

Review essay

A Political Philosophy in Public Life: Civic Republicanism in Zapatero's Spain

José Luis Martí and Philip Pettit

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010

Reviewed by Stuart White

When parties lose elections badly, this is often taken as a sign that the party needs to think again and think hard about the question: 'What do we stand for?'

In March 2000 the Spanish Socialist Party suffered a second, emphatic election defeat to the conservative Popular Party. Following the defeat, the Socialists elected a new leader, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, whose base of enthusiastic support came from a young group of party activists calling themselves the 'New Way'. But what, exactly, was this New Way? Although the term had clear echoes of New Labour's Third Way, there was a concern that this wasn't distinct enough from the policies of the previous Socialist government of Felipe González or, indeed, from the politics of the centre-right governments of José María Aznar. After some initial, tentative groping for themes and ideas, an academic advisor, José Andrés Torres Mora, turned Zapatero's attention to a book published by the Princeton-based political philosopher, Philip Pettit: *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Pettit, 1997). Zapatero seized on its ideas. Republicanism was the Socialist New Way.

On 11 March 2004 a terrorist attack in Madrid by a group with links to Al Quaida killed 191 people and injured another 1,858. Occurring just three days before the upcoming general election, it – along with the Aznar government's somewhat cynical efforts to suggest that Basque terrorists might be responsible for the attack – caused a last minute shift in support from the Popular Party to the Socialists. Zapatero became Spain's prime minister.

Following this victory, Zapatero invited Pettit to come and give some lectures and seminars on his philosophy of republicanism. Eager to show that this was not just intellectual window-dressing, Zapatero invited Pettit to return in a few years to write a republican audit of the government and to present his evaluation of the government's record in a public lecture.

The book under review seeks to tell the story of this unusually close identification of a political leader and his government with a very specific political philosophy. It consists of an essay by José Luis Martí setting out the political context to the adoption and reception of Pettit's ideas; an essay by Pettit setting out his conception of republicanism; the text of Pettit's lecture from 2007 which presents his largely positive, but critical, assessment of the government's republican record; an interview of Zapatero by Pettit; and a joint essay by Martí and Pettit on what makes for an effective political philosophy for public, political use.

Although published in 2010, the bulk of the book's material addresses the period before the great economic crash of 2008. This means it reads frequently like a postcard from a

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bygone, more innocent age. But there are occasional glimpses of the storm on the horizon. And on Pettit's part there is dissatisfaction with the form of republican politics. Repeatedly, he urges the need for a new social movement politics as a complement to the efforts of the Socialist government.

Perhaps the first thing to clarify is just what Pettit's republicanism consists in. Along with the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, Pettit is responsible in contemporary political theory for clarifying a distinctive conception of freedom: freedom as 'non-domination' (Skinner, 1998). In his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau says that 'the worst thing that can happen to one in the relations between man and man is to find oneself at the mercy of another' (Rousseau, 1984, 125). This captures the idea at the core of Pettit's understanding of freedom. A person is unfree when he or she is living 'at the mercy' of another; that is, when another has a power to interfere, entirely according to the power-holder's own will, in his or her life. Freedom consists in the absence of this power relationship: hence, in 'non-domination'.

Pettit and Skinner contrast this view of freedom with what they see as the 'liberal' conception of freedom as the absence of interference. Domination and interference are by no means the same. One can be dominated, and thus unfree, even if one does not experience much in the way of actual interference. For example, a slave is dominated by their owner even if the owner is too lazy or benevolent to boss the slave around very much. And, by the same token, interference need not entail domination. Domination arises when some party has a power of *arbitrary* interference in another's life. But interference need not be arbitrary either in the sense of lacking appropriate justification or being at the whim of the power-holder. Traffic laws certainly amount to interference. But typically they have a justification that tracks the subject's own interests and the authority they give state officials is clearly delimited. Pettit's and Skinner's tendency to read into the contrast between freedom as non-domination and non-interference, a contrast between republican and liberal views of freedom is, I think, unpersuasive and distracting. (Liberal thinkers such as J. S. Mill have certainly been as concerned about freedom as non-domination as freedom as non-interference). But there is no doubt that their contrast of the two conceptions of freedom itself is a valuable contribution, helping us clarify a distinctive and important normative concern in political life.

