Visions of liberty: republicanism and liberalism in the current theoretical debate

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Abstract

For the last two decades, an influential neo-republican movement, coming from both historiography of political thought and normative political theory, has made a case for a concept of liberty which is said to be distinct from communitarian and liberal views. This movement establishes a meaning of liberty that goes beyond the celebrated dichotomy between positive and negative freedom. Historians like Quentin Skinner and normative theorists like Philip Pettit have construed this alleged "neo-roman" concept of liberty based on the ideal of nondomination. Such an ideal can be properly understood neither as the human flourishing resulting from community's self-government nor as the indiscriminate absence of external interference with individual's preferences and choices. In this paper, after briefly pointing to some uncontroversial distinctions between communitarian and neo-roman versions of republicanism, I offer an account of the current disputes between neo-roman and liberal theories of liberty. By means of this account, I intend to answer the following questions: 1) What allows us to talk about republicanism and liberalism as two rival traditions of thinking about liberty? 2) What are the distinctions between republican and liberal conceptual vocabularies that constitute their respective linguistic contexts for the stabilization of the semantic meaning of liberty? The first question frames the debate from a historical point of view, and the second, from an analytical perspective.

Introduction

The initiatives of theorists interested in reviving the republican ideas have served as stimulus to the fermentation of one of the densest fields of debate in
the political theory in the latest decades. Either in the domain of the history of political thought or in that of contemporary political theory of analytic and normative persuasion, republicanism has been presented for many authors as an intellectual tradition distinct from the liberal one, as well a movement of contestation to the hegemony of liberalism in the contemporary politics.

In the course of the recent decades, we can observe, both in the academic and disciplinary field of political theory and in the arenas of the public debate, two great waves of republican orientation against the liberal ideological domain. The first wave has taken shape in the work of historians of civic humanism and, subsequently, of communitarian theorists. Between the decades of 1950 and 1990, thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Hans Baron, J.G.A Pocock, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel, to name some of the best-known, have claimed the values of civism and of community as an antidote to the “atomistic” individualism of the dominant trend of liberal thinking. From mid-1990’s, the debate between communitarians and liberals enters into a reflux. Although the communitarian criticism has changed to some extent the face of liberalism, the general perception that seems to have been left from the debate is the one of the excessively demanding character of the claims made on behalf of “community” in the context of societies characterized by the “fact of pluralism”.

The second republican wave starts to be outlined along the 1980’s, acquiring a more defined shape in mid-1990. Associated to it are authors like Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit, Maurizio Viroli, John Maynor, among others. At the same time they seek to turn themselves away from the way civic humanists and communitarian thinkers present their criticism to liberalism, these authors continue to maintain that republicanism must be understood as a movement of contestation to the hegemony of liberal tradition, however, a movement fit for dealing with the challenges of social order characterized by the diversity and reasonability of the conceptions of good.

This essay intends to present the outlines of the current debate between republicans and liberals political theorists, focusing on the arguments of the second neo-republican wave in the contemporary political theory. Considering that the representative authors of this variant argue that modern republicanism has its genesis in the old Roman Republic, I use the expression “neo-Roman republicanism” to refer to the type of republican order that emerges from these authors’ formulations. It is not difficult to realize that the concept of freedom is in the core of the conceptual and rhetorical disputes between neo-Roman republicanism and liberalism. For this reason, my reconstruction of the debate will concentrate on what both trends have to say about the concept of liberty and about the political-institutional implication of their application.

The debate between republicans and liberals has occurred in an equally intense way in two distinct but interconnected fields: the one of the history of political thought and the one of the analytic-normative political theory. That is, at the same time as they claim the specificity of a long tradition of political and constitutional thinking, both neo-Romans and liberals seek to present the definitional elements of vision of freedom allegedly fit to respond to the
dilemmas of the contemporary democratic societies. They are two registers of the same controversy. I will broach here the outlines that conform the debate in these registers, but from the start I make it clear that, due to the increasing literature about the theme, a more systematic analysis of the historiographical and conceptual disputes requires a more detailed and prolonged treatment, to be developed in subsequent works.

First, I will discuss the way the debate is organized in the analytic-normative plan, presenting the republican’s criticisms to the liberal conception of negative freedom. We will also see how the main defenders of the liberal vision have reacted to the adversary’s attacks in this plan. Next, I will examine the contours of the debate in the field of the history of political thought. First, we will deal with the arguments of the neo-Romans about the historical singularity of the thinking about freedom that would identify itself neither with the “Athenian” tradition of positive freedom, nor with the liberal tradition of negative freedom. We will also see how some historians of ideas have contested the narrative of the neo-Romans, throwing doubts both on the existence of a neo-Roman tradition in character and on the presupposition of the “rivalry” between republicanism and liberalism.

Before, however, I must conclude this introduction with a methodological note about the nature of my approach. Why to broach the theme of freedom by means of the reconstruction of a debate? The answer is in the fact that the concept of freedom, like the other key concepts of political theory, belongs to a class of concepts that the philosopher Walter Gallie, in a seminal text of 1956, called “essentially contested concepts”. In the words of Gallie,

> Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly “likely”, but as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question. (Gallie, 1956, p. 193).

