

Eco-republicanism

This article argues that eco-republicanism is a good, perhaps the best, model for an ecocentric and therefore ecologically sustainable polity. Conversely, it maintains that ecocentrism (and arguably only that) would enable a republican project to fully realize its goals. It begins by describing the chief characteristics of civic republicanism, concentrating on the Florentine or Atlantic tradition. It then considers the changes to that model that would follow from clearly defining the 'common good' as fundamentally ecological in a sense that includes but is far from only concerned with human beings. It also begins to address the implications of deep-green civic duty, the need for a corresponding emphasis in education, and the difficult question of how to institute and protect ecocentrism from destructive sectarian meddling (which is anti-republican by definition), no matter how popular or 'democratic'.

What I want to do here (and all there is room for) is to sketch out the basic idea, possibility and need of an ecocentric republicanism, that is, one that is fully ecological. After briefly introducing civic republicanism, I shall argue that it extends naturally into eco-republicanism, and that only in this way can civic republicanism realize its full potential and avoid failure. But the potential benefits don't all run one way; it seems to me that republicanism, suitably adapted, is the most promising political programme for realizing ecocentrism. This mutual cross-fertilization then coincides in the ultimate point of the whole exercise: developing an adequate response to the contemporary ecocrisis and helping to guide ecocentric citizens' actions.¹

The most considerable context for this essay is therefore anthropogenic ecocide and the resulting ecocrisis. Given limited space, however, I shall assume that most readers are aware of these and need no persuading to take them seriously. Concurrently, however, much of the human polity is also breaking into the fragments, often mutually antagonistic, sometimes described as 'identity politics'. These are based on self-identification as a particular gender (including no-gender), sexual

preference group, race, class (albeit less so these days) and/or nationality – a political tendency which includes the reactionary Right fully as much as the progressive Left. 'Intersectionality' simply takes these essentialized fragments as givens to be linked up.

In a particularly pointed irony, the resulting attrition of widely shared values and unifying ideals weakens our ability to defend the greatest common good: the ecosystemic health of the Earth, upon which all human enterprises, including politics, completely depend. This is our unavoidable starting-point – although to say so, as deep greens know, is to invite opprobrium. It is also the greatest potential strength of a greened republicanism.

Civic republicanism

Civic republicanism² is a political tradition with roots as old as Aristotle's politics and ethics, then the classical humanism of Livy and Cicero. It was influentially redefined by Machiavelli in the late-15th to early-16th century, and again, differently, by Rousseau in the 18th century, when it was also enacted, to some extent, by the founding fathers of the American Revolution. It almost vanished from sight in the 19th century, overtaken by classical liberalism and its heirs.³

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For civic republicans, liberty is viewed and valued as the highest good. But it is understood in a very particular way, namely as non-domination: that is, freedom from arbitrary interference (including even the possibility of such interference). Such liberty is not private but common and public. It can only be maintained by practices of active citizenship, especially its duties, which encourage and demand *virtù*: the kind of virtue which places the common good above private and personal interests, and which thereby forestalls its contrary – corruption, resulting from either neglect in a welter of selfish private pursuits, or undue concentrations of power, including (or especially) wealth, by unaccountable elites bent only on advancing their own sectarian interests.

Civic republicanism recognizes the dangers posed by changing conditions resulting from ‘fortune’ (which we would probably call contingency or chance) – both ‘external’, the so-called environment, and ‘internal’, human nature, about which republicans are distinctly unsentimental. Barry (2012) has usefully developed this ecologically resonant awareness and its implications in terms of vulnerability, resilience and, importantly for my purposes, sustainability.

There are overlapping but differing strands of civic republicanism. The kind discussed and advocated here is neo-Roman republicanism, sometimes also described as Florentine or Atlantic, whose chief inspiration was Machiavelli. Another, which I think we should be distinctly wary of, is the more collectivist and authoritarian kind articulated by Rousseau, which fed not only into French revolutionary ideals but also into revolutionary terror, and its modern offspring.

Civic republicanism differs markedly from all variants of the modern anthropocentric mainstream, which valorize freedom as personal autonomy. Liberalism seeks such freedom through guarantees of minimal legal protection alongside private wealth and privilege, which it also protects; socialism, through the social, largely reduced to the state

and often, thence, the Party; and neo-liberalism, through the so-called free market and winner-take-all. From the 19th century on, in varying measures and admixtures, these approaches have tended to reduce citizenship to the radically impoverished condition (from a republican point of view) of voters once every five years or so, dependent clients and debtees, customers, producers and consumers. In addition, unsurprisingly, none of these roles can adequately address ecocide, whose fundamental causes they encourage and whose solutions are fundamentally common, public and shared.

