

## Women and the History of Republicanism

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## Women and the History of Republicanism

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Sandrine Bergès's [2021] fascinating lead article has justifiably stimulated a vigorous debate amongst the respondents that will contribute significantly to scholarship in this field. In this short editorial coda, I cannot do justice to all of the responses, even though each is valuable and instructive. I should like, first of all, briefly to review each contribution. In the remainder of what I have to say, I shall then respond in more general terms about the nature of the overall project of reading historical women philosophers as part of the republican tradition, with the aim of tackling what I consider to be some misconceptions. In so doing, I will address myself mostly to Karen Green's [2021] article which is the most sceptical about the endeavour, although I shall also engage with Lena Halldenius [2021]. I should say up front that I found both contributions to be extremely insightful and tightly argued.

One of the most encouraging aspects of reading the responses to Bergès's article is the breadth of perspective that the contributors have taken both in working out how best to understand women's historic philosophy and in extending our ideas about what counts as republican. Martin Fog Lantz Arndal [2021] helpfully draws our attention to the role that religious ideas and convictions play in the history of republican thought, and in particular in the philosophy of both Wollstonecraft and Germaine de Staël. This is an element that is often overlooked by scholars seeking to tease out and recreate the specifically republican elements of their thought, especially if their aim is to bring historical work into dialogue with contemporary republican debates. While, in my view, the religious and the republican elements in, say, Wollstonecraft's political philosophy can be distinguished, and a secular republican position can usefully be articulated, there is no doubt that the Christian motivation in her thinking is both subtle and significant, and deserving of fuller appreciation. This case can be generalised to numerous other thinkers of the period, both male and female, including for example, Catharine Macaulay and Richard Price.

However, against the almost millenarian optimism that some of these writers can exude, Spyridon Tegos [2021] traces Sophie de Grouchy's concerns about a more dangerous possibility, that of an unconstrained religious enthusiasm. He builds up to this by way of a very welcome—and clearly explained—integration of the doctrine of sympathy into republican historical thought, rooted in Adam Smith's thought and developed by Grouchy. This represents a genuine enlargement of the range of ideas normally thought available to republicans. Patrick Ball [2021] expands this range still further by exploring the philosophical content of direct political action itself, as well as in the interplay between that action and the written treatise. This is an

innovative and complicated idea, and Ball rightly reminds us that we must remember that not everything comes back to philosophy, and that action can have other purposes. Nevertheless, it remains a very promising way of giving both voice and dignity to the women who have taken matter into their own hands and effected great change without due recognition.

Martina Reuter [2021], in her contribution, examines Gouges's often overlooked or misunderstood arguments towards an equality for women as active citizens that acknowledges and respects sexual difference. Cautioning us not to read back contemporary ideas about the distinctness of the concepts of sameness and difference, Reuter places Gouges in the context of reactions to seventeenth century debates on the subject, ultimately giving an impeccably and philosophically republican solution (though Reuter does not express it as such), namely that if women are to be true equals as citizens and under law, they must be permitted and empowered to take part in the formation of that law, including in the eligibility for office and in the distribution of wealth. In this, Gouges anticipates a very similar structure of argument to Wollstonecraft the following year in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Only when the sexes can come together on an equal basis to set the terms of their shared social, economic, and political lives, taking account of their different perspectives, interests, and aims, can there be genuine freedom from tyranny or domination.

## 1. Women and the History of Republicanism

The project of uncovering and exploring the philosophical richness of women's historic political writings is as refreshing as it is illuminating. With any undertaking of this scale, it is often necessary to restrict one's focus in order to probe the subject more deeply. The choice to focus on the republican tradition is a productive one since, in contrast to the longstanding and widespread belief that republican theorising has been the preserve of men, there is a deep pool of women who not only drew on republican principles in what they wrote but who contributed, both individually and collectively, to the theoretical development of the tradition. The late eighteenth century was a particularly productive period for women's writing with respect to republican theory, as the papers in this issue bring out. Not only were the discourses surrounding the American and French revolutions often couched in republican ideals but so too were many of the debates for other emancipatory causes, such as the abolition of slavery and religious equality. As more and more women were finding the opportunity to write and publish, we should not be surprised that they drew on the intellectual resources that surrounded them, and these included principles that we would now describe as republican. Beyond the eighteenth century, we can see a growing number of women writing in the same philosophical vein into the nineteenth century. These include, amongst many others, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Hays, and Mary Shelley in Britain, and Frances Wright, Harriet Jacobs, and Anna Julia Cooper in the United States.

