more so in the *Symposium*) Plato battled the poets who mock the excellencies of human purpose when they portray human foibles or unforeseen consequences, thereby rendering the purpose tragic. Since tragedy is an expression of public purpose, it invokes sorrow, not pity for individuals, for it reflects the aspiration for perfection in the relationships that form society. But the Greek poets chastened the philosopher’s ambition for perfection, reminding him of its elusive nature as a grounding for public life.

This is why Plato retained the Republic but turned from wisdom as its authority to the laws, so human living-together might be less sorrowful. The best regime is not the best possible regime; but the best possible regime is the one that grants a public space for virtue and allows its para-

digmatic significance to shape human connectedness: a republic of virtue. Plato knew that man's willed acts are often frustrated by an unwilling nature that mocks human purpose. Machiavelli and Tocqueville, two of the most serious students of virtue, understood this limitation.

Those who have treated virtue as somehow requisite to public life have felt that it cultivates an affinity with others that makes public life not merely bearable but somehow desirable. This is even true of "Old Nick." Machiavelli did not advance *virtu* for the sake of an abstract republic, but for the sake of his beloved Florence. This political sentiment is more visible in the Roman republicanism of Cicero, who held that "These virtues originate in our natural inclination to love our fellow man." Viewed in this way, virtue is a transhuman, self-subordinating quality that recognizes the potential of fraternity beyond the parochialism of race, state and nation, i.e., beyond "politics." The worldliness of virtue is central to Arendt's political anthropology and is expressed by her in the Greek idiom, "Wherever you go, you will always be a *polis*." Her intended implication (as with Cicero) is that virtue creates a cosmology (*kosmo-politeia*) of goodness that connects citizen to citizen and city to city.

All this suggests some naturalness in fraternal sentiment, or at least the potentiality for human connectedness beyond the orbit of cultural peculiarity. A republic of virtue contains within it the potentiality of transcending its own finiteness. The Enlightenment *philosophes* sought to extend

knowledge of this potentiality to those insulated by the particularities of time and place. But this potentiality assumes a natural disposition toward a universalist knowledge consonant with the Enlightenment goal of the "education of all mankind." This used to be the guiding principle of liberalism.

This universalism is consistent with a republic of virtue. The latter does not seek to reform nature by positing some eschatological goal that frustrates or overwhelms human potentiality and fits it into some historical process that limits human responsibility for shaping that history.

Unlike the salvationist politics that are the stamp of the twentieth century, a republic of virtue has no perfectionist ambition, sees no conclusion to human suffering. It offers no grandiose purpose to justify its existence in the face of competing *Weltanschauungen*. It does not seek to abolish evil, only limit its scope; it does not aim at universal goodness but offers itself as an exemplar to others. This helps explain its impotence today. It lacks the combat-readiness essential in the market-place of modern progressivist ideologies.

It is the surviving tradition of virtue that has prompted a reexamination of the American regime, a regime that is seemingly incapable of escaping utopian designers. Christopher Lasch, in *The True and Only Heaven*, takes the progressivist disposition as his starting point for understanding American social decline. It is striking that a former leftist ("I had always identified myself with the left") would identify

American decay with the limitlessness of leftist ideologies. Lasch's own prescriptions are bounded by "the natural limits on human power and freedom," although his modified Calvinism of "hope, trust, or wonder" affirms "the goodness of life in the face of its limits."

Lasch offers an extraordinary reinterpretation of William James who was "the first to see . . . that science would never be able to offer a world view to replace discredited religions"—a slap at an attenuated rationalism that abandoned its (not always articulated) Christian assumptions. Lasch takes from James the question central to the survival of American republicanism: "What if the 'final purpose of our creation' was the 'greatest possible enrichment of our ethical consciousness'?" For Lasch the way the American people answer the question will determine their fate in history.

Lasch's turn away from the radical politics of the 1960s is due in part to his recognition of what has been done in the name of progress. The belief that "humanity" represents some kind of reified amalgam propelled by a mechanism understood only by the "experts" has led us to "mistake the promised land of progress for the true and only heaven." The futuristic claims of the New Class, "unleavened by its own limits," are secretly animated by the old human concern to eradicate evil. Abandoning his former assumptions, Lasch now understands that evil cannot be eliminated. He refuses to see it, as progressivists do, as a purely technical problem that can be

resolved, diminished, or eradicated through the "bureaucratization of benevolence." His analysis of the American regime leads him to an old liberal truth: community is held together by moral relations, not by a redistribution of goods and services through society's banal ways.

