

## **Republics, Empires and Historical Materialism**

Dr Geoff Kennedy  
School of Government and International Affairs  
Durham University

The purpose of this paper is to sketch out some problematic themes in the history of republican political thought. In particular, I seek to explore the relationship between the evolution of republican conceptions of empire in the history of political thought and the changing nature of the processes of state expansionism in the history of European states. In particular, it examines a conceptual problematic at the heart of republican political thought: the alleged tension between the republican desire to maintain liberty and the necessity of state expansionism that threatens the very liberty of the republic itself. In other words, the processes of state expansionism that threatens to turn the republic into an empire. The primary goal of the project is to introduce an interdisciplinary perspective to the growing literature on the history of republican political thought. Questions of empire require greater conceptualization by way of an engagement with the critical approaches to state formation and state expansionism that deal with the important consequences of the development of the nation state on conceptualizations of sovereignty. Insofar as the republican dilemma of liberty and empire relates to an understanding of the spatial limits of political community and the institutional structuring of the state, critical international relations theory that is informed by historical materialism can provide important insights into the changing nature of the problem.

## **Republicanism and International Political Theory**

In a 2004 review essay titled *The 50 Years Rift: Intellectual History and International Relations*, David Armitage noted the longstanding division between the disciplines of International Relations and intellectual history – in this case, the history of political thought. For much of its disciplinary history, international relations has been characterized by both a lack of rigorous theorization and an absence of historical contextualization. On the one hand, mainstream IR presupposed a transhistorical system of anarchy that underpinned the rise of the modern states system, while maintaining the continuity of state behaviour.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, IR engaged in selective readings of the history of political thought in order to construct the theoretical basis of an intellectual IR tradition. For realists, Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes were the theorists of a realist approach to IR that articulated the concepts of international anarchy, the balance of power and ‘reason of state’.<sup>2</sup> For ‘English School rationalists’ Hugo Grotius represented the theorist of international law and the precursor to an intrinsically ‘modern’

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<sup>1</sup> Wight (1966); Rosenberg (1994)

<sup>2</sup> Haslam (2002); Forde (1992, 1995)

Westphalian system of states while cosmopolitans and solidarists have found their precursor in the international political thought of Immanuel Kant.<sup>3</sup>

With the ‘linguistic turn’ finally penetrating the discipline of IR, an increasing number of international relations scholars have begun to reassess the history of ‘international thought’ outside the parameters of the dominant realist and liberal trends within the field. This development, argues Armitage, has ‘coincided with a redefinition of political theory itself to incorporate international, transnational and global concerns’, and has ‘created more favourable conditions for the history of political thought to encompass the history of the relations between states’ and work towards a ‘rapprochement between International Relations and intellectual history.’<sup>4</sup>

The study of a republican tradition in the history of political thought has become one of the most vibrant research areas in the history of political thought over the past thirty five years. Since the publication of JGA Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*, which challenged conventional Whig accounts of the evolution of liberalism and bourgeois modernity in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, historians of political thought have been emphasizing the persistence of classical – be they Greek or Roman – political traditions throughout the entire early modern period.<sup>5</sup> It is now generally accepted that, far from representing an era of liberal modernity, the early modern period was defined by the persistence of either Aristotelian notions of ‘civic humanism’ that elevated the martial virtue of the publicly spirited citizen over the rational self-interest of *homo economicus*, or neo-Roman conceptions of liberty as ‘non-domination’ that prioritized the notion of independence as a true condition of freedom. In either sense, the persistence of classical influences pushed back the development of ‘bourgeois modernity’ until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the field of international relations theory, Nicholas Onuf has sought to highlight the republican legacy to contemporary international thought as a corrective to the historical dominance of liberalism and realism in the discipline.<sup>6</sup> In the republican tradition, the system of states is historicized and situated within the 18<sup>th</sup> century, well after the development of a discursive tradition of international political theory. Prior to the establishment of these modern states were republics accompanied by a republican discourse of interdependence, the common good and the beginnings of international civil society. As such, just as the context of republicanism becomes decisive for an understanding of the history of political thought, it is also an important context within which one must interpret the history of international political thought. For Onuf, the basis of international political thought from this perspective is to be found in the history of republics and the intellectual tradition of republicanism. In accord with Pocock, the period in which republicanism dominates political discourse spans from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, when the rise of a modern states-system undermined the coherence of republicanism’s theoretical coherence, resulting in its disappearance ‘in the great tide

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<sup>3</sup> Bull (1966); Wight (1966); Onuf (1994), Linklater (1990, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Armitage (2004, 100).

