



# Civil Republicanism and Political Liberalism- A Comparative Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** Dissatisfaction with liberalism is nothing new. As the longstanding dominant force in Western political thought, it has been subject to unending hostile critiques from a variety of sources. Of the criticisms of liberalism advanced in recent years, some of the most persistent and scathing have been levied by scholars identified with civic republicanism. Civic republicanism has adopted the pose of a counter philosophy to liberalism. Civic republicans, such as Alasdair Macintyre, Michael Sandel, and Cass Sunstein, argue that liberalism is an impoverished political conception that is unable to provide or sustain the moral energies necessary for a vital democratic life. They maintain that liberalism has failed, resulting in, inter alia, a nation rife with discontent. Drawing upon classical and renaissance sources, civic republicans present what they claim is a revived and revitalized republican alternative to the reigning political philosophy. In sharp contrast to liberals, who advocate state neutrality and negative liberty, civic republicans believe that the state (political community) should not be neutral toward the ends espoused by its citizens. Indeed, they believe that the state should work to inculcate civic virtue in individuals in order to maintain the true liberty to be found in a self-governing republic. This thesis analyzes civic republicanism by examining the implications of its internal premises, and by comparing and contrasting it with the classical republican tradition and fascism.

Political philosophy which advocates equality, state neutrality, and negative liberty. Liberalism prizes the freedom of individuals to live out their personal conceptions of the good life without state interference. Civic republicanism--also referred to at times as neo-republicanism, civic humanism, or neo-Aristotelianism<sup>4</sup>--has adopted the pose of a counter-philosophy to liberalism. Civic republicans argue that liberalism is an impoverished political conception that is unable to provide or contain the moral energies necessary for a vital democratic life. They maintain that liberalism has failed, resulting in, among other things, a nation rife with discontent. Drawing upon classical and renaissance sources, civic republicans present what they claim is a revived, revitalized, and updated republican alternative to the reigning political philosophy. In sharp contrast to liberalism, the civic republican political conception does not oblige the state to adopt a neutral pose regarding conceptions of the good life. Indeed, civic republicans believe that the state should work to inculcate citizens with civic virtue so that they might serve the common good. Civic republicanism is but one manifestation of a broader, decades-long "republican revival." This revival has included the fields of history and law, in addition to political theory. J.G.A. Pocock's important work *The Machiavellian Moment* is not undeservedly credited with inspiring this reexamination of republican thought and its influence, although the work of other scholars, such as Gordon Wood, has also been widely influential. This has spawned much debate, especially in historical circles. Scholars sympathetic to the republican tradition have subjected the "Hartzian thesis" to intense examination, arguing against the view of an unrivaled liberal tradition in America. Much of this debate has focused on the influence that classical and renaissance republican political thought had upon the Founding Fathers, with members of the "republican school" arguing that it was great indeed. Certainly the historical debate is not unimportant. In fact, some civic republicans think that their cause would be bolstered if it can be shown that the republican school is right about

No figure in the civic republican school of thought occupies a position which is in any way comparable to that which John Rawls occupies within contemporary liberalism. Also, there is no work that is comparable to *A Theory of Justice*. One does not have the luxury of being able to refer to any single "core" civic republican text. Instead, one is forced to rely on scattered, and at times highly divergent, works by various authors. This makes the task of presenting an intelligible profile of civic republican thought quite difficult. It is not, however, utterly impossible. Learning who the civic republicans are is a logical first step in determining what exactly civic republicanism is. Michael Sandel, Cass Sunstein, and Alasdair MacIntyre are the most prominent of those scholars who are generally identified as being in the civic republican camp, and their work is the most comprehensive. As a result, in the discussion to follow I will focus the preponderance of my attention upon their work.



However, from time to time, I will cite the work of other, lesser-known civic republican scholars--such as Frank Michelman, Suzanna Sherry, Shelly Burt, Ronald Heiner, and Philip Pettit - in order to help flesh-out some of civic republicanism's key concepts. Deciding what, if any, uses to make of Quentin Skinner's work is problematic. As a historian of political ideas, he is not normally thought of as a partisan in contemporary political philosophy. Yet in some of his more recent works he has adopted a discernable normative posture vis-a-vis the political visions offered to us by liberalism and republicanism. Therefore, in my attempt to outline civic republican political thought I believe that referencing some of his works is appropriate and helpful, especially when discussing the concept of liberty. However, before fully delving into the discussion of the key principles of civic republicanism, I must first briefly outline the core tenets of liberalism. For, as mentioned in chapter one, civic republicans primarily define their political conception in terms of its contradistinction to liberalism. Unless it is set against the backdrop of modern liberalism, civic republicanism is largely incomprehensible.

### **Liberalism:**

Although it would be an exaggeration to characterize the past twenty-five years of liberal theorizing as but a footnote to A Theory of Justice, it is true that when one thinks of contemporary liberal thought, John Rawls immediately comes to mind. Certainly he has been the most influential liberal theorist in the English-speaking world this century. So while contemporary liberal thought is hardly monolithic, Rawls is most assuredly the greatest liberal exemplar. More importantly, at least in light of my aims in this thesis, when civic republicans proffer their critiques of liberal theory they most often cite the Rawlsian variant.