In other words, the essentially contested concepts are constructions refractory to consensual definitions. The stabilization of the semantic meaning of the concept is always precarious and contingent. That instable meaning is an outcome of the permanent clash of perspectives under which the concept can be defined. It must be clear that not only each perspective can use the concept in a different way, but also that each one has to recognize that its particular use of a given concept is contested by others, and that arguing in favor of its own criteria of using of the concept is also arguing against the adversaries’ criteria. Still according to Gallie:

> More simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one’s own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses. Still more simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively (Gallie, 1956, p. 172).
There is a set of criteria that allows us to recognize the essentially contested
character of a concept. I highlight here that every concept of this type has an
evaluative (or normative) nature, insofar as its use allows not only a description
of given states of the world, but also, inevitably, a judgment, or an attribution of
value of the described states of the world. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that
a concept only becomes essentially contested when it reflects the accumulation
of layers of semantic meaning sedimented in it in the course of a historical
process. Understanding the essentially contested character of a concept is to
call the attention to its historicity. Nietzsche has expressed with clarity this
perspective on maintaining that “all ideas in which an entire process is
semiotically summarized elude definition. Only something which has no history
is capable of being defined” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 68).

Freedom: the analytic and normative debate

In the contemporary debates on the concept of freedom, manly in the field of
political theory of analytic and normative inspiration, no other author has exer-
cised so much influence as Isaiah Berlin. In a celebrated essay, first
published in 1958, Berlin calls the attention to the existence of two ways of
conceiving human freedom: positive freedom and negative freedom (Berlin,
2002). Berlin was not the first one to use this terminology. Already at the
beginning of the 20th century, Guido de Ruggiero, an Italian philosopher of neo-
idealistic inspiration, used to refer to two distinct traditions of the concept of
freedom by using exactly the same designation made famous by Berlin. For
Ruggiero, “history presents us with to conceptions” of freedom: the first one
develops itself in the 18th century and the second one in the 19th century. Both
are presented as products of the development of modern liberalism, but
negative freedom would have chronologically preceded positive freedom. The
main distinction between these two conceptions is that “negative freedom
consisted in denying all authority and all law; the new positive freedom consists
in transferring the source of authority and law to the intimacy of one’s mind”
(Ruggiero, 1927, p. 352). As one of the protagonists of the broad neo-Hegelian
intellectual movement that has widespread across Europe in the last decades of
the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century, besides thinkers
like Benedetto Croce and T. H. Green, Ruggiero narrates a history of modern
liberalism in which the positive conception of freedom comes up as dialectically
overcoming the negative conception. This last one would have been the product
of an era in which the main issue consisted of ensuring the freedom of the
individuals before the autocratic powers of the State. With the revolutions of late
19th century, and with the new era of institutional construction that opened up,
the problem would start to be less of ensuring a sphere of non-intervention in
the private life of the individuals than of promoting the means for the individuals
to govern themselves. The passage from negative freedom to positive freedom

2 I have developed a more detailed analysis of these criteria, as well as of some of the
is, thus, hailed as a perfecting to the liberal tradition, to which Ruggiero adheres without restriction.

Although the terminology adopted by Isaiah Berlin is identical to the one utilized by Ruggiero, the meaning of Berlin’s reconstruction is completely opposed to the meaning that one gathers from the analysis of the Italian philosopher. Berlin argues that “the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions, not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other” (Berlin, 1969, p. 132). Far from considering the positive freedom as a perfecting of liberalism and an overcoming of the negative freedom, the author regrets the fact that a number of liberal thinkers have succumbed to such a positive conception of freedom. The most notable case is the one of Kant, with his identification of freedom with the obedience to moral law. These liberals end up endorsing the paradox contained in the belief that men could be obligated to freedom, as wanted, before Kant, Rousseau. On writing in the context of the political and ideological struggle of the cold war, Berlin associates the rhetoric of positive freedom to the totalitarian movements and regimes that haunted the 20th century. Despite his indisputable contribution to the analytic debate on freedom, Berlin’s taxonomy underlies a side taking in the ideological field: we would be more immune to the loss of freedom by rejecting any appeal to the positive freedom and unconditionally adhering to the thesis that only the negative freedom is compatible with the ethical, cultural and political pluralism of the contemporary societies.

Berlin defines the negative liberty as the absence of an external impediment to the individuals’ action. More precisely, as “is the area within which the subject - a person or group of persons - is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons” (Berlin, 1969, p. 121). It deals with a conception of freedom that analytically defines itself rather by the absence than by the presence of something. On the other side, positive freedom is defined by the presence of self-domain, which can take on varied forms, from the ideas of self-emancipation of the ascetics and quietists to the conceptions of autonomy, self-achievement and self-government, more characteristic of the modern world. In any of these forms, a struggle is implicit between a superior self and an inferior self to be submitted to the benefit of a specific goal. The belief in the existence of an ultimate purpose, a supreme value for which all the others must converge, consists of the core of the positive way of thinking about freedom. The positive freedom has a determined content, whereas the negative freedom has an undetermined content. This one gets rid of the burden of maintaining that being free means to reach or simply pursue a specific end.