<sup>5</sup> The literature here is voluminous. For some recent examples, see Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press 2004), Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 volumes (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Onuf, Nicholas Greenwood (1998). *The Republican Legacy in International Thought*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Slaughter, Steven (2003). ‘The Neo-roman Legacy and International Political Theory.’ Working Paper 2003/5, Department of International Relations, Australia National University, Canberra.

of liberalism and positivism.’<sup>7</sup> Just as the republican revival in the history of political thought has characterized this period as one of continuity with the civic humanism of the Renaissance period, thereby staving off the emergence of a liberal dominated conception of ‘modernity’ until well into the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this republican revisionism has sought to move beyond the realist-liberal domination of the history of international political thought in order to uncover an alternative set of norms and inherited meanings that frame international relations.

Despite this interest in republican political thought, it has been left primarily up to the historians of political thought to explore the relationship between republicanism and international relations. Most of this research is conducted with the tradition of intellectual history, which, for reasons that I hope to make clear below, limit our ability to contextualize republicanism within an international context of social change and geopolitical competition. I would like to explore a particular republican problematic in the history of (international) political thought: that is, the evolution of the antagonism between republican liberty and empire. In doing so, I want to propose that the discourse of republicanism needs to be situated within a variety of fundamentally different historical contexts characterized by the contestation over both the core conceptual categories of republicanism as well as the relationship between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ power vis-à-vis the various projects of state formation underway in these various contexts.

## **Republicanism and Empire in the History of Political Thought**

In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, the Florentine poet and partisan of the Holy Roman Empire, placed Brutus and Cassius—the heroes of republican mythology who assassinated Caesar—in the deepest ring of Hell, where they were damned to be gnawed on for all eternity by one of the mouths of Satan. By doing so, Dante was characterizing their tyrannicide as an act of murderous treason similar to Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus rather than as a heroic defence of republican self-government. The politics of Dante’s poem would become a literary representation of an historical conflict between republican conceptions of liberty and self-government on the one hand, and (from the republican perspective) the arbitrary power of empire. The conflict would become increasingly prominent in the history of Western political thought in the context of the monarchical project of absolutist state building in the Renaissance period.

So prevalent is this conceptual antagonism between republicanism and empire, both within academic and popular culture, that it has been recently reproduced within radical circles in the work of Hardt and Negri. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri set out to explore the possibility of conceptualizing a ‘postmodern republicanism’ within the interstices of a deterritorialized Empire constituted by new forms of Imperial sovereignty. ‘Being republican today,’ the authors conclude, ‘means first of all struggling within and constructing against Empire, on its hybrid, modulating terrains.’<sup>8</sup> In *Multitude*, the immediate follow up to *Empire*, Hardt and Negri propose a synthesis of Leninism and

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<sup>7</sup> Onuf, Nicholas Greenwood (1994). ‘Civita Maxima: Wolff, Vattel and the Fate of Republicanism.’ *American Journal of International Law* 88(2): 280-303; pp. 281-82.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 218.