Eco-republicanism

The shift from civic to eco-republicanism⁴ entails certain changes in the former but also new expressions of some of its enduring values. First and foremost, the common good must be recognized as fundamentally ecological and more-than-human, that is, including but extending far beyond the strictly human: in a word, ecocentric.⁵ The reason is not hard to understand, even if it is apparently often difficult to accept: without healthy ecosystems, citizens cannot be free to safely or adequately pursue even their own private interests, nor, ultimately, any interests at all. When there is conflict between that consideration and purely human interests, therefore, the former must take priority. As Plumwood (1996: 160) says, “the health of nature is not just another set of interests but the condition for any sustainable democratic practice.”

Putting the Earth at the heart of the common good could also help to resolve the current political impasse between the sectional identity-politics of the new Left and the sectarian nationalist and racist identity-politics of the new Right, thus helping to maintain Earthly life. Put simply, no other truth, and no other narrative, is sufficiently potentially unifying. Furthermore, anthropocentric politics marginalize and minimize the very ecological considerations required to adequately address the ecocrisis; indeed, given that the human-centred values

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behind such politics are a primary driver of ecocide, they can only worsen it. And let me emphasize that only a genuine love of more-than-human nature – that is, for its own sake – will suffice (with luck as well as intelligence and hard work) to save it, including us. Any mere anthropocentric pretence will continue to leave everyone, of all kinds, terminally exposed to our endemic narrow self-interest, short-termism, resourcism and instrumentalism.

Doing whatever is necessary to maintain the integrity of the Earth, its ecosystems, wild places and the nonhuman animals with whom those are bound up is therefore a primary duty (as well as potentially a joy) which, in eco-republicanism, takes pride of place. It follows that the duties of citizens to ensure the ecocentric common or public good must take precedence over the pursuit of private interests when the latter results in the neglect of the common ecological good, and all the more so when such pursuit damages it.

Such duties may appear onerous, especially if their importance is not really understood – although they may also be embraced – but it is important to note that in any case, they do not constitute arbitrary domination of or interference in our lives. On the contrary, being internal to and constitutive of essential freedom, they are both necessary and rational. Indeed, in both republican principle and practice, they are what enables private interests to be pursued in ways that do not end up destroying their own foundations. As Pettit (1997: 137) observes:

We live in physical, biological, and psychological continuity with other human beings, with other animal species, and ultimately with the larger physical system [...] These linkages between us and our environment mean that when you degrade that environment you hurt me and mine, you hurt us and ours [and] there is an assault on at least the range of our undominated choice.

Pettit restricts ‘me’ and ‘us’ to human beings, however, and he claims

that republicanism “starts from an anthropocentric concern.” But if I am right then that is wrong, and any anthropocentrism is no longer tenable, even on republicanism’s own terms. Actually, I don’t believe it ever was. When were humans in any polity ever independent of ecological exigencies and affordances? And since we are fully ecological beings, albeit of a particular kind (like all the others), these are constitutive, not merely peripheral.

Nor does the redefinition of the common good as ecological entail a substantive revision of the principle of republican liberty. Whereas the liberal view is that force (or its threat) is the only constraint on individual freedom, neo-Roman republicans, in the words of Skinner (1998: 84), “insist, by contrast, that to live in a condition of dependence is itself a source and form of constraint.” But further to the point just noted, aren’t citizens in a republic fully dependent on the common good anyway? So acknowledging republican liberty as ecologically dependent (or rather, interdependent) simply articulates what was already present but obscured by entrenched anthropocentrism.

Positively, as I have said, there is no remotely sustainable human common good that is not more-than-human, that is, integrally ecocentric, rather than as an optional add-on. Unless the common good and the *virtù* that it constellates are no longer an exclusively human affair, then, the human common good itself will fail, as is presently happening.

Negatively, to consider the welfare of humans alone, or even to automatically put their interests first, is *ipso facto* domination, subjecting all non-human life – potentially even when not actually – to the arbitrary and coercive exercise of power. And ‘actually’ describes nearly all the current situation. But this is the very thing republicanism rightly abhors, and restricting that concern to humans alone is arbitrary at best, when it is not mere species-prejudice.