Berlin’s contribution has unchained a vigorous debate, which persists up to now. On one hand, there are those who accept the analytic framing of Berlin’s theory but invert the normative signal of this theory. Charles Taylor, for example, agrees with the idea that there are really two ways, or two “families” of thinking on freedom. By modifying Berlin’s terminology, without, however, modifying his concepts in depth, Taylor refers to freedom as an “exercise
concept” and to freedom as an “opportunity concept”. Taylor suggests that there is a sort of Manichaeism in Berlin’s vision, certainly a result of his feelings as a convinced pluralist. Berlin’s mistake would be the association of all the positive conceptions of freedom to the totalitarian phenomenon. For Taylor, this mistake, a common feature of the contemporary liberalism, has its origin in Hobbes’ formulation of freedom as an absence of external opposition to the movement of the bodies.

The crude negative view of freedom, the Hobbesian definition, is untenable. Freedom cannot just be the absence of external obstacles, for there may also be internal ones. And nor may the internal obstacles be just confined to those that the subject identifies as such, so that he is the final arbiter; for he may be profoundly mistaken about his purposes and about what he wants to repudiate. And if so, he is less capable of freedom in the meaningful sense of the word (Taylor, 1985, p. 228).

On the other hand, there are the theorists of freedom who share Berlin’s normative point of view, however alternating the analytic structure of his theory. Among these theorists, we can find Felix Oppenheim (1963) and Gerald McCallum (1967). Both contest the existence of two concepts of freedom by arguing that freedom is just one. McCallum, in particular, contributes with the establishment of a formula to represent the logical structure of freedom. According to the author, the reason for so many disputes and confusions in the debate on the concept of freedom, besides the normative disagreements, resides in the difficulty of seeing that there is only one type of freedom and that this one consists of a “triadic relation”, a relation that always involves an agent (x) free from some constraint or restriction (y) to carry out an objective (z). Hence the general formula of McCallum (1967, p. 314): “x is (is not) free from y to do (not to do, become, not to become) z”. That is:

Whenever the freedom of some agent is in question, it is always freedom from some constraint or restriction on, interference with, or barrier to doing, not doing, becoming, or not becoming something (McCallum, 1967, p. 314).

Up to mid-1990, the position described above had dominated the debate on freedom. Berlin’s followers used to suppose the existence of two types of freedom and argued in favor of the negative freedom. Thinkers associated to communitarianism and civic humanism also accepted the dichotomy formulated by Berlin, but they argued in favor of the positive freedom. Finally, theorists like MacCllum and Oppenheim rejected the dichotomy, arguing that there is only one concept of freedom, characterized by a triadic relation between agents, impediments and purposes.

The contribution of the neo-Roman republicans to the debate is related to the thesis that there is not only one and not even only two concepts of freedom. Without failing to recognize the coherence of the discourses on positive and negative freedoms, authors like Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner develop the
argument that the dichotomy covers up the historic existence and analytic specificity of a third conception of freedom. As Pettit clarifies,

Berlin’s taxonomy of positive and negative liberty forecloses a more or less salient third possibility. He thinks of positive liberty as mastery over the self and of negative liberty as the absence of interference by others. Yet mastery and interference do not amount to the same thing. So what of the intermediate possibility that freedom consists in an absence, as the negative conception has it, but in an absence of mastery by others, not in an absence of interference? This possibility would have one conceptual element in common with the negative conception – the focus on the absence, not presence – and one element in common with positive: the focus on mastery, not interference (Pettit, 1997, p. 21-22).

Thus, the core of the conceptual scheme of neo-Roman republicanism is a conception of freedom allegedly irreducible to any side of the dichotomy between negative and positive freedom. That is, the political freedom is neither the simple absence of external barriers to individual actions, nor the pure presence of the participation of the citizens in the self-government of the city.

Although the republican freedom can be also defined as a negative kind of freedom, that is, one defined by the absence, not by the presence of something, what is absent is not the indiscriminate external interference in the choices and actions of the individuals. For neo-republicans, what must be absent when one speaks of freedom is a specific type of interference, which results from the dependence and dominance derived from the existence of the “arbitrary power” of given agents over others. If in the dominant formulation of the negative freedom any form of interference is interpreted as harmful to freedom, in the republican formulation, the damage to freedom is caused only by the arbitrary interference. In this particular sense, the republican conception of negative freedom is more specific than the liberal conception. In another sense, however, it is broader, once the liberals advocate that only the effective interference is opposed to freedom, i.e., it does not make sense to talk about reduction or loss of freedom unless an external opposition hinders in fact an individual. The republicans, on their turn, maintain that the reduction or loss of freedom is a consequence not only from the effective existence of the arbitrary interference, but also from its potential existence. One of the central characteristics of a relationship of domination is that it remains in force even when the dominant agent refrains from effectively interfering in the choices and actions of the dominated agent. Take the extreme and paradigmatic case of the relationship of domination between master and slave. The fact that a slave can live under the dominance of a benevolent master does not make him free man. The current

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absence of impediments to his choices and actions is only a corollary of one of the possible states of his master's desires, and he, the slave, knows it. The awareness of this state of subjection inevitably weighs on his attitudes, which tend to take the form of anticipations of his master's will. The decisive point is that one cannot consider as free an agent whose choices and attitudes are carried out under the influence of the anxiety resulting from his conscious dependence on an alien power. According to Skinner, this teaching, which is in the core of the conception of freedom claimed by the current theorists of republicanism, was already in the texts of republican authors of the 17th century in England:

As James Harrington was to put it in his classic statement of the republican theory in his *Oceana* of 1956, the predicament of slaves is that they have no control over their lives, and are consequently forced to live in a state of unending anxiety as to what may or may not be about to happen to them (Skinner, 2008a, p. xiii).