Green [2021] levels two kinds of challenge to those who read not only Olympe de Gouges, Sophie de Grouchy, and Marie-Jeanne Roland, but several others including Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay, as republicans. The first is methodological. It is generally problematic, she argues, to read historical women's writing through the lens of contemporary philosophical concepts developed by men who have not consulted women in their construction. Here the prime culprit is said to

be Philip Pettit's republicanism and his ideal of freedom as non-domination. Women's historical political work should instead be read on its own terms and in the context of its production. The second challenge is substantive. Rather than through a republican lens, Green argues, these writers should be understood as making use of an ideal of positive liberty underpinned by certain theological commitments. Here, she invokes Macaulay as her main exemplar. I shall say something about both challenges, but I will note first of all that this second challenge is compatible with a republican reading properly understood.

My argument shall be that, far from representing an ahistorical misattribution or even a historical aberration, women writing as republicans constitute a diverse and productive strand that has the potential both to change our perspectives about the tradition and to contribute to present theoretical discourses. Women wrote on their own terms within this framework, collectively challenging the patriarchal and prejudicial notions that infused both their culture and the theoretical resources at their disposal, thereby contributing to the reconstruction of notions of gender that republican proponents advocate today. Not every woman wrote about gender, of course, and their contribution was not confined to this subject. In my view, Macaulay could plausibly be regarded as the preeminent republican philosopher—male or female—of the eighteenth century [Coffee [Forthcoming](#)].<sup>1</sup> Across her nine volumes of history, philosophical treatises and reflections, and political pamphlets, she developed by far the most extensive and thoroughly worked-through republican position of her generation. Though John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon before her, and Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and Thomas Paine as her contemporaries, receive more attention from republican scholars, on any balanced review Macaulay would be accorded a prominent place in the republican pantheon.

In the next section I will address Green's first challenge by setting out some fundamental differences between Pettit's contemporary neo-republicanism and the historic ideal. After that, I examine the structure of republican freedom as it was conceived in the eighteenth century. While Bergès [2021] is in my view right to place Gouges, Grouchy, and Roland in dialogue with Rousseau's republicanism given the French Revolutionary context and their specific philosophical concerns, I nevertheless briefly offer a more generic articulation of republicanism that focuses only on the internal logic of the core idea of freedom itself. The benefit of this approach is that it connects our three French writers with Macaulay as Green [2021] recommends, as well as with others such as Wollstonecraft. In the final section, I address the question of whether historic republicanism was an essentially masculine ideal. I argue that it was not. The conception of freedom as independence that women worked with in the eighteenth century, and the associated social, moral, and political implications that resulted, stand as a valid philosophical variation on its basic conception. Indeed, many of their ideas are the ones we now accept as most plausibly following from a normative commitment to equal freedom. To that extent, women writing as republicans do not represent an aberration but, rather, collectively they form a distinctive strand of thought that today's republicans should now look to as one of their primary theoretical resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding my republican leanings, I should note that I regard Green alongside Wendy Gunther-Canada as the best Macaulay scholars writing today, even if neither employs a specifically republican philosophical key.

## 2. Republicanism: A Capacious and Confusing Term

In asking whether certain historical women writers should be considered as republicans, we must first identify what our purpose is. There is, for example, a great benefit for republicans today in recognising and understanding how concepts developed by historic (as well as contemporary) women force them to reconsider their core assumptions and to revise their models accordingly. In this context, I have argued that Wollstonecraft analyses social prejudices and biased norms as forms of arbitrary power in their own right [Coffee 2013]. This has significant implications for republicans because it undercuts their central commitment to an ideal of freedom under institutions that are governed by rational discourse, since public reason itself can be subverted by a prejudicial environment. Wollstonecraft offers an innovative theoretical solution that republicans would, in my view, do well to adopt. The collaborative creation of a set of social norms that reflect the input, perspectives, and interests of all sections of the political community must be considered as part of the republican model rather than simply as one of its enabling conditions. Bergès's [2021] article gives today's republicans several useful insights brought by women, such as in Gouges's ideas of family, competition, and mimesis in the state of nature, Grouchy's understanding of the role of sympathy, and Roland's navigation of equality and difference concerning gender roles.