Madisonian republicanism as a means to achieve the ‘absolute democracy’ rooted in the constituent power of the multitude. The third instalment, *Commonwealth*, opens with a section titled ‘Republic (and the multitude of the poor)’ and represents the republican antithesis to the de-centred *Empire* of our post-modern global era.<sup>9</sup> Within the history of political thought, republicanism not only exists in antagonism to empire, but is fundamentally threatened by the processes of state expansionism indicative of geopolitical competition in the pre-modern era. The antagonism between republicanism and empire manifests itself in an existential dilemma for republics. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen emphasise the extent to which, for republicans, the decline of civic virtue was facilitated by the acquisition of overseas empire.<sup>10</sup> James Bohman emphasizes the ‘republican anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism’ of the French and German Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Within this republican tradition, argues Bohman, ‘domination abroad undermines democracy and nondomination within the republic’.<sup>12</sup> David Armitage has identified an ‘intractable dilemma’ arising from the ‘tension between the competing demands of two overwhelmingly desirable but ultimately irreconcilable goals, liberty and empire.’<sup>13</sup> According to Armitage, this dilemma was most clearly articulated by Machiavelli in the *Discourses on Livy*, where he argues that in order to preserve its free way of life, a republic had, out of necessity, to ‘expand’; and in this process of expansion lay the seeds of its own destruction. In the process, republics inevitably gave way to empires. The conclusion is that republicanism and empire are ‘ultimately incompatible.’<sup>14</sup>

Critics of this interpretation of republicanism have emphasized the ‘imperialist’ pretensions of self-identified republicans throughout the early modern period—particularly those writing within the Roman republican tradition. Jonathan Scott has downplayed the tension between republican liberty and state expansionism within republican political thought—particularly that of Machiavelli—and emphasized the ‘imperial’ missions of English republicans like Harrington and those associated with the Commonwealth of 1649-1653.<sup>15</sup> In his study of Machiavelli, Mikael Hornqvist has argued that imperialism ‘was an integral and essential aspect of the [republican] tradition. Freedom, for some, entailed oppression or control of others.’<sup>16</sup> Edward G. Andrew has argued that early modern republicanism is best understood as being categorized in two

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<sup>9</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000; *Multitude*, Penguin Books, 2004; *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: a shared European Heritage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> James Bohman, *Democracy Across Borders: From Demos to Demoi* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 10. Bohman makes a similar case in ‘Nondomination and Transnational Democracy,’ in Cécile Laborde and John Maynor, *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Bohman, *Democracy*, p. 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 125.

<sup>14</sup> David Armitage, ‘Empire and Liberty: a Republican Dilemma’, in Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: a shared European Heritage*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Scott, *Commonwealth Principles: Republican Writing of the English Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). However, Scott argues that the ‘imperialist’ pretensions of English republicanism distinguished it from Dutch republicanism, presenting us with perhaps a more nuanced picture of the relationship between republicanism and empire.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Hornqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 41.

competing strands: an anti-imperialist Aristotelian republicanism and an imperialist Machiavellian republicanism rooted within the Roman tradition. Andrew argues that ‘republicanism and imperialism are not antithetical’ and that eighteenth-century neo-Romanism in particular was ‘patrician or anti-democratic.’<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, contemporary republicans have downplayed the extent to which classical republicans actively sought ‘empire’ and embraced the expansionary republic of Rome as a model worthy of imitation precisely *because* of its imperial pretensions.

Both positions contain elements of truth; but both positions also mischaracterize the relationship between republicanism and empire.<sup>18</sup> And to a certain extent, each position is speaking past the other. The anti-imperial republican interpretation tends to view empire as a constitutional issue pertaining to the rule of law versus the exercise of arbitrary power. In this sense, they are concerned with the ways in which expansionism impinges on the maintenance of constitutional government within the republic. The limitations of this interpretation reside in the ways in which republican discourse and republican institutions are conceptualized in abstraction from the social relations underpinning state expansionism. First, state expansionism is largely characterized as a generic process of territorial aggrandizement with no distinction made between the different strategies of expansionism and their relationship to the social property relations and political institutions of the various republics being studied. Secondly, while there is some recognition of the forms of social conflict surrounding the expansion of republics, the relationship between those forms of conflict on the one hand, and the dynamic of political institutions and the nature of social property relations on the other, remains under-theorized. As a result, any and all forms of state expansionism are presented as a threat to republican liberty. Any change in this conceptual antagonism—such as that which occurs in the context of 18<sup>th</sup> century America—is ascribed to changes in political discourse (and possibly to innovations in political institutions, such as the development of ‘representation’). In particular, Armitage ascribes to the ‘new science’ of (English) political economy the power to overcome the (Machiavellian) contradiction between republican liberty and expansionism. Yet this interpretation neglects to appreciate the significance of the specific social relations that facilitated the reconceptualization of the political and economic spheres that were characteristic of that political economy discourse.