The neo-Romans' most ambitious criticism to the liberal theory of negative freedom points out the indifference of this theory to the cases of dominance without effective interference, and that indifference would bring the acceptance of the paradox of the "free slave". A consequence of this criticism is the conclusion of the neo-Romans that there is not a necessary trade-off between freedom and law, as suggest the theorists of the negative freedom in Berlin's line. Not, at least, when the law is formulated, enacted and applied according to republican principles. A legislation that creates barriers to avoid that certain individuals (or groups of individuals) exercise an arbitrary power over one another does not compromise on freedom as non-domination, on the contrary, strengthens it.

These assaults by the neo-Romans against the liberal conception of negative freedom have been the object of intense criticism. Increasing is the amount of studies meant to contest the republicans' theses in the name of the analytic (in some cases also normative) superiority of the liberal definition of negative freedom. At least a decade and a half ago, Allan Patten already used to call the attention to the difficulty of Skinner's republicanism to offer an effective alternative to liberalism. In mid-1990's, Patten had at his disposition only the texts of the first phase of Skinner's reflection on the history of the concept of freedom, texts written in the course of the 1980's and devoted to the theme of freedom in the Italian Renaissance, mainly in the work of Machiavelli. Skinner understood the republican freedom in that context in a way that was theoretically little different from the Hobbesian negative conception. Skinner argued that Machiavelli "has no quarrel with the Hobbesian assumption that the capacity to pursue such ends without obstruction is what the term 'liberty' properly signifieth" (Skinner, 1984, p. 217). On what, then, would reside the difference between the Machiavellian (republican) conception of freedom and the one advocated by Hobbes? Skinner maintained that Machiavelli

merely argues that the performance of public services, and the cultivation of the virtues needed to performe them,
both prove upon examination to be instrumentally necessary to the avoidance of coercion and servitude, and thus to be necessary conditions of assuring any degree of personal liberty in the ordinary Hobbesian sense of the term (Skinner, 1984, p. 217).

It was to this “instrumental republicanism” of Skinner that Patten used to refer in his criticism, which basically follows the following reasoning: in the points in which the instrumental republicanism makes it right, it is perfectly compatible with the political liberalism of authors like Rawls and Dworkin; in the points in which it distinguishes itself from liberalism, it follows through paths that the liberals must avoid. Thus, “Skinner’s formulation of instrumental republicanism does not represent an improvement upon the liberal attitude towards citizenship and civic virtue, because it fails to identify any philosophically interesting disagreement between the two positions” (Patten, 1996, p. 36).

However, for purposes of evaluation of the current state of the debate between republicans and liberals, Patten’s criticism seems to be limited, once Skinner has widely reformulated his vision of freedom from mid-1990. Two circumstances have contributed to such a reformulation. The first one of them was the displacement of the attention of Skinner’s contextual studies from the Italian Renaissance to the context of the disputes between the Parliament and the Crown in the English 17th century. The focus on Machiavelli’s texts is replaced by the focus on the texts of authors like Harrington, Milton, Sidney, Neville, and others, who Skinner has started to identify as committed to a “neo-Roman” conception of freedom⁴. The second circumstance was the beginning of Skinner’s interlocution with Philip Pettit. Based on Skinner’s historiographical contribution, Pettit has elevated the republican concept of freedom to an upper level of analytic refinement, solving difficulties present in the initial texts of Skinner himself. In Liberty before liberalism, the English historian takes an important step towards the conception of freedom as non-domination (Skinner, 1997). In his latest studies, he starts to integrally adopt the essence of this conception (Skinner, 2008, 2008b, 2010).

However, a more recent generation of critics takes as target exactly this more developed version of republican freedom. Among these critics two are noteworthy defenders of what one has conventionalized calling the theory of “pure negative freedom”. In their extensive studies on the concept of freedom, Ian Carter (1999) and Mathew Kramer (2003) seek to reestablish the position of the liberals in the analytic debate on human freedom, at the same time as they attack the singularity and superiority of the republican alternative⁵. Carter starts from the concept of overall freedom to develop a sophisticated theory on the measurability of freedom. The overall freedom of a person results from a combination between sets of particular liberties accessible in a given instant as

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⁴ For an outline of this change of historical context in Skinner’s investigation on freedom, see Palonen (1998). Register that Palonen regrets this movement of Skinner, which would have resulted in undue concessions to the contractarian liberalism of our time.

⁵ Carter and Kramer develop their theories under a strong influence of Hillel Steiner (1994). The three authors have systematically collaborated, having jointly edited an anthology on the concept of freedom (Steiner, Carter & Kramer, 2007).
well as in the course of time. Thus, when one considers a given embarrassment in relation to a set of particular liberties, one must evaluate to what extent other sets of particular liberties can become more accessible by the time of the embarrassment or in a future circumstance. Carter maintains that, just like the liberals, the republicans have in mind the notion of overall freedom. But the liberals have the advantage of not needing to lean on a normative notion of freedom. For this reason, Carter prefers to frame the republican freedom from a previous expression of Pettit, which identified freedom as “resilient non-interference” (Pettit, 1993, p. 17). If the republican freedom is worried about the general freedom in terms of resilient non-interference, “the most that can be attributed to Skinner and Pettit is a useful set of empirical hypotheses (which point out to certain sets of institutional arrangements) about how freedom is best to be maximized (or maximally equalized, or perhaps even maximinned)”.