It is precisely the problem of evil that led John Diggins to write *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (1984). This book is not mentioned by Rahe. It is the only major work on the subject that he does not cite. Diggins's book, like Lasch's, is an effort to locate the source of American virtue and identify the reasons for its dissipation. Also like Lasch, Diggins thinks it dangerous to see in politics a method for abolishing evil: "Such a superhuman goal is an illusion, a kind of spiritual sickness."

Lasch and Diggins are further united by the guarded but sanguine belief that the pursuit of goodness is not the same thing as pressing politics into the service of eradicating evil in history.

Diggins holds that by the time of the American founding the moral authority of Jonathan Winthrop and Jonathan Edwards had all but ceased to guide Americans. What emerged was a crude Lockean-Calvinist synthesis which contained a struggle between wealth and virtue. The majoritarian politics of Locke prevailed in time against the Winthrop/Edwards emphasis on conscience. Diggins holds that by the mid-nineteenth century individual conscience was overwhelmed by majoritarianism and by

largely commercial ambition. Thus “the Christian values Lincoln and Melville had stood for—love, humanity, magnanimity, humility, sacrifice, and forgiveness—died out in the late nineteenth century.”

Veblen, Adams, and Peirce tried to blame Social Darwinism for the collapse of Christian morality. They sought to rebuild moral relations on a firmer basis than commercial virtues. But it was John Dewey who sealed the fate of both Christian morality and classical virtue. It was Dewey, Diggins contends, who transformed classical liberal individualism into the stuff of social and psychological reductionism. Dewey took the commercial spirit one step further by seeing in the individual not only a potential for self-advancement but for “self-realization.” Dewey transformed a productive society into a commodity society. This development only helped validate the narcissistic social theories of the liberal sociologists Charles Horton Cooley, Herbert Mead, and Albion Small. The narcissistic trend paved the way in America for Sigmund Freud and made the “autonomous self” the centerpiece of moral reckoning. That this evolution led to “rights theory” should be no surprise to those familiar with this history.

Embracing a Lockean-Calvinist synthesis, Diggins is himself departing from major precursors who tried to identify the nature of American moral balance. Bernard Bailyn, in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and in *The Origins of American Politics* (1970), holds to the proposition that the “ideology” of the

Revolution was persuasive in shaping the institutions that followed. These ideas were often an admixture of Enlightenment and Calvinist principles, ambiguously stressing reason and revelation.

A most significant contribution to the history and interpretation of republicanism is J. G. A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (1975). In contrast to the Lockean-Calvinist thesis of Diggins, Pocock points to a continuous and resilient Machiavellian tradition that reached its “last great pre-modern efflorescence” in the American colonies. The “Americanization of virtue” was a modified but heroic reprise of the civic Renaissance found in Machiavelli, but whose lineaments are traceable to antique Athens and Rome. The public good was to triumph over private interest. The commercial spirit of classical liberalism and Lockean institutional restraints were workable not merely because they tethered human appetites but because they emanated from a people already constrained by conscience and chastened by Christian ascetics.

Here Rahe is closer to Diggins than to Pocock. Rahe assumes a (late) Jeffersonian position, one which severs virtue from both its historical and transcendent sources. Like Jefferson, Rahe is skeptical about antique models and Christianity as sources of early American civic virtue. Diggins is technically correct in arguing that the value of labor and its expected rewards per liberalism and the centrality of conscience and Christian moral-

ity per Calvinism were not pronounced in the American founding. But neither is it correct that all of the founders rejected out of hand the paradigmatic significance of Athenian civic-mindedness or Spartan martial virtues. Jefferson may have wanted to throw his old books away, but antique republicanism served as a counterthesis, a model of negation and refutation. Indeed, not even Jefferson asked for an American inversion of courage, temperance, prudence or self-discipline. But Jefferson was then, as Rahe is now, a skeptic regarding their proper grounding. In fact, it was the adaptation of some of the ancient virtues that Adam Smith saw as essential to the commercial spirit. It is not commerce as such that degrades the virtues, but its outcome, consumption. The sybarite has never been the model republican.