In the same vein, if more practically, as Barry (2012: 7) aptly says, “just as the rich will do everything to help the

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poor except get off their backs, likewise those benefitting from unsustainability (which is the exploitation of people and the planet) are willing to do everything to realize sustainability, except stop their unsustainable lifestyles and transform the underlying social and economic dynamics that cause unsustainability.” In other words, they must be stopped. In this context a socialist diagnosis is not altogether wrong, although its prescriptions often are.

It is sometimes maintained that moral obligations and duties cannot sensibly be predicated of non-human nature, so the latter cannot be treated as a stakeholder or honorary citizen. As Joe Gray and I (2016: 23) argue, however, “entitlement for stakeholder status should not come from the capacity to understand fairness [...] but rather the potential to be subject to unfair outcomes” – including those resulting from arbitrary domination – “such as going extinct.” Such status would therefore be appropriate not only for non-human individuals but also for “species, ecological communities, or” – since they are integral to and necessary for the existence and functioning of the former – “non-living components of ecosystems such as water and soil.”⁶

This view of the common good and ultimately, therefore, of the ‘good life’ is unavoidably substantive. As Sandel (1996: 5–6) observes, since self-rule requires specifically civic virtues, “this means that republican politics cannot be neutral toward the values and ends its citizens espouse.” More typically, Barry (2012: 258) avers that “Green republican politics does not require that there be one commonly held view of the good life.” This is true of exact forms of that life, subject to the agonistic contestation which republicans favour over bland consensus and one-size-fits-all abstract ideals, brutal when they are not vacuous. Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous not to admit that in a republican or indeed any sane polity, ecocentrism, for the reasons I have already given, is not merely one option but a view which, *qua* principle, is fundamental and necessary. Furthermore, ‘bads’ can only be

recognized as such and avoided, as Barry advocates, in relation to the regulative ideal of an overall good.

The pretence at complete openness, being impossible in practice, was always unconvincing anyway. Even radical and plural democracy, say, requires adhering to that very principle as its non-negotiable basis. One is also reminded of the so-called ‘neutrality’ of the liberal state, which has been effectively skewered by John Gray (1993) as an empty formalism disguising an unavoidable commitment to a particular view – liberal, secular, *etc.* – of the good life.

Republicanism too has its effectively ultimate guiding value and ideal: the self-determination of citizens. So putting forward an ecocentric polity in that place is not the radical change, let alone disruption, it may appear. The only qualification needed, I think, is a disciplined and habitual awareness of always moving towards its realization. But the principle itself must be non-negotiable.

A republican polity thus has itself a duty to encourage and, if necessary, enforce the indispensable duties of green citizenship, and to try to render the wellbeing of the Earth proof against meddling by anthropocentric self-interest.⁷ As Oldfield (1990: 164) says, “The moral character which is appropriate for genuine citizenship does not generate itself; it has to be authoritatively inculcated.” ‘Authoritative’ does not necessarily entail ‘authoritarian’, of course, but it does have to be *actively* pursued. And it’s not as if we aren’t already not only ‘nudged’ but often coerced in ways that are overwhelmingly irrelevant or hostile to ecocentric conditions: compulsory education, taxes, the toxic scourge of advertising and above all, in all these and other contexts, the overarching iron cage, no less for often being virtual, of neoliberal values, views and activities.

How to protect an ecocentric common good as the guiding and regulating value of the polity is thus a key question for eco-republicanism. It has at least two parts. For the first, after Fremaux (2019), I see no alternative to strict constitutional and

legal measures keeping arguments over precise forms of ‘the good life’ within the boundaries set by the Earth’s natural limits.⁸ As Sylvan and Bennett (1994: 90) put it, the task now is “to set anthropocentric concerns within ecocentric concerns” – something which must be accomplished legally and formally, as well as personally, socially and culturally.⁹ As a minimal benchmark, in the absence of which any eco-republican project must be viewed as a failure, there must be a universal presumption *against* all uses of nature, requiring them to be ecologically justified, instead of what we have now: a presumption *for* ‘development’ requiring a justification for not proceeding.

In his openly republican *Discourses*, Machiavelli remarks that finally, the only defensible purpose of a prince is to establish a republic. These days, we might say the same of a state. (Here and elsewhere, civic republicanism sometimes belies its reputation for tough-minded realism by relying on something more like optimistic idealism.)