Thus, “the difference between republicans and liberals is an empirical rather than a conceptual one, and the supposed difference over the meaning of ‘constraints on freedom’ is an illusion” (Carter, 1999, p. 239).

Carter makes correctly explicit the two main enunciations of the theory of freedom as non-domination: 1) a person can have her freedom reduced without suffering any effective interference; 2) a person can suffer an effective interference without having her freedom reduced. Carter announces that the comparison between the republican freedom and the liberal negative freedom must be accepted only in relation to the first enunciation, since the second enunciation must be rejected for two reasons. The first one is of an intuitive order, since it seems sufficiently clear that the impediment of an individual’s action corresponds to a limitation of the freedom of action of this same individual, even when the interference occurs in tune with the interest of the individual who suffers it, that is, when it occurs exempt of arbitrariness. The second reason is of epistemological order, for it concerns what one expects from a theory of negative freedom in the cognitive domain. Carter maintains that the thesis that there can be interference without loss of freedom must be rejected because it represents a moralization of the concept of freedom. A moralized conception of freedom maintains that “obstacles do not restrict one’s freedom as long as they are morally legitimate obstacles” (Carter, 2008, p. 65). Carter quotes the passage in which Pettit even suggests that “neither a tax levy, nor even a term of imprisonment, need take away someone’s freedom” (Pettit, 1997, p. 65). For Carter, however, even though a term of imprisonment is applied to a notorious criminal and in the most genuine interest of the collectivity, it is difficult to accept the proposition that the imprisonment does not take away the prisoner’s freedom. In this case, there will certainly be conflicts between the individual interest and the common interest. Carter argues that “where such conflicts occur, I can see no reason for privileging the common interest over the agent’s personal interest in deciding which obstacles count as instances of unfreedom, unless this reason consists of a moral point of view” (Carter, 2008, p. 65).

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6 On the importance of the paradigm of the prisoner as an unbearable test to the republican freedom, see Wendt (2010).
On rejecting as counter-intuitive and moralizing the proposition that the non-arbitrary interference is compatible with freedom, Carter, on the other hand, recognizes some sense, although under strong reservations, in the first proposition of Pettit that can be loss of freedom without the occurrence of an effective interference. Carter interprets Skinner and Pettit as if both maintained that fear and anxiety, inhibitors of the action of the dominated agents, can act as a force against freedom. However, so argues Carter, this would not at all surprise the contemporary theorists of the pure negative freedom, whose theory would be perfectly equipped for dealing with the role of such psychological obstacles to freedom.

On building a theory of liberty fine tuned with Carter, Matthew Kramer believes that “when subtleties and fine distinctions are duly taken into account, the modern exponents of negative freedom can fare very well indeed in a confrontation – and a reconciliation – with their civic republican counterparts” (Kramer, 2003, p. 149). According Kramer, one of the problems of republican criticism to the concept of negative freedom is that seldom this criticism deals with contemporary liberal theorists. With the exception of the occasional references to Isaiah Berlin, the great target of the republicans is not a liberal author, nor a contemporary one. Republicans usually refer to Thomas Hobbes, whose conception of freedom as the absence of external impediment to the movement of the bodies, object of the 21st chapter of the Leviathan, seems to summarize the vision of freedom that Skinner and Pettit deem to find in the heart of contemporary liberalism (Skinner, 2008a; Pettit, 2005). Kramer insists that, notwithstanding the undisputable analytic value of the Hobbesian conception of freedom, the contemporary theorists of negative freedom turn themselves away from Hobbes in a series of aspects. In the first place, the contemporary theorists restrict the field of application of the Hobbesian concept. While Hobbes considers that freedom applies to both human beings and any other bodies in motion, theorists like Berlin, Carter and Kramer consider that it applies only to the relationship amongst persons. In this sense, negative freedom is essentially social and political. Moreover, although they continue to postulate the non-normative nature of negative freedom, the contemporary theorists discard the restrictive clause by means of which Hobbes used to maintain that only physical barriers external to the body in motion are able to withdraw from this body the freedom of moving itself. On discarding this unnecessary restriction, the theorists of pure negative freedom prepare their theory to deal with the corrosive effects of freedom resulting from the phenomenon of domination. As the republicans suggest, the domination is carried out by the effect of psychological factors like anxiety and fear from the dominated agents when these are aware of the situation of submission in which they are in relation to the dominant agent.