On the other hand, the ‘republican-imperialist’ interpretation downplays any significant difference between empires and republics. The reliance on terms such as ‘imperialism’ in this sense obscure more than it reveals, as it tends to characterize ‘imperial republicanism’ exclusively in territorial terms that casts the problem of ‘empire’ as a relation of domination between a republican ‘core’ and a subject ‘periphery.’ The issue remains one of *international relations*: that is, republics and empires are indistinguishable because the focus is largely placed on their external relations with other states and political communities. The weakness of this position is

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<sup>17</sup> Edward G. Andrew, *Imperial Republics: Revolution, War, and Territorial Expansion from the English Civil War to the French Revolution* (University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. xxi.

<sup>18</sup> For an interesting, and alternative, explanation of the relationship between liberty and ‘imperial’ expansion, see McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge 2011). McCormick argues that Machiavelli’s treatment of the subject is full of ambiguities, and needs to be taken as a strategy for persuading the *ottomati* – to whom the *Discourses* is dedicated – to accept a popularly based republic. See McCormick (2011: 56-61).

that it fails to adequately distinguish between republican expansionism (largely of the Roman type) and the constitutional aspects of empire—particularly the problem of discretionary power—that republicans sought to avoid. In this regard, there is no analysis of the republican state and the forms of citizenship that constitute it.

Both interpretations presume a certain stability in the concept of empire within republican political thought (and often presuming it possesses only one meaning), and both display a tendency to abstract the concept of empire from a context of social property relations, political institutions and the social conflicts to which they are intrinsically linked. The anti-imperial republican interpretation treats empire as a constitutional problem abstracted from changing social property relations and social struggles and is addressed largely through conceptual innovations in political theorizing. The imperialist republican interpretation, on the other hand, conceives of empire as a timeless process of territorial aggrandizement that is isolated from broader questions of constitutionalism and the political institutions of the state.

## **Empires and Imperial Republics: Problems of Classification**

An understanding of classical republicanism's ambiguous relationship to empire depends, of course, on an understanding of what republicans meant by empire. A conceptualization of empire is notoriously difficult to obtain given the great diversity of historical empires that have existed throughout human history. As one prominent historian has stated, the word empire 'is itself an elusive one, whose signification, and the contexts in which it could be employed, shifted constantly until it acquired its modern meaning in the early eighteenth century.'<sup>19</sup> A recent study of empire has identified three general characteristics of empire: expansionism, hierarchy and order.<sup>20</sup> Empires are by nature expansionistic, entailing the conquest of other peoples and the annexation of their territory, thereby 'absorbing them through a combination of coercive, legal, cultural and economic mechanisms into a larger socio-economic and political entity—an empire.'<sup>21</sup> Empires are also hierarchical, characterized by the 'hierarchical rule over a periphery from a metropolitan centre or 'motherland'.<sup>22</sup> And lastly, empires rest upon the maintenance of some form of imperial order.

Yet there is something unsatisfying about this historical characterization of empire, at least from the perspective of classical republicanism. Indeed, all of these features can be said to be present during the high point of Roman republican power preceding the creation of the Roman Empire proper. From this perspective there is little to distinguish the republic from the empire. Rome was, after all, an expansionist republic that based its hierarchical rule over its subject provinces through a relatively advanced infrastructure of roads and political and economic relationships. As Antony Pagden has pointed out, 'there was no reason why a true republic – a *respublica* – could not also be

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Colas, *Empire* (Polity Press 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Colas (2007: 6).