Nonetheless, assuming such enlightened leadership is not actually an impossibility, how could it avoid the accusation of coercion for necessary green measures when they are highly unlikely to be approved by a majority of human voters, now or foreseeably? Such a charge would be unfounded, as we have seen – maintaining ecosystemic integrity is not a minority interest! – but it would have to be vigorously rebutted nonetheless, and the precise limits and boundaries would also need to be interpreted and defended.

The second part of eco-republican duty concerns encouraging and inculcating good practices of ‘green’ citizenship. As Fremaux (2012: 4) says, to tell people that “from now on, they will have the choice between their feet, their bike or the public transportation to travel while they are used to their personal car, motorbike or cheap flights to Majorca, will obviously not sound to them as an extension but rather as a reduction of what is a ‘good life.’” It’s true that ecologically virtuous behaviours, especially if embraced but even when driven, offer humanly enriching

“possibilities in terms of sharing, meeting, discovering new ways of life,” on both bigger and smaller scales.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it would probably be a hard sell. In the longer run, a vital part of the answer would be universal ecological education: full-spectrum eco-literacy, plus Barry’s (2012) excellent suggestion of compulsory ‘sustainability service’ (from which the children of the rich would not be exempt!).

The goal of an eco-republican project, and the result, to the extent it succeeded, would revise and extend but, it seems to me, substantially remain liberty as republicanism has always understood it (Skinner, 1998). Nevertheless, I don’t think that is the way to sell it, so to speak. One reason is that our contemporary understanding of liberty has been thoroughly stamped as freedom-to-do-whatever-I-want. Another is that, if I may be permitted a huge (but defensible) generalization, most people, not to put too fine a point on it, prefer security – or the promise of security – to freedom, and are quite willing to make extensive compromises to obtain it.¹¹ I suggest, therefore, that eco-republican liberty be presented rather as offering true security.

Important though persuasive arguments are, however, it will take much more to ensure an ecocentric polity. The problem of both establishing and maintaining an eco-republican polity today points us to the continuing relevance of the state, along with the need for genuine leadership. As the history of 20th century tyranny attests, it is certainly not desirable to try to get rid altogether of the painfully acquired relatively democratic state, legal protections and so on. If anything, these need renewing but also, crucially, redirecting in an eco-republican context. Part of that context is the point that what the state must guarantee is not duties to itself but to one’s fellow-citizens, both human and nonhuman. That would keep the door open to self-organizing on smaller scales, and to mixed-species communities of all kinds. (Barry [2012] includes an excellent discussion of this and related issues in terms of a republican

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approach to sustainability and the economy.)

Another argument for not jettisoning the state altogether was stated earlier by Oldfield. There is little evidence that 'left to themselves' (whatever that means), humans will always or automatically do the right thing – a truth which again points to the limits of the idea that ecocentrism can be achieved entirely through self-determination. Machiavelli's clear-sighted realism is summarized by Skinner (1998: 33) to the effect that "if civic virtue is to be encouraged ... there will have to be laws designed to coerce people out of their natural but self-defeating tendency to undermine the conditions necessary for their own liberty." Relatedly, the problem of irresponsible 'free riders' will have to be tackled. The relevant contrast is with Rousseau's sentimentality about 'the noble savage' – the other side of the coin, ironically, to his brutal collectivism. Eco-republicanism rejects both.

Such realism will also be perceived by some, however – and long has been – as immoral. Let me be clear about this common misunderstanding (and not always by sincere error): Machiavelli was not a proponent of the view that 'the end justifies the means'. Nor did he extoll bad behaviour as such. Rather, he held that in defending republican liberty, it is sometimes necessary to do something that could indeed be construed as morally wrong, and be able to handle not being a completely pure soul. (The essence of his criticism of Christianity was that by putting personal salvation first, it made being a good citizen much harder.) In other words, life sometimes unavoidably requires hard choices and prioritizing, even triage. Of course, humane solutions are always preferable, and next 'soft' coercion; but even that is not always possible.

The result is a range of significant actionable implications in a number of ecological contexts where purely human interests are now destroying, or are set to destroy, wild lives and places. Global human over-population as a whole, and immigration into already over-populated

areas – both in terms of specifiable criteria of genuine sustainability – demand both sticks (such as fiscal penalties for large families and strict but colour-blind immigration quotas) and carrots (such as more female education and empowerment, and assistance integrating into the host society).

At the far end of the range, most poachers are bent on murdering their profitable victims down to the very last individual, and invasive species – a problem created by humans, note – are exterminating not only individuals but whole species as well as ecosystems. The purity of never doing anything morally wrong or even questionable in a non-ecocentric perspective amounts to a death-warrant for wild animals.