Republicanism, then, in Pettit's sense, is the project of creating a political and social regime in which every person enjoys freedom as non-domination. On the one hand, this requires positive state action to ensure that relationships in society and the economy, such as in the household or the workplace, do not involve domination. On the other hand, it also requires action on the state itself, to help prevent the state dominating individuals. In part, this requires attention to the structures of the state. Decision-makers must be accountable and every decision 'contestable'. But it also requires a degree of active political engagement by the citizenry. An active citizenry can bring vital pressure to bear to make sure that state officials and processes treat people with the respect necessary for freedom as non-domination. The focus on freedom, moreover, is not to the exclusion of equality. Specific kinds of inequality – economic, political, of civic status – must be reduced or eliminated in order to secure freedom as non-domination for all citizens.

So how did the first Zapatero government (2004-8) fare by the standards of freedom as non-domination? As indicated already, Pettit's evaluation is positive. The government introduced a batch of new laws which could plausibly claim to be advancing freedom as non-domination. These included the introduction of same-sex marriage which powerfully affirmed the equal standing of gays and lesbians in Spanish society (June 2005); a new Dependency Act (November 2006) which gave new welfare rights to disabled people and

their carers, reducing their vulnerability to domination; a Law of Equality (March 2007) which increased women's rights to 'play an equal part with men in public life and the workforce' (p. 79); as well as initiatives to improve the position of illegal immigrants and workers on temporary contracts, among the most vulnerable to domination in the labour market. Consistent with the republican approach to the state, Zapatero's government also introduced greater freedom for the 'Autonomous Communities' such as Catalonia; a law to increase the power of parliament over the deployment of Spanish troops abroad; and it put the public TV broadcasting service on an independent footing. Pettit also regards its efforts to engage in talks with the Basque terrorist group, ETA, as sensible, notwithstanding their ultimate failure. He notes that this was all in the context of a 'buoyant' economy with low rates of unemployment by recent historical standards.

That said, Pettit is far from painting Zapatero's Spain as a republican utopia. He notes with concern the continuing problem of delay in the legal system which works against the effective rule of law. He bemoans the lack of independence of the body with responsibility for appointing judges (the Consejo General del Poder Judicial). He presses Zapatero to justify cuts to corporation tax, concerned at a possible European-wide race-to-the-bottom in tax rates. He describes the economy not only as 'buoyant' but as 'unbalanced', and there is a brief, worried nod to the asset bubble in house prices.

Moreover, while Spain may have had a republican government, Pettit is not at all sure it has a republican *politics*. What seems to be missing is a sufficiently organised and critical civil society:

In a complex society, the exercise of civic vigilance cannot be conducted by individuals alone, since the informational demands are too heavy. It is best conducted via independent, nongovernmental organisations ... Only bodies of such a kind can monitor government with a professional level of expertise ... The interest in civic vigilance is evident in Spain from the number of mass demonstrations. But the proper conduct of civic invigilation requires the expertise of nongovernmental organisations, and I worry that these do not have a sufficiently strong presence in Spanish civil life. (p. 92)

The book is very interesting in its parts and as a whole, but there are two pieces I feel are missing.

The book makes the point very strongly that Pettit's republicanism struck a chord because of its affinities with Spain's own republican political tradition. But I would like to have learned more about the wider intellectual and political milieu of this republican revival. We learn what Zapatero's government does with the idea, and what Pettit thinks of this. But what are others doing with republicanism? What other political projects is it thought to support? For example, some republican thinkers in contemporary Spain have drawn on this approach to make a strong case for an unconditional basic income or Citizen's Income (Raventós, 2007). But, although an extensive bibliography offers some pointers to relevant texts, there is not much direct discussion of this or other republican intellectual currents in the book.