<sup>22</sup> Colas (2007: 7).

an empire'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, between the period of the early republic and the principate, the meaning of the term *imperium* evolved from an abstract notion of the 'power of command' that was analytically independent of any territorial or constitutional foundation, to a conception of *imperium Romanum* that accorded with the definition given by Tacitus, referring to 'the kind of political, and cultural, unity created out of a diversity of different states widely separated in space' under the auspices of what was in his time, a formally imperial Rome.<sup>24</sup> It is in this sense that Colas' qualification is indeed an important one: 'empire is, both conceptually and empirically, parasitical on other categories and phenomena such as power, the state, territory, class or the market.'<sup>25</sup> This qualification needs to be extended to theoretical conceptualizations of empire in the history of political thought.

In the case of republican political thought, the important element upon which empire depends is a conception of the state.<sup>26</sup> The republican conception of empire is predicated upon a particular notion of the desired relationship between citizenship and the state. As will be demonstrated in greater detail below, classical republicans conceived of empire as a 'politically constituted' form of tyranny (or *regnum*)<sup>27</sup> that had more to do with the relations between the state and the citizen than it did with the relationship between a metropolitan 'core' versus a subject periphery. Any territorial component to the idea of empire was subordinated to this political/constitutional meaning. This becomes increasingly prevalent with the resurrection of classical republicanism in the context of the move towards royal absolutism in the early modern period. As Pagden has put the point, 'It was this identification with empire, understood as a diversity of territories under a single legislative authority, and empire understood as monarchy, which underpins the medieval and early-modern conflict between empire and republic.'<sup>28</sup> Staunch republicans like Cicero, for example, had no quarrel with Rome's wars of 'defensive expansionism' and the extension of the *imperium populi Romani*. For Cicero, the republic came to an end when 'a single man came to dominate everything' and 'there was no longer any room for consultation or for personal authority'.<sup>29</sup> Expansionism

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<sup>23</sup> Pagden (1994: 16).

<sup>24</sup> J. C. Richardson, *The Language of Empire: Rome and the Idea of Empire from the Third Century BC to the Second Century AD*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. Richardson stresses that this is the dominant official use of the term *imperium* in the third and second centuries BCE. It does not preclude other informal uses that refer to the power of Rome over other peoples. But these latter uses are much more infrequent. Tacitus cited in Pagden, *Lords*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Colas, *Empire*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> In the case of Rome, the shift from republic to empire began to occur in 27 BC when Octavian adopted the title *Princeps* meaning 'first citizen' as well as the honorary title of *Imperator* – chief commander of the Roman legions.

<sup>27</sup> The relationship between tyranny and kingship is a complicated one. To the Greeks, the term tyranny initially referred to the unconstitutional means by which an individual or group of individuals gained power. It did not, however, necessarily refer to cruel or arbitrary forms of power. Rule by the tyrant may be *illegitimate*, but not necessarily arbitrary. In his *Constitution of Athens*, Aristotle describes the 'tyranny' of Peisistratus as a period of moderate and constitutional rule. In contrast, despotism signified the kind of arbitrary and unconstrained rule associated with the master/slave relationship. The deteriorating rule of Peisistratus' sons (the Peisistratids) and the formation of the cult of the Tyrannicides marked the beginnings of the association of tyranny with arbitrary rule. Plato would play an important role in fusing the two meanings together and it is this fused meaning that makes its way into Roman political thought.

<sup>28</sup> Pagden, *Lords*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Cicero, *De Officiis*, p. 63.

became a problem when it undermined the institutions of republican self-government and the morality of the virtuous republican citizen (however ideological such a formulation may have been). In other words, the territorial element of ‘empire’ related strictly to the ways in which the expansion of the republic transformed the constitutional structures of the state and undermined the traditional relations between the republican state and the body of self-governing citizens (whoever those citizens may have been).