Admitting limits to everything, however, I would add that an ecological common good would also provide an opening to what the foregoing attitude tends to lack and therefore need, namely an ecofeminist ethics of care – or as MacGregor (2007) prefers to put it, feminist ecological citizenship.¹² I see such ethics as not just additional to eco-republicanism but integral. The frankly masculinist provenance of civic republicanism points to the same need, but also the promise. Is this suggestion simple-mindedly gendered? But I have already mentioned Machiavelli's occasional romantic idealism ("Behold, a city of free self-governing citizens!"), and tough-minded pragmatism is by no means the sole province of men, any more than care and compassion are solely that of women. So integrating ecofeminism would bid fair not only to make eco-republican practices of citizenship more effective, and indeed sustainable, it would also enrich the tradition itself.

I am of course aware of the countless practical questions and objections that could be raised to an eco-republican project, but I don't think they mean it shouldn't be explored, let alone attempted. In the words of Machiavelli himself:

[I]t is the duty of a good [person] to point out to others what is well done, even though

“At the far end of the range, most poachers are bent on murdering their profitable victims down to the very last individual.”

the malignity of the times or of fortune has not permitted you to do so for yourself, so that of the many who have the capacity, someone more beloved of heaven may be able to do it. ■

Notes

- 1 I didn't want to simply write a commentary on other texts, which can be tedious. However, several texts have informed my own views, and taken together they constitute a kind of dialogue. So I shall compromise by putting direct comments on other work into footnotes.
- 2 See, minimally, Pettit (1997), Skinner (1981; 1984; 1998), Pocock (1975), Oldfield (1990), Honohan (2002), Maynor (2003) and Sandel (1996). There are many translations of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*.
- 3 Liberalism's philosophical roots lie especially in Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, as well as J.S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham. It has too many modern exponents to name, although John Rawls must be.
- 4 I use the term 'eco-republicanism' to distinguish it from Barry's (2012; 2016) 'green' republicanism, which he describes as weakly anthropocentric. To the extent he is correct about that (which is not easy to ascertain), it is in my view a failing. His defence of "enlightened anthropocentrism" (2012: 5), for example, falls foul of the problem with 'enlightened self-interest' (of which anthropocentrism is an instance) noted by Mary Midgley (1997: 94): namely, it is "by its nature rather unenlightened and hard to enlighten." Nonetheless, Barry's work is invaluable and indispensable in this context, although that of Fremaux (2019) and Cannovò (2018) is also important. See also Curtin (1999), Slaughter (2005) and Curry (2000), although regarding the last, see note 6 below.
- 5 See Curry (2017; 2018) and Washington *et al.* (2017).
- 6 Relatedly, in an earlier paper I argued that "Civic *virtù* is thus a subset of ecological *virtù*" (Curry 2000: 1067). I now think that statement is misleading, because (1) although civic virtue may well be a subset of ecological virtue, it is also a special kind appropriate to humans; and because (2) although it might be possible to make a persuasive case that ecological *virtue* can be classed as a kind of republican virtue, I'm not sure it would be worth it or is necessary. A more urgent job is to argue, as I do in the present essay, that civic republicanism must become eco-republicanism in order to be true to itself, to fulfil its promise and, *a fortiori*, not to fail. So I would now rather say that there are ecological communities which all living beings comprise, including a subset of human communities with

its own additional attributes. (This should not be understood as yet more human exceptionalism! Cheetahs have their own attributes, as do termites, as do...)

- 7 It is a signal virtue of Fremaux's work (2019) that it doesn't shirk this awkward and difficult but unavoidable question.
- 8 On republicanism and limits, including or especially ecological, see the excellent paper by Cannovò (2018).
- 9 This point is already being addressed by the admirable campaign to criminalize ecocide.
- 10 This is also a point made by Barry (2012) and Crist (2019).
- 11 From Czechoslovakia to China, majorities of the populace have regarded their political dissidents with a mixture of envy, exasperation and indifference.
- 12 MacGregor does careful and important work on feminist ecological citizenship, although it is, as usual, anthropocentric. Ultimately, however, I feel that her determination to take an eco-feminist ethics of care out of the private realm and into the public runs the danger of sacrificing what makes such an ethics valuable in the first place. More generally still, after Maoism we should know to be very careful about completely politicizing the personal.

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