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Yannick Bosc and David Casassas, *La liberté contre le capitalisme. Le républicanisme du XVIIIe siècle et les révolutions à venir.* Paris: Éditions Critiques, 2024. xi + 275 pp. €19.00 (pb). ISBN 9782487232006.

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What if, amid the chaos and incoherence of our present, we suddenly realized that the best solutions lay in the past? What if the answers to all the questions that plague the twenty-first century were to be found in the eighteenth century?[1] These are the questions that drive Yannic Bosc, a historian, and David Casassas, a social and political theorist, in their intriguing study, *La liberté contre le capitalisme*. Far from being another feeble plea for a return to Enlightenment values, their essay seeks to explore and spruce up a different strand of eighteenth-century European thought: the classical republican tradition. Their book wrestles with two closely related questions: What were the key elements of the classical republican tradition, as articulated by such figures as Thomas Paine, Maximilien Robespierre, and Adam Smith? And how can the insights of this tradition be used to rethink a range of contemporary issues, including freedom under late capitalism, the nature of property rights, the proper domain of the market, and basic human rights, including the right to a minimum income? The implicit slogan informing this book--which at times can feel like a manifesto--is "*encore un effort,* citizens, if you wish to be republican."

The premise of *La liberté contre le capitalisme* is that eighteenth-century republican discourse bears an uncanny resemblance to contemporary political language--the language of what might be called Western neoliberal democracy. "Uncanny" means something that is at once familiar and strange: in this vein, Bosc and Casassas claim that eighteenth-century republicans emphasized words that we still use, though in an altogether different sense. This explains the book's chapter structure: each chapter has a title that pits a word against itself: "Liberty against Liberty," "Property against Property," "The State against the State," and so on. The difference between eighteenth-century republicanism and the jargon of neoliberal democracy lies in the different shades of meaning lurking within a common vocabulary. Bosc and Casassas ask us to bracket our commitment to the manifest (i.e., liberal) meaning of these terms as they bring their latent (i.e., republican) contents to the surface.

Though the French and American revolutions were fundamentally republican in inspiration, they were ultimately hijacked by liberals, who turned the democratic and egalitarian impetus of the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen into

charters for property rights, deregulated markets, and vast wealth disparities. If we recover the republican substratum of our political order, this will provide a formidable fulcrum for challenging the inequities of the neoliberal system that disingenuously claims to have risen from the same historical roots. This is Bosc and Casassas' thesis in a nutshell. In the eighteenth century, they find "another conception of 'modernity'," one that will make it possible to "deconstruct" the narrative that conflates "productivism with progress and economic liberalism with liberty" (pp. 8, 9). They turn to the eighteenth century not to celebrate it as an age of forward-looking founding fathers, but to recover missed and repressed opportunities. What they discover in this earlier period is not the "same" (that is, "our vision of the world"), but the "other": "a worldview that we have largely forgotten" (p. 10).

The cornerstone of Bosc and Casassas' argument is that the political thought of eighteenth-century revolutions was primarily based on the republican idea of freedom. This conception of freedom, they argue, is preferable to and more authentic than the freedom promoted by neoliberal democracy. This is the position they defend in their first chapter, "Liberty against Liberty." In making this case, Bosc and Casassas rely as much on recent theorists of republicanism, particularly Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit, as on its eighteenth-century proponents.[2] They subscribe wholeheartedly to Pettit's defense of republicanism as a theory that conceives of freedom as "non-domination." Modern liberalism, in Pettit's account, is based on what Benjamin Constant called the "liberty of the moderns" and Isaiah Berlin "negative liberty.[3] According to this view, I am free when no one interferes with my actions. Yet this stance still allows for what Pettit calls domination: that is, a situation in which "the power-victim acts in the relevant area by the leave, explicit or implicit, of the power-bearer," meaning that "they live at the mercy of that person, that they are in the position of a dependent or debtor…." [4] These situations are significant for Pettit, as they suggest how my freedom might be significantly limited without overt interference. A dean seeking promotion opportunities but who serves as an at-will employee of a university president or an assistant professor in a department with rigorous tenure requirements at a prestigious institution might face little direct interference with their work, but they certainly find themselves on the short end of the power stick--and thus in a condition that Pettit calls domination. Republicanism is a theory that downplays negative freedom by promoting freedom as non-domination, which it believes can be properly realized through democracy, civic-spiritedness, and civility.

Rehearsing this argument, Bosc and Casassas maintain that the republican conception of liberty is superior to liberalism's and more consistent with the eighteenth-century revolutionary heritage. On this basis, they argue that liberty is not atomism (because individual liberty is necessarily connected to civic participation), liberty is not wellbeing (since wellbeing is compatible with domination), and that liberty cannot exist without social and economic rights. True liberty consists in "benefiting from positions of social invulnerability that make it possible to weave together forms of interdependence that respect the autonomy of all parties" (pp. 66-67).

For Bosc and Casassas, social and economic rights are the heart of the matter. While they are certainly interested in the democratic mechanisms that Pettit and Skinner prioritize in their defense of republicanism, the real appeal of this theory, from their perspective, is the claim that no one is truly free if they are economically dependent on another. It is not surprising that one of the book's side arguments is that aspects of Karl Marx's theories of exploitation and alienation

are prefigured by eighteenth-century republicanism. Thus, much of the book focuses on republicanism as a solution to the forms of domination exerted by contemporary capitalism.