However, while the benefits to current republican theorists of recognising the relevance of women's historic contribution should not be overlooked, I maintain with Bergès [ibid.] and others that a republican paradigm remains both valid and appropriate even when these philosophers are read on their own terms and in their social and intellectual context. It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that any thinker should be read only in republican terms and I make no such claim. However, while there are many valuable ways to interpret and understand these historic women, I would argue that in many cases a republican framework is the optimal way to approach the particularities of aspects of their thought. I cannot discuss this in detail here, though excellent work has been done in this regard not only by Bergès but also by Halldenius [2015] amongst others. What I can do, however, is attempt to dispel the idea that the republican reading of historic women's philosophy represents a retrospective application of Pettit's particular present-day framework.

As we use it in political discourse, the republican label is a contemporary one. It can be applied historically in a variety of ways. In some contexts it may refer to the society of a particular location or period, in others to a set of political concerns, objectives or allegiances, and in still others to a commitment to certain core philosophical and normative principles. These senses are conceptually distinct, if often in practice overlapping. There is no single historic understanding or set of issues at stake, and neither is there, in Halldenius's [2021] phrase, a 'republican flag' under which to write. The result can be confusing with scholars talking at cross purposes. In a political sense, for example, it would be wrong to refer to Mary Astell as a republican, given her High Tory principles, as Green [2021] notes. It is, however, helpful to analyse aspects of Astell's social philosophy as embodying an ideal of freedom that has a particular logical structure, such as where she articulates women's condition as one of servitude in her *Reflections on Marriage* (1700). Astell sometimes shares this use with later writers such as Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, and Gouges whom I regard as writing within the republican tradition in this restricted, philosophical sense. In what

follows, I shall be solely concerned with philosophical republicanism as a commitment to a distinctive conception of freedom. Speaking personally, if it were up to me, I would jettison the term ‘republican’ in this context, and write instead of a theory of ‘freedom as independence from arbitrary power’. Alas, I do not make the rules.

Pettit’s is the most well-known and fully-developed current articulation of philosophical republicanism, and so it is understandable that his work is often invoked to bring historic ideas into dialogue with current debates. Nevertheless, while Pettit’s ideas are recognisably part of the overall republican tradition, we must bear in mind that they were developed in a specific and contemporary context. He takes the classical notion of freedom understood as the antonym of ‘slavery or, more generally, subjection to the will of another’, and recasts it in ‘more analytic terms’ [Pettit 2003: 394]. He does this for a particular audience, aiming to demonstrate its viability to political liberals. Pettit [1997] positions his idea of non-domination as a negative form of freedom—albeit one distinct from the standard conception of liberal non-interference—couched in explicitly non-moralised, non-sectarian, and consequentialist terms. As versatile as Pettit’s republicanism is, it does not exhaust the possibilities for a notion of freedom from subjection to another’s will and it should not be taken as being identical with earlier iterations of this idea. Certainly, the features highlighted—non-moralised, consequentialist, negative—are not found in eighteenth-century models which are infused with a notion of natural law. However, while the differences between Pettit’s and earlier frameworks are significant, we can still recognise certain core structures and principles in common, just as liberal scholars routinely, if cautiously, draw parallels between current liberal thinking and the historic work of writers such as Locke, Kant, and Mill.<sup>2</sup>

This much said, I am solely concerned here with the historic understanding of republicanism as a philosophical ideal.

### 3. Freedom as Independence, Equality, and Virtue

The eighteenth-century conception of freedom that is now described as republican is a complex ideal that comprises three constituent parts: independence, equality, and virtue. We find this use in Macaulay and Wollstonecraft, as well as in others at the time such as Richard Price [Coffee 2013, 2017, 2019].<sup>3</sup> These components are held together in a delicate balance such that persons cannot be free unless they are independent, they cannot be independent unless they are the equals of others in their society, and these two conditions cannot obtain without a high degree of both individual and collective civic virtue. Not only are these elements each necessary but any deficiency in one undermines the quality of the others—inequality generates dependence, and dependence is said necessarily to corrupt virtue. This corruption spreads, affecting not only those immediately implicated in the dependent relationship (both dominator and dominated) but throughout society. The politics of the court, for example, not only infected the aristocracy as well as the lowly courtiers, but these people brought these abusive attitudes home. A disaffected courtier would mistreat his wife, who in turn

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while usually viewed as part of the liberal tradition, each of these philosophers could equally plausibly and helpfully be considered as writing in a republican tradition.