It was not so much the rejection of Greco-Roman republicanism that inspired the founding debates. Nor was it the invention of something called liberalism, in this case with a Calvinist dimension. It was the historically ascendant notion of popular sovereignty, of ground-up rulership, that breathed new life into and made necessary a new civic humanism. Here Rahe's Straussian assumptions and Diggins's Lockean thesis underplay the immanent Christian conscience that preceded the formation of the institutional checks by one hundred fifty years. Indeed, the Calvinist covenant predates the Lockean and Hobbesian notion of contract by decades, and served as the organizational thesis for the early Puritan com-

munities. This is why the American founders were content to leave communal authority in the hands of their fellow commonwealthmen.

Popular sovereignty means the dilution of civic virtue because of the dilution of the excellencies that results from mass politics. Having a different conception of citizenship and the realm of politics, the Greeks could both demand and expect virtue as requisite to public participation. Yet we know from the ancients and the early moderns that virtue is essential even in a popular regime, because what is at stake is not just one's own interest but one's own kind. It was concern for one's own kind—for *genos*, tribe, *fratria*, *homonoia*, the cult—that made virtue integral to communal adhesion, if not survival. As Rahe rightly observes, men will kill for profit, but die only for what they love.

The founders, as Rahe shows well enough, were acutely aware of the historical moment of their enterprise. Implicit in the founders' understanding of the *Novus Ordo Seclorum* was the more significant recognition that they were providing for a new age. An epochal shift in circumstances requires an epochal shift in principles.

What Pocock calls the "dialectic of virtue and commerce" involved a quarrel with modernity. Secular time had overrun civic virtue. Jefferson understood this, if grudgingly, and tried not to rework the virtues but to reinvigorate the *paideia* that transmits them. Jefferson was never entirely successful in connecting political equality with the natural inequality

that is necessary for the promotion of civic virtue. This is also why liberalism has been a poor caretaker of the *civitas*; it separates the process of politics from those who are to participate in it: it assumes that men are sufficiently good and does not ask them to become such. Embedded within the liberalism described by Diggins and the Lockean are the seeds of its own destruction, the "sovereign self." This self has no friends in the classical sense, but only makes alliances, which can never form the enduring soul of a people. Machiavelli warned that it is easier to found republics than to sustain them. Rahe is kinder to Locke than he deserves.

The ancients are separated from the moderns by a chasm of culture and circumstance: the scientific and industrial revolutions, the Reformation, the impact of ideological movements, the rise of mass society. With the exception of the Reformation none of these was influential in shaping the American constitution. Yet America is now increasingly a product of the mentioned currents. The ascendancy of the masses, the notion of popular sovereignty, has nullified the kind of intimacy that was known to the Greek *polis*. Mass democracy forever altered the dynamics of politics.

When the Greeks expanded organized living-together from the *genos* (tribe) to the *fratria* they were expanding along blood lines. But when they expanded further into a polity (*koimonia politike*) they were making a shift from a natural to an artificial and "spiritual" designation, a political community. They had moved to

homonoia, or like-mindedness, as an organizing principle. They had shifted the political focus from what men already are to what they aspire to be. Madison was aware of the need for this shift in trying to "expand the sphere" (Federalist 10).

With increasing secularization, promoted by an attenuated rationalism (disconnected from its earlier Christian moorings), factions are restrained only by the coercive powers of the state. Subordinate republics, no longer made congenial by a universalism that centers each of them, descend into an atavistic tribalism based on blood ties. When a plurality of interests and human appetites are held to be goods themselves and there is no recognition of a general good within which men have different interests, pluralism degenerates into a battleground of inter-tribal warfare. The state is degraded into presiding over blood feuds. The state becomes the prize for the group that has conquered all others.

It is the mediation of wills, handling the tension between the one and the many, that makes republicanism at once difficult and desirable. The need to balance religious insularities, renegade individualism, and ethnic irredentism has made virtue indispensable to American politics. It is a skeptical, but sympathetic and even redemptive, examination of this tension that makes Rahe's work valuable. He offers us a historiography of public virtue that concludes with an account of the American founding. The work is a reminder that *civitas* is intimately connected with *humanitas*.