But why, after all, would the theory of pure negative freedom be unable to recognize this restrictive effect on freedom caused by domination? The new theorists of negative freedom do not see any reason for such, once one considers not only the individual-specific freedoms at the present moment of the interference threat of the dominant agent, but also its overall freedom. According to Kramer, the neo-Roman’s criticism to negative freedom fails to recognize that the general freedom of each person is “largely determined by the
range of combinations-of-conjunctively-exercisable-liberties available to her". Once recognized this formula, it would be forceful to note that the general freedom of a subordinate person is reduced when this person "has to resort to obsequiousness or unobtrusiveness in order to stave off a dominant person punitive measures" (Kramer, 2008, p. 44). Unlike it is advocated by neo-Roman theorists, far from representing a situation in which the interference is not exercised, the domination represents a situation in which interference is widely. In short, according to Kramer:

[... ] under any tenable account of negative liberty, we must conclude that [a person] P’s overall freedom is substantially reduced by her subjection to the dominant party. Contrary to what Pettit contends, the dominance of that party is indeed being exerted – not through the actual infliction of violence (which is unnecessary in the circumstances), but through the party’s readiness to inflict violence. That very readiness eliminates many combinations of conjunctively exercisable freedoms for P” (Kramer, 2008, p. 44)

Skinner and Pettit, reacting themselves to the attacks made by the theorists of pure negative freedom, reaffirm the distinctive character of the republican conception of negative freedom. Pettit highlights that the new theorists of pure negative freedom deem that “freedom of choice is not affected by anything other than removal of an option. I interfere with you and impact on your freedom only when I block you from doing something; I do not have any impact on your freedom to choose between various options just by coercively threatening” (Pettit, 2008, p. 119). Thus, for these theorists, the fact that a person is under the domination of another only counts as a reduction of freedom because the domination consists of an effective interference that removes options that the dominated agent would, otherwise, have at his or her disposal. The dominated agent tends to behave in a subservient way because he or she recognizes as believable the threat of sanction perpetrated by the dominant agent, ready to act should the behavior of the dominated not be sufficiently humble and servile. Thus, it is the fear of punishment of the bold behavior that makes the dominated agent remove from his or her range of jointly exercisable options those which can arouse the punitive rage of the dominant agent.

Pettit and Skinner argue that this attempt to present the phenomenon of domination as an effective interference in the choices of the dominated tend to lose sight of a crucial aspect of the conception of freedom as non-domination. For the neo-Romans, domination is a phenomenon that can occur with or without effective interference. In Pettit’s terms, whenever a person makes her choices under the shadow of an “alien control”, it is possible to maintain that her freedom is compromised, and this is valid for the case of the alienated power is not actually exercised. Plus: even though the dominant agent is, by his or her own nature, of the type unwilling to interfere, and even though the “probability” of him or her wishing to block the actions of the dominated is in fact very reduced, the simple presence of an uncontrolled power is a sufficient reason for the loss of freedom of the dominated agent.
A decrease in the probability of interference at the hands of an alien controller will not remove the specter of an alien control [...] That interpersonal evil is more or less insensitive to the endogenously based probability of interference; alien control will remain in place so long as the agent can interfere or not interfere, whatever the reduced probabilities of interference that are dictated by the agent’s nature (Pettit, 2008, p. 124).

Thus, the presence of the arbitrary power qualitatively typifies the relationship of domination, not quantitatively. Speaking of freedom in republican terms is speaking of a status. For this reason, in a certain sense, it deals with a matter of all or nothing.

Just like the loss of freedom in the relationship of domination does not depend on the degree of probability of the exercise of the dominant agent’s arbitrary power, it does not depend either on the particular type of attitude taken into effect by the dominated agent. Carter and Kramer argue that the effective interference resulting from the relationship of domination is an effect before the attitudes of the dominated. Being aware of the subordinate situation in which he or she is, the dominated agent knows exactly what to do to avoid the rage of his or her master: behaving in a sufficiently humble and servile way. It is this type of behavior that takes from him or her options that otherwise he or she could exercise, and that reduces his or her overall freedom. Skinner opposes himself to this conclusion, suggesting that it results from misinterpretation by the theorists of negative freedom about the republican theory of liberty. By mobilizing once again the slave as a pure type of dominated agent, a recurrent topos in the republican tradition, Skinner clarifies that

[...] what basically distinguishes the life of slaves according to republican tradition is that they are condemned to a life of complete uncertainty. They never know what may or may not be about to happen to them. But if this consideration leaves them, as it probably will, to act with the servility routinely expected of them, this will not be because they will undoubtedly be stopped or penalized if they behave otherwise. Rather it will be because, in consequence of their basic sense of uncertainty, they feel an understandable disposition to play safe (Skinner, 2008, p. 98).

Republicanism and liberalism: the historiographical debate

The emergence of the neo-republicanism in the contemporary theoretical debate has had its initial stimulus in the work of historians of ideas devoted to recover the continuity line of this tradition in the Western political thinking. In mid-1950’s, the German historian Hans Baron published the first edition of his
seminal *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, in which are revealed the affinities between the civic humanism of the Renaissance Italy and the republican ideology that had been emerging in the city-states of the Italic peninsula since the end of the Middle Ages. Baron seeks to show that the great theorists of the Italian civic humanism, just like Leonardo Bruni, have revived the republic tradition by means of the recovery of the Aristotelian ideal of the good life as an *vita activa*. This recovery occurred in a context in which the Italian cities needed an ideology fit to provide the defense of their free way of life and of their participative and elective politics before the threat of expansion of the princes’ power.