Therefore, although one should understand the discussion to follow as an explication of the cardinal concepts of liberalism in general, I will give prominent place to the work of John Rawls. I understand liberalism to be a non-perfectionist political philosophy that values equal civil and political liberty; equality of opportunity; social equality; the right to vote; liberty of conscience; freedom of thought and association; protection of the rule of law; and economic reciprocity. It has as its central conception the idea that persons are free and equal by virtue of their possessing the capacity for a conception of the good and the capacity for a sense of justice. Consequently, they have an equal claim to basic liberties and rights. Individuals, according to liberal theory, are inherently equal in worth and dignity, and they are entitled to equal respect. Community must have a shared conception of the good life. Republican politics, they insist, cannot be neutral toward the ends and values that its citizens espouse. Above all others, this idea highlights the glaring difference between civic republicans and liberals. However, one cannot discuss it, or any of civic republicanism's other key principles, in isolation; for, they are all interconnected. Civic republicans assume that a self-governing republic is the most desirable form of political association--it is the good society. As a result, they place a high premium upon citizenship and participation, and emphasize the importance of self-government and political deliberation in their writings.

### **Civic Republicanism's Core Principles:**

As mentioned above, providing an intelligible profile or accurate explanation of civic republicanism is no easy task. One civic republican, Cass Sunstein, insists that civic republican conceptions diverge substantially from another, and that there is no unitary approach that can be classified as republican. Yet there is a common tone of ant liberal opposition that runs through the writings of the civic republicans. Furthermore, even the most idiosyncratic civic republicans adhere to some common and fairly specific central principles. It is upon these commonalities that I will concentrate in this discussion. For civic republicans, virtue, in particular civic virtue, is certainly an issue of common focus. It is arguably the central principle inherent in all civic republican theory. Steven Gey calls it civic republicanism's leitmotif. Nonetheless, it is not the only important principle. Citizenship, duty, community deliberation, positive liberty, and a concern for "the good" are also key pillars of the political conception. Like classical republicans, and unlike modern liberals, civic republicans would have us imagine a life in which the good is not banished to the sidelines. In fact, the good is bound up with virtue and stands at the heart civic republican thought. Civic republicans argue that a political

### **Criticisms of Liberalism**

As mentioned previously, its opposition to liberalism provides much of civic republicanism's self-identity. Civic republicans believe that liberalism is impoverished and lacks the vision necessary to sustain self-government. They blame liberalism for causing "the anxiety of the age" --the erosion of community and the loss of self-government. When making their criticisms, civic republicans focus on three principal areas: state neutrality, the liberal conception of the individual, and the liberal conception of freedom. Civic republicans are dissatisfied with the liberal notion of state neutrality. The idea that the state should not favor or promote any doctrine of the good life is anathema to civic



republicans. Not only do they think that this enfeebles a people's ability to exercise self-government, they contend that it creates disenchantment. Furthermore, civic republicans think that state neutrality creates a moral void that "opens the way for intolerance and other misguided moralism.

#### **Civic Republicanism, Liberalism, and Modernity:**

Modernity is a slippery term. It can mean many things to many different people. However, for civic republicans the term generally denotes something negative. The unease that civic republicans feel for modernity is implicitly, and at times explicitly, contained in nearly all of their writings. They believe that contemporary society is suffering from a malaise--the malaise of modernity. Civic republicans decry modern secularization--the loss of faith and moral horizons. Modern man, they argue, is unsettled and atomistic. Western society has become impersonal, abstract, and fragmented. It is characterized by decay and dreary conformism. Virtue has disappeared and we are living in a moral wasteland. The moral fabric of community has eroded. Indeed, the moral language of society itself might be said to have evaporated. Civic republicans believe that modernity is liberalism incarnate. Modernity and liberalism are so inextricably intertwined in their minds that they often use the terms synonymously. And since civic republicans understand modern western culture to have been shaped by the liberal individualism of which John Rawls's theory of justice is the central contemporary representation, they feel justified in pointing to liberalism in order to explain many of society's woes. They contend, for example, that liberalism's insistence on bracketing off comprehensive doctrines of the good, etc., has contributed to the evaporation of our moral language that state neutrality has helped to erode the virtue of the citizenry; and that liberalism's "radically individualistic" conception of the self is largely responsible for undermining our sense of community. In short, liberalism is to blame for the dusty taste in modern man's mouth.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Central to liberalism (particularly Rawls's) is the idea that the self is prior to its ends. Liberals assume that individuals are self-authenticating sources of valid claims. The liberal self is a free and independent, rationally prudent chooser, who is independent of the desires and ends he may have at any given moment. Pluralism is the fundamental problem liberalism attempts to address. Liberalism presupposes a disparate polity wherein manifold competing conceptions of the "good life" exist, and it holds that individuals have a right to pursue whatever conception of "the good" they choose. Therefore, the principle of state neutrality is pivotal. In a liberal polity, political principles are to be neutral with respect to "controversial doctrines of the good." The state is not to try to cultivate virtue or affirm any particular end. The right, not the good, is to serve as the basis of political organization, and the right is to have priority over the good. In addition, the state should work to ensure that all citizens have an equal opportunity to advance their own conception of the good; the state should do nothing to favor or promote any particular conception of the good; and the state should do nothing that will make it more likely that individuals will accept any one particular

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