A conception of empire that was intrinsically territorialist and expansionist, connoting merely an expansionist state establishing hierarchical relations between an imperial core and a subject periphery was, according to Pagden, the product of the 19th century.<sup>30</sup> Yet this anachronistic conception of empire is the very metric against which republics and republicanism is evaluated in the republican-imperialist literature. In his definition of empire, for example, Andrew refers to ‘territorial expansion and domination over people not yet integrated or incorporated by the imperial power.’ This definition is presented in contrast to a conception of empire referring to ‘territory ruled by an emperor’ and ‘the policy of expanding the emperor’s reach,’ defined by Diderot and D’Alembert in the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>31</sup> The problem here is that this conception of ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ does not correspond to the historical meaning attributed to the term empire by those within that historical context. In *Oceana*, James Harrington famously characterizes a ‘commonwealth’ (the English translation for *res publica*) as an ‘empire of laws’ distinguishing it from the ‘empire of men’ of a proper imperial—or, in the early modern case, Absolutist—state. This ‘domestic empire’ was rooted within the distribution of property, and in the case of a commonwealth, the ‘empire of laws’ was rooted within a proper balance of land upon which the institutions conducive to liberty were erected. This distinction between an ‘empire of laws’ and the ‘empire of men’ is more specifically related to the differences—denied by Hobbes—of the status of the citizen in the Republic of Lucca in contrast to the condition of the subject in the Ottoman Empire. However, his ‘equal commonwealth’ did not preclude the creation of colonies—‘foreign or provincial empire’—characterized by a fundamental relationship of inequality between the republican ‘core’ and the colonial periphery. Harrington’s discussion of the Venetian republic is instructive in this regard: the Venetians do not rule over their colonies—their ‘subjects’—in the same way that the Venetians governed Venice; that is, through a form of rotating senate that corresponds to the ‘balance’ of her ‘domestic empire.’ To do so, would be to strengthen the ‘foreign’ interest in the colonies [notice how the ‘natives’ are considered the ‘foreign’ element]; to ‘diffuse’ the republican form throughout her territories would result in the loss of her ‘advantageous’ situation, ‘by which in a great part she subsisteth.’<sup>32</sup> According to Harrington, the Spanish ran their Caribbean colonies in the same way: colonial governments are ‘deputed’ or ‘delegated’ to ‘natives of his own country’ [i.e., Spain] as opposed to the ‘Creolios’ despite their descending from the initial Spanish conquerors. In other words, the relationship of the Venetian ‘republic’ to its provinces is similar to that of the Spanish ‘empire’ to its colonial acquisitions.

The point is that to define empire in terms of imperialism meaning ‘territorial expansion and domination over people not yet integrated or incorporated by the imperial

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<sup>30</sup> Pagden, *Lords*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew, *Imperial Republics*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Harrington, *Oceana*, p. 17.

power’ prevents us from appreciating the ways in which republicans differentiated their own forms of ‘free states’ from ‘empires’ proper. We can again turn to that model ‘free state’ of Greek antiquity, Sparta, to illustrate this point. As we have seen, most republicans characterized Sparta as a republic for preservation; but it was a republic that, according to Cicero, was founded upon a ‘most equitable system of justice’ that ‘provided that the lands of the rich should be cultivated by the poor *as if they latter were slaves*.’<sup>33</sup> In other words, Sparta’s initial period of territorial expansion—albeit limited in scope—was predicated upon the ‘domination over people [the helots] not yet integrated or incorporated by the imperial power.’ Unless we are to treat the distinctions that republicans make between republics and empires as mere posturing or propaganda, we need to take more seriously the extent to which their understanding of empire was cast in political and constitutional terms that co-existed with the same processes of territorial aggrandizement that were characteristic of the empires they opposed. This only makes sense if we look for a republican conception of empire *within* the state—not between it and a territorial periphery, or between it and the political communities it conquered.