The book also cries out for a post-crash commentary (1). Given what we now know about the Spanish and global economies, and given the developments in Spanish society and politics since the crash, what would a republican audit look like today? This is not just a question of evaluating the government's record since 2007-8 but also of taking stock of republicanism itself as a critical tool. Did the republican audit of 2007 miss things out? If so, was this inevitable human error, or does it reflect some flaw inherent in the republican

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perspective itself? Do subsequent developments call for revision or refinement of republicanism?

One key question mark here, of course, hangs over the treatment of the economy and, in particular, the role and position of the banks. What can a republican analysis contribute to public discussion of banking? Is the concept of domination applicable here? Can we say that banks acquired in the boom years a degree of concentrated power which put them in a position of domination over the wider society? If so, how do we, as citizens, address this putative problem of domination?

Another question, which Pettit could hardly have anticipated in 2007, concerns the politics of austerity. No sooner had the banks been bailed out than the problem of bank indebtedness gave way to that of government indebtedness. In many countries, and certainly in the UK, the resulting deficit reduction packages have been grotesquely unjust in the way they have distributed the burdens of the fiscal squeeze. The situation does not appear to be much better in Spain, with some commentators on the left arguing that Zapatero's government chose to tackle the budget deficit through swingeing public spending cuts rather than reverse tax cuts made earlier in the decade (Escolar, 2012). What does this say about the nature and distribution of power in our societies? Why is it so hard to achieve a deficit reduction program that really does live up to the nostrum that 'We are all in it together'? If republicanism is to be a useful philosophy for public life, then it must find the resources to explore these questions and to think about how to challenge the underlying concentrations of power.

This brings us back to Pettit's concern about the nature of republican politics itself. The past year will be remembered in Spanish politics not only for the heavy defeat of the Spanish Socialists in the recent general election but also for the upsurge of the May 15 movement. 'We needed to express ourselves as citizens, but how? To assume our proper nature we had to break the silence' (Pérez and Barnett, 2011). Taking its own cue from Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring, the May 15 movement has helped in turn to stimulate similar tent city mass protests around the world, notably through the Occupy movement. Here is Anthony Barnett's evocative description of the civic space created by the May 15 movement in Madrid:

...the tent city is not a market place packed with commodities for sale, spices laid out to consider or carpets hanging on display for you to look at and think of buying. Instead there are words. Words are being offered and exchanged. Words everywhere: notices, slogans, banners, jokes, announcements, leaflets, marker-scrawled schedules, maps of the current layout of stalls and services, in notebooks, on notices, in suggestion boxes and on screens. And words are on everyone's lips. Everywhere there are conversations, enquiries, discussion, people meeting in small circles. In the communications tent laptops cover wobbly tables, running thanks to a noisy generator that powers the lights and the excellent speaker system that is strung throughout the encampment. And a torrent of words in the general assemblies and different commissions, live-streamed, broadcast, shared with other cities signalled in sign language beside speakers at all the major events, personifying the energy and effort to communicate to everyone especially those usually excluded. (Barnett, 2011)

What is a republican to make of this? This kind of citizen action doesn't fit Pettit's two categories of 'demonstrations' on the one hand and NGOs on the other. Barnett's description suggests the *agora* – the space where citizens meet to discuss and debate and exchange ideas. Key questions, perhaps strenuously ignored by politicians, are emphatically posed.

Diverse proposals are canvassed and exchanged. The deliberative, contestatory impact is not necessarily confined to those physically in the space, but can ripple out through various citizen-controlled media. Thus far, at least in some advanced capitalist countries, Occupy spaces seem to have helped widen the terms of mainstream political debate about the problems of contemporary capitalism. And these spaces need to be seen in the context of wider efforts to build new forms of active citizenship: in the UK, one might cite the growing interest in community organising stimulated by London Citizens, as well as recent initiatives ranging from Climate Camp, Transition Towns, and UK Uncut, to the innovative 'Spartacus' campaign by disability rights activists.

Republican political theory must be responsive to the many ways citizens create to press their interests against the powerful. Now is probably a good time for the academics of republicanism to take a little leave from the ivory towers, go into the tent cities, and see what we have to learn.

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Note

1. Pettit has recently written a blog post which interestingly tries this: Pettit, 2011.