

Imperial Republicanism

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- Pettit, Philip. 1997. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

It's a surprising fact that the paradigmatic states where republican liberty was attempted (Rome, Venice, Britain, France) all had significant empires. Can this behavior be accounted for by the political theory that Pettit extracts from these historical contexts? Is there something about understanding freedom as non-domination that could motivate republics to acquire large empires? If so, is this troubling enough to make us reconsider its merits?

Civic republican freedom requires eliminating actual *and potential* domination, because “it is possible for liberty to be lost without actual interference” (35).¹

“You enjoy non-interference from the powerful in the actual world, as we might say, but you do not enjoy it in the range of readily accessible worlds—a range of nearby possible worlds—where this or that contingent condition is varied; you do not enjoy it resiliently” (24).

¹Recall that interference is always negative - it makes things “worse for you [the interfered-with party], not better” (52). “All interfering behaviours, coercive or manipulative, are intended by the interferer to worsen the agent’s choice situation by changing the range of options available, by altering the expected payoffs assigned to those options, or by assuming control over which outcomes will result from which options and what actual payoffs, therefore, will materialize” (53).

Pettit emphasizes that mere improbability is not enough to discount the specter of potential domination.

“...the possession by someone of dominating power over another—in whatever degree—does not require that the person who enjoys such power actually interferes, out of good or bad motives, with the individual who is dominated; it does not require even that the person who enjoys that power is inclined in the slightest measure towards such interference. What constitutes domination is the fact that in some respect the power-bearer has the capacity to interfere arbitrarily, even if they are never going to do so” (63).

“...improbability of the kind in question here does not make for inaccessibility. Someone can be in a position to interfere with me at their pleasure, even while it is very improbable that they will actually interfere” (64).

“Seeing an option as an improbable choice for an agent, even as a vanishingly improbable choice, is different from seeing it as a choice that is not accessible to the agent: seeing it as a choice that is not within the agent’s power. Thus the fact that another person is unlikely to interfere with me, just because they happen to have no interest in interfering, is consistent with their retaining access to the option of interfering with me” (88).

There is a limit point, however, and it relates to capacity: “...the capacity to interfere must be an actual capacity, as we might call it—a capacity that is more or less ready to be exercised—not a capacity that is yet to be fully developed” (55).

Applying this reasoning, it seems we must say that a republican state concerned with freedom as non-domination has a duty to intervene whenever the freedom of its citizens is threatened. It would seem ad hoc to draw the line at the borders of the republic: a threat to freedom is serious, no matter where it originates. And we must do more than merely defend ourselves: Pettit argues that an understanding of freedom as non-domination means that we must deprive those in possession of arbitrary power of the capacity to exercise it (73). Other states will have arbitrary power when they possess the actual capacity to interfere, without reference to their intent.

We also have reasons to think that any interference from outside the republic must by definition be domination - there can be no “non-mastering” interference (31) because such interference will occur arbitrarily, ignoring the “interests and opinions of those affected” (35, see also 55). There are no “preconditions of action” (58) for such state interference, nor are there any penalties associated with that interference. There is also no way that the state can consent to some domination just to get along; recall that domination by consent is still domination (62).

The argument so far has what IR theorists would call “kinetic” implications for global security. To defend the republican liberty of its citizens, a state must eliminate latent sources of domination. It must act to prevent future domination. In many contexts, this will motivate territorial expansion at the expense immediate neighbors. By enlarging the republic, new potential sources of domination will be introduced, and these new sources must be addressed in turn. There does not seem to be a logical stopping point, because “[t]o advance freedom as non-interference will be to remove interference as far as possible, and to expand as far as possible the sphere of uninterfered-with choice” (83).

Conclusions

We are left with a picture of an insatiable republic, hysterical about eliminating not only actual but potential sources of domination, and doomed to grow ever less secure as it expands. The very features that lead to internal stability seem to compel external instability. On my thoroughly unprofessional understanding, this is exactly what happened to the Roman republic. Eventually, the stresses of perpetual expansion abroad were felt at home, and the republican political system collapsed, taking republican liberty with it.

Responses available to Pettit

- 1 These doctrines were never meant to apply to states, just to people.
- 2 This offensive posture would violate the republican freedom of citizens of other states, and would thus be impermissible despite of any positive effects on domestic freedom.
- 3 The proper response to domination is to create a constitutional authority that will eliminate domination (68). Pettit even argues that “it is not entirely outlandish to think that the previously dominant party might accept the constitutional arrangement” (68).
- 4 These empires are just an artifact of the presence of non-republican states in the system, and would not be necessary in a world of civic republican states.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Is the requirement to eliminate latent or potential sources of domination too strong? Can we weaken this requirement while retaining the desirable features of civic republicanism?
- 2 Do these consequences of civic republicanism give us reasons to reevaluate the “good enough” nature of freedom as non-interference? On this view, we’re free even if our neighbors could invade us, as long as it’s sufficiently unlikely that the prospect doesn’t materially alter our behavior. This “relative indifference to power or domination” (9) seems more likely to conduce to long-term peace.