<sup>3</sup> This tripartite division of freedom is also found in Lena Halldenius’s work [2015]. While we understand the precise internal relationship of these ideas differently in places, overall I am in substantial agreement with Halldenius on this as in many other aspects of her analysis of historical republican thinking.

would tyrannise her servants [Wollstonecraft 1787: 63]. The corruption of virtue and its inexorable replication throughout society, which thereby undermines the basis of a free society, is perhaps the central idea running through Macaulay's entire eight-volume *History of England*.

Constructed this way, freedom is a social and relational ideal that can only be exercised in community with others living under certain stringent civil and institutional conditions that ensure that the constitutive components of a free way of life are maintained. Government must be reflective of, and responsive to, the inclusive common interests of the entire citizenry. The citizens, for their part, are required to develop their own civic virtue. Chief amongst these virtues are, first, the capacity and willingness to think for themselves rationally and in accordance with the moral law, and secondly, to favour the common good over their own private interest. Personal virtue is something that must be learned and cultivated, and which can only take root under suitable social conditions. The responsibility for maintaining these conditions falls to government. This means that patterns of systematic dependence—politically, legally, socially, or economically—must be eradicated as a matter of priority. There must also be a high degree of equality amongst the citizens, not only formally under the law, but, as Macaulay and especially Wollstonecraft note, also socially and economically. Women can, of course, challenge subjection using any theoretical resources. Nevertheless, the philosophical structure of freedom as independence offers a helpful frame of reference, allowing women to identify and challenge internal inconsistencies and failures of logic, such as where Macaulay brings the same language of prerogative, that she identifies as being so harmful politically, into her criticism of prevailing domestic power relations, or where Wollstonecraft sees in women's dependence a parallel with the dangers posed to society by slavery [Coffee 2013; Forthcoming].

While Green [2021] acknowledges that Macaulay is a republican, she does not attribute to Macaulay the above model. Green does not specify in what sense she understands the term 'republican' but it would appear to be in a historic, political sense. Regarding freedom itself, she argues that Macaulay (as well as our three French authors) should be understood as using a conception of positive freedom rather than the republican alternative. It should be noted, first, that there is no contradiction between describing someone's position on freedom as being both positive and republican.<sup>4</sup> However, while it is true that aspects of Macaulay's philosophy do entail positive elements, this does not capture her full position. In general, I find the distinction between positive and negative freedom unhelpful in an eighteenth-century context, since it is a later distinction and is more indicative of our contemporary preoccupations. Reflecting the complex variety of elements from which it is comprised, the republican position on freedom that I attribute to Macaulay is a hybrid term embodying both positive and negative aspects. Individually, freedom entails an independence of mind that requires people to govern their conduct in accordance with the dictates of reason and the moral law. This does entail positive self-mastery as Green [*ibid.*] notes, and collectively the laws of the republic should reflect these same rational and moral principles. At the same time, since liberty of mind cannot be imposed, there must

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, if there were such a contradiction it would mean that a great number of historical men now considered to be republicans—such as Trenchard and Gordon, or Price—should not be so considered because of their clear advocacy of, and reliance on, notions of positive freedom. This would represent a radical reconsideration of the tradition.



be a high degree of negative freedom within the state in order to allow citizens to develop their moral personalities and consciences, as well as to develop their knowledge and experience so that they can contribute to the free flow of debate upon which social and political progress is predicated.

#### 4. Is Republicanism Masculine?

Lena Halldenius [2021] notes that feminists have not in general warmed to republican thinking, at least in part because of the sexism that forms part of its conceptual foundations. In response, Halldenius has written extensively—and insightfully—on Wollstonecraft as a feminist republican, although she uses this label cautiously [Halldenius 2015: 16–17]. In her reply to Bergès, Halldenius [2021] accepts that Gouges, Grouchy, and Roland should be considered as republicans. However, invoking the distinction between historical practice and normative theory, she emphasises throughout that to attribute to these writers an idea of equality for women as citizens should count as a ‘subversion rather than an application of late eighteenth-century republican thought’ [ibid.: 381], even if it is a subversion from within its fold. Halldenius makes clear that she is referring here to historical rather than normative republicanism. On the surface, this seems right and, as I often am, I am in substantial agreement with much of what Halldenius has to say. Historically, republicans had no place for women as citizens, and the very idea of their becoming citizens directly challenged the way that many of its central concepts and principles had long been understood. This much said, I believe the matter of whether women’s historic republican theorising was subversive is not so easily settled.