Baron’s work has exercised a great influence in the historiography of the Italian Renaissance, inspiring the broader effort of reconstitution of the history of the entire republican tradition promoted by J. G A. Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment*, originally published in mid-1970’s. Pocock highlights the connections, already present in Baron’s work, between civic humanism of Renaissance Italy and the Athenian ideals of civic virtue and freedom. Influenced by Hannah Arendt’s Aristotelianism, Pocock presents republicanism as a language of the political ideas articulated by the ideal of positive freedom (Pocock, 1975, p. 550). But Pocock’s contribution consists of not only highlighting the Aristotelian origins of the republican thinking of the Italian Renaissance, but also of understanding the legacy of civic humanism in later times, especially in the Anglophone culture. His investigation comprehends the reception of Machiavelli’s ideas in the context of the English 17th century and the way this English republicanism was received in the 18th century in America, furthering an ideology of great impact in the struggle for the foundation of the Republic of the United States. It was not by chance that Pocock’s book has exercised so much influence in the recent historiography of the North-American revolution (Cf. Rodgers, 1992). Pocock has contributed to shake the conventional vision of the foundation of the Republic as an innovative movement inspired by the Lockeian liberalism, a vision which has in Louis Hartz one of its most notable defenders (Hartz, 1955). It is true that Pocock’s contribution could benefit from the paths opened by authors like Bernard Bailyn (1967) and Gordon Wood (1969), whose studies on the American Revolution have already emphasized the inspiration, rather republican than liberal, of the movement of ideas underlying that revolutionary process. But Pocock attributes a greater strength and a new sense to the discoveries of Bailyn and Wood, insofar as he situates the American republicanism in the interior of a vast tradition initiated in the Greece of Aristotle and adapted to the modern world by Machiavelli.

Despite the influence exercised by Pocock’s narrative in the historical and constitutional studies, the republican historiography has been recently experiencing other paths, and the main contribution in this new direction has been the one of Quentin Skinner. For Skinner, the rebirth of republicanism in the early modern times has owed more to the recovery of Roman moralists and historians, like Cicero and Sallust, than to the resumption of the Aristotelian conception of the civic virtues. It is certain that in the studies of Baron and Pocock these Roman thinkers recurrently appear. However, they appear like followers of the Aristotelian conception of citizenship. What Skinner maintains is
that the Roman republicanism, although not alien to the Greek conception of citizenship, must be thought-out as an independent intellectual and political tradition. If in the civic-humanistic interpretation the center of the attentions was the notion of civic virtue, in the “neo-Roman” interpretation of Skinner the focus of the analysis is the concept of personal freedom.

This displacement of the analytic focus has initiated an investigation effort on the history of the concept of republican freedom. Supporting the independence of the “neo-Roman” republicanism in relation to the Aristotelian tradition requires a conception of freedom distinct from the one present in the Athenian model, with which Pocock operates. Skinner seems not to feel very comfortable with the strong communitarian consequences of the neo-Athenian model, organized around an emphatically “positive” vision of freedom. He prefers to take on a polemic position, characterizing the republican freedom as a type of “negative freedom”, a freedom enjoyed both by individuals and collectivities for pursuing the purposes chosen by themselves. “To possess one’s liberty is to be free in the ordinary ‘negative’ sense of being unconstrained by other agents. It is therefore to be free – as Machiavelli ads in his next chapter with reference to collective agents – to act ‘according to one’s own will and judgment’ ” (Skinner, 2002, p. 197). But the implications of this vision of “negative freedom” are very different from those found in the atomistic liberal conception. Skinner does not admit of the fact that the freedom of the particular individual can be carried out in a context of a non-free community. That is, without political freedom there can be, in a lasting way, no individual freedom. Hence the need for the individuals to take part in the political life of the republic. Skinner maintains, against liberalism, that the postulation of the dissociation between individual freedom and political freedom represents a serious “lack of rationality” (Skinner, 1984, p. 217). It would be like desiring the purposes without resorting to the means. On the other hand, against the civic humanism of Baron and Pocock, Skinner emphasizes that the political participation is more precisely a means, an instrument of freedom, not the freedom itself. In relation to freedom, the political participation would be an instrumental value, not an intrinsic value, as the neo-Athenian model implies.

Skinner criticizes the thesis that the republican conception of freedom would have been resumed in the Renaissance from the recovery of Aristotle. Skinner’s interpretation collides with Baron’s vision that republicanism would have emerged only from the beginning of the 15th century, and that the ideology of the elective and participative form of government would have come up as a reply by Florence to the advancement of the autocratic and imperialistic intentions of the regime of Milan. Underlying Baron’s thesis, one would find the supposition that modern republicanism would not have been possible without the return to the old ones, especially to Aristotle, whose work had become widely accessible as a result of the translations carried out in the turn of the 14th century to the 15th century in Italy. Already in The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Skinner calls the attention to the fact that long before Aristotle became widely available for the humanists of the 14th and 15th centuries, the “pre-humanists” had already found out a way of defending the intentions of the Italian cities against the tyrannies. Thus, the English historian advances by at
least two centuries – from late 14th century to late 12th century – the emergence of republicanism in the *Regnum italicum*. The justification of the elective regime and of the civic participation would have dispensed, at the moment of its emergence, the knowledge of Aristotle’s moral philosophy. Although it did not fail to inspire itself in sources of the Antiquity, it was in Rome, not in Greece, that there was the source of inspiration of the republicanism of the Italian cities. Tito Livio, Salustio and, mainly, Cicero would have served as models for the pre-humanistic republicans. Skinner maintains that “it was from these humble origins, far more than from the impact of Aristotelianism, that the classical republicanism of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and their contemporaries originally stemmed”. Thus, “the political theory of the Renaissance, at all phases of its history, owes a far deeper debt to Rome than to Greece” (2002a, p. 92). Skinner’s suggests that the Roman tradition has its own life, which cannot be reduced to the Greeks’ heritage.