In the next chapter, "Property against Property," Bosc and Casassas argue that eighteenth-century thought recognized an alternative to the modern dichotomy between state-owned property and private property, namely communal property. While also referencing Elinor Ostrom's work on the economics of the "commons," they note that Maximilien Robespierre argued that any resource that preserves human life was "the common property of society as a whole" (p. 105). Pursuing the theme of republican political economy, Bosc and Casassas turn to "Markets against Markets." Drawing on Karl Polanyi's claim that markets are not natural phenomena but social institutions that reflect social priorities, they argue that republicans maintained that markets are perfectly compatible with freedom so long as economic interests are prevented from using their clout to impose domination. They reclaim Adam Smith as a thinker in the republican tradition, arguing that he promoted "social relations freed from all forms of domination" and sought to "remunerate all economic actors in exchange for their real contribution to the productive process" (p. 138). In the chapter entitled "The State against the State," they assert that, in contrast to deeply rooted historiographical assumptions about the centralizing tendencies of Jacobinism, revolutionary republicans favored political (as opposed to administrative) decentralization, in the form of derogated powers to local bodies, particularly municipalities. Finally, in "Expertise against Expertise," they examine the republican tradition of "common sense" (a term strongly associated with Thomas Paine's famous pamphlet), contrasting it to the top-down reform programs of figures like the Physiocrats.

Though their book presents itself as a broad overview of eighteenth-century republican thought, it constantly circles around one issue: the antecedents of the universal basic income. This theme is addressed specifically in the final chapter, "Civilization against Civilization," and the conclusion. Bosc and Casassas refer specifically to Thomas Paine's 1797 pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*.[5] In that work, Paine proposed, as compensation for the many who were condemned to stark poverty due to being dispossessed of their land, a system whereby everyone would, upon turning twenty-one, be paid fifteen pounds sterling annually, followed by an additional ten pounds once they had reached fifty. Bosc and Casassas believe that this system is justified on the very republican principles to which Paine subscribed: only individuals with a guaranteed standard of living are freed from domination and capable of exercising civic duties in a free state. A universal basic income is necessary to ensure that we can "live lives that truly belong to us" (p. 246). In their effort to recover the republican tradition, Bosc and Casassas say relatively little about its political aspects, such as forms of democratic decision-making or ways of enhancing civic participation. The purpose of their detour through the eighteenth century is primarily to find justifications for the universal basic income.

The main shortcoming of this provocative book is a certain tendency towards cherry-picking. In probing eighteenth-century republicanism for solutions to problems faced by twenty-first-century neoliberal democracy, Bosc and Casassas always find what they are looking for. And they rarely find that these answers are tethered to inconvenient truths. They do not investigate the deeper social and cultural wellsprings from which eighteenth-century republicanism emerged, whether it be a familiarity with classical authors or, in the case of Paine, the world of skilled artisans, which Eric Foner stresses, for instance, in his intellectual biography.[6] While *Agrarian Justice* is a

striking statement and is clearly relevant to current debates about the universal basic income, Bosc and Casassas do not assess how representative it is of republican or Enlightenment thought (give or take a few excerpts from Robespierre's speeches). Nor do they consider that, as Foner notes, *Agrarian Justice* was written in part because of Paine's opposition to the conspiracy of Gracchus Babeuf and his Society of Equals, just as they tend to downplay Paine's connections to the Girondins, whom they deem less genuinely republican than the Montagnards. While it is appealing that Bosc and Casassas take Robespierre seriously as a political thinker, they go to peculiar lengths to avoid any mention of the Terror. They euphemistically refer to the insurrection of May 31-June 2, 1793 as the "*rappel*" of the Girondins, and make this point only to explain why, after this date, the Montagnards miraculously had a majority to end the "liberal economic policy" pursued by their adversaries (pp. 94-95). Surely the circumstances required for this change in policy--a political purge followed by show trials and executions--explains *some* of the reasons why the liberal arguments of which Bosc and Casassas are so critical gained traction.

Yet what makes *La liberté contre le capitalisme* ultimately appealing is that it is a book in which ideas are very much alive. There is no denying that genuine historical analysis consists in understanding ideas in their context. Yet to understand an idea, one must imaginatively bring it back to life, which also means considering the idea on its merits. Bosc and Casassas seek to reconsider eighteenth-century republicanism and, in so doing, have rediscovered its vitality--even if, at times, they project their present concerns a little too forcefully onto it. They also deserve credit for rehabilitating the republican tradition at a time when, on the left as well as the right, contemporary politics seems inextricably committed to liberal assumptions. This may not be a book that proposes an original or field-defining interpretation of the past. But by bringing an intellectual tradition back to life in all its potency, it is a book that exemplifies the power and relevance of historical thinking.

NOTES

[1] An earlier example of this approach can be found in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers to Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[2] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[3] Pettit, *Republicanism*, passim; Benjamin Constant, "De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes," in Benjamin Constant and Marcel Gauchet, eds., *Écrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

[4] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 63.

[5] Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, in *Collected Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States/Library of America, 1995), 396-413.

[6] Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

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