While the distinction between contingent historical instantiation and fundamental theoretical principle may be analytically clear, in practice it is not easily drawn. Halldenius [ibid.] discusses the ‘foundations of the republican conceptual world’, referring to the prevailing intellectual and cultural ideas within which normative republican principles were worked out and contested. Even considered in its historic manifestations, republicanism is not a monolithic or static ideal but has shifted constantly over time, and each variation must be assessed within the parameters set by the formal philosophical commitments that allow us to class something as being ‘republican’. Suppose that we grant that the republican tradition from its inception in Ancient Rome has been ubiquitously patriarchal and masculine, it would not necessarily follow that for women to challenge these norms’ orthodoxy by their presence and in their writing was subversive. In the absence of a clear stipulation to the contrary, to say of an innovation that it is a ‘subversion’ risks conferring theoretical authority on the status quo. Handing over ownership of the historic republican ideal to its patriarchal representatives is, I believe, something we should resist.

While patriarchy may have been historically pervasive, it was also a contradiction of republicanism’s normative basis if we take its essence as applying to all human agents irrespective of time or place. We now recognise women’s exclusion as a misapplication of republican principles properly stated. Our understanding of these principles has been continually contested and has developed over time. Whether we regard women’s demands—first to be included on an equal basis as citizens, and subsequently to reshape received ideas about how republican principles should be understood in light of their inclusion—as a subversion will turn on how we understand this demand: as a radical overturning of republican theoretical fundamentals or as an



innovative breakthrough that brought those fundamentals closer to being realised. We might draw a parallel with the historic acceptance of slavery. The theoretical contradictions within the republican model of the practice of institutional slavery were evident even in Roman times, and yet republican society was to some extent slave-based almost everywhere until the nineteenth century. Where emancipatory and abolitionist movements arose, they challenged the complacency, self-deception, and cognitive dissonance involved in this long-accepted abuse. My own view is that it would be misleading to describe the liberation of subject peoples as a subversion of historic republican practice from within. It was, rather, a necessary corrective championed by a minority who went on to change the tradition as a whole, bringing it closer to its theoretical ideals.

Another example can be found in the core concept of ‘virtue’ that Halldenius [ibid.] discusses. She argues that ‘the virtue of women had nothing to do with’ the historically prevailing idealised picture of male public spiritedness [ibid.: 384]. Substantively, this is correct. But at a higher level of abstraction, republican virtue simply refers to those behaviours and dispositions upon which the freedom of state depends. Precisely how those are understood has shifted repeatedly over time to reflect the character of the society in question from its classical origins, through Machiavellian *virtù*, the rise of commercial society, to our own contemporary democratic and egalitarian norms. The redefinition of virtue to include feminine values is a remarkable achievement. While this was subversive with respect to entrenched but corrupt attitudes, I regard the women that enabled us to understand its necessity as pioneers of the republicanism to which we are now heirs.

Women had been written out of the history of republican theorising. As their presence has become acknowledged, and their writings have been studied, it has become apparent this was no mere local anomaly confined to a few philosophers such as Wollstonecraft. There is a substantial body of work written by women that spans a considerable period. While their output was particularly marked in the century that runs from Macaulay’s *Histories* to, say, Harriet Taylor and the *Subjection of Women* (1869), their antecedents can be found much earlier. This writing is recognisably republican in the philosophical sense—and particularly in its use of the concept of freedom as independence—and contributes to a much richer overall conception of republican concerns than the narrow scholarly fixation with the key male sources from Machiavelli to Price had bequeathed, for example by shifting our focus to the family and domestic life; enlarging our understanding of central political concepts such as citizenship, equality, freedom, and virtue; broadening the range of human drivers by discussing sympathy, competition and mimesis; and by developing theories of structural domination. The historic male perspective in no way represents the default to which women’s ideas must conform. After all, in many of these cases, it is women’s perspectives that most closely reflect our own today.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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