Notwithstanding the distinctions between the narratives of Pocock and Skinner, both reach the same conclusion when what is in focus are the relations between republican and liberal traditions. Both Pocock and Skinner and, after them, Philip Pettit, maintain that these two main traditions of the Western political thought represent rival visions on the concept of freedom and on the institutional forms derived from such a concept. If the republicanism has been a dominant intellectual strength since the Renaissance until the revolutions of the 18th century, its ideals start to decline and to be replaced by the ideals of liberalism from the turn of the 18th century to the 19th century. Republicanism becomes, then, a peripheral tradition, while, more and more, liberalism takes on the role of dominant intellectual strength in the contemporary world.

It is precisely this historical thesis on the rivalry between the republican and liberal tradition that has been put in doubt in recent studies. Even a theorist like Maurizio Viroli, entirely aligned with the neo-Roman republicanism of Skinner and Pettit, rejects the narrative in which republicanism and liberalism appear as two genetically and conceptually distinct traditions and in a collision route with one another. For Viroli, far from coming up as an alternative intellectual movement to republicanism, the liberal thinking comes up, in fact, as a kind of problematic heir of the republican tradition. Thus, “from a historical point of view, the relationship of liberalism to republicanism is one of derivation and innovation” (Viroli, 2002, p. 58). Liberalism shares a series of principles already present in the classic republicanism, mainly “the defense of the limited state against the absolute state” (ibid., p. 58). Moreover, against the communitarian conceptions of politics, liberalism associates itself to republicanism in the belief that “the social conflict is both inevitable and indeed beneficial” to the social and political order (ibid., p. 59). Despite these affinities, continues Viroli, “from a theoretical point of view, liberalism can be considered an impoverished or incoherent republicanism”, once it would be less prepared “to accommodate the demands of freedom as absence of dependence, which are central to the ideal of civil liberty” (ibid., p. 61).

Recently, on elaborating a narrative to a certain extent close to the one of Viroli, the political analysts Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson have reinforced the thesis of historical kinship between republicanism and liberalism. For these
authors, there is no grounding for the story that “republicanism and liberalism [...] emerged from particular wellsprings, each isolated and insulated from the other, as two ‘incommensurate’ vocabularies”. Then, it would be a mistake to believe that the relation between both traditions represents a “zero-sum game”, in which “the victory of one must imply the defeat of the other” (Kalyvas & Katzenelson, 2008, p. 4).

The essential difference between the narrative of Kalyvas & Katzenelson and the Viroli’s one is in the moral of the story. For Viroli, as we have seen, liberalism, although still keeping a set of republican ideals, can be understood as an “impoverished republicanism”, insofar as it turns itself away from some principles dear to the classic republicanism, those articulated around the ideal of freedom as independence and non-domination. For Kalyvas & Katzenelson occurs exactly the opposite: liberalism consists of the updated and improved version of the classic republican tradition, making it fit to deal with the challenges of a modern commercial society. Thus, liberalism would emerge from an effort by the very republican thinkers to get rid of the anachronistic aspects of the classic republican tradition. The metamorphosis of the classic republicanism, motivated by its need for adaptation to the modern world and made effective along the half century from 1780 to 1830, would have originated liberalism such as we know it today. As the authors summarize, “liberalism is not external to the history of republicanism. [...] 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” (ibid., p. 4).

To give shape to their narrative, Kalyvas and Katzenelson promote a detailed examination of the texts of a set of thinkers who would have faced the dilemma put to the classic republicanism by the emergence of the commercial society. Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Thomas Paine, James Madison, Germaine de Staël, and Benjamin Constant are the protagonists of this story of the birth of liberalism inside the republican tradition. These authors would be connected to “common project”. Crossing national, linguistic, and regional borders, as well as political and philosophical limits, these thinkers shared a way of thinking, reasoning, and imagining about politics for modern times. (ibid., p. 176)

**Final Considerations**

Republicanism, as well as liberalism, is a multifaceted tradition, there being among many of its protagonists the perception that the liberal ideas are both an adversary to be beaten and an ally to be conquered. There is, in fact, a broad zone of axiological convergence between the two traditions. This, however, must not lead us to believe that the incompatibilities between both are of little significance, for where there is no significant difference, there is no debate, dispute, controversy. The concern of this paper was to present in outline this rich field of debates, both in its analytic-normative register and in its historiographical register.
The outline presented in this paper suggests of course a more detailed treatment. This is still more required when we take into account that the debates on the meaning of liberty are still in course and attracting more and more scholars in the fields of political philosophy and history of political thought. My concern is that the question about the historical specificity and the distinctive analytic and normative character of republican conception of liberty is not yet adequately answered.

It would still be left to ask if these evident disputes in the fields of normative theory and historiography of the political thought, specialized fields of the academic literature, are reflections of really alternative prospects of sociopolitical order or only two languages, two political idioms leading to the same basic sets of institutions and political practices.

Bibliography