### **Republics for Preservation versus Republics for Expansion**

These insights are also important for furthering our understanding of the republican distinction between republics for preservation versus republics for expansion. There is a tendency within some strands of the anti-imperial republican literature to equate republics with small-scale city-states that are organized for ‘preservation’ as opposed to those organized for ‘expansion.’ Expansion here generally refers to territorial or commercial expansion (or both) that extends the boundaries of the *res publica* and breaks the bonds of communal solidarity that is required for a self-governing political community to properly function. The expansionist republic is an aberration that is doomed to degenerate into corruption, resulting in its inevitable transformation into an empire. From this perspective, true republics are considered to be necessarily static and empires are intrinsically expansionist in a territorial sense. Secondly, and this is related to the previous point, there is a tendency to relate commercial development, *in general*, to the process of state expansionism and *imperialism*, thus incurring the opposition of republicans. Pocock himself tends to present a dichotomy of dynamic commercial expansion versus the traditionalism of agrarian society, in which the latter forms the basis of a stable republic—articulated most forcefully by Harrington’s adoption of the ‘agrarian law’—while the former acts as the foundation of empire.<sup>34</sup> From this perspective, commercial development is either viewed as an intrinsic threat to the existence of the republic because it results in the corruption of an enlarged citizen body. We are therefore confronted with a dichotomy between republics that are small-scale, agrarian and anti-commercial communities on the one hand, arrayed against empires that are expansionist and commercially oriented on the other.<sup>35</sup> The historical anomaly, of

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<sup>33</sup> *De Rep.* III, 17. My emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*.

<sup>35</sup> These dichotomies can be traced back to classical Greek political thought, in particular, the works of Plato and Aristotle. In Plato’s *Republic* disparities of wealth and poverty must be avoided because they cause social polarization, division and conflict amongst the propertied classes in society. Strict limits must

course, is Rome, which is representative of an expansionist republic mentioned above. By definition, Rome therefore becomes an ‘imperial republic’ or an ‘imperialist republic’ juxtaposed to the archetypes of the conservative ‘republic for preservation’: Sparta and Venice. The result, therefore, is that early modern republicanism, insofar as it remained within the Roman tradition, was intrinsically ‘imperialist’.<sup>36</sup>

While there is an element of truth to this generalization, there is a sense in which it obscures more than it reveals about republicanism. More specifically, what is meant by ‘expansion’ versus ‘preservation’ needs to be assessed more carefully. First of all, there is no inherent reason why commercially oriented republics were more oriented towards ‘expansion’—and hence susceptible to the temptations of empire—than were republics ordered for ‘preservation’. Indeed, as is obviously the case, the Roman republic, perhaps the expansionary republic *par excellence*, was premised upon private property in land—not in commercial expansion. Cicero, that stalwart of the Roman republican tradition, displayed the typical aristocratic contempt of commercial activity: trade, usury, profiteering and handicrafts are ‘demeaning’ forms of trade.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, two of the most oft cited ‘republics for preservation’ actually engaged in overt forms of territorial expansionism. As Machiavelli points out in the *Discourses*, Sparta’s primary mode of expansion assumed the form of territorial occupation of conquered territory.<sup>38</sup> As Cicero had previously pointed out in the *Republic*, the ‘Spartans used to claim as their own all the territory they could touch with their spears.’<sup>39</sup> The transformation of Sparta into a ‘hoplite state’ occurred in response to a series of military defeats at the hands of its neighbours in the second half of the seventh century BCE. As mentioned above, Spartan expansion required the subjection of the surrounding rural population to a position of juridical servitude—the helots. The purpose was to free the Spartiate from the need to labour in order to excel in the one craft that they deemed essential to their survival: warfare. Sparta’s ordering for ‘preservation’ therefore, did not preclude processes of territorial expansion; what it precluded was the opening of the state to an inclusive notion of citizenship as such ‘political expansionism’ would undermine the *homoinioa* that was crucial to the solidarity of the hoplite state and more importantly, undermine the existence of Sparta as a tributary state in which political and military power was wielded by an exclusive body of citizens as a means of extracting, from a community of subject producers, the surplus required for their subsistence. Similarly, the Venetian republic (another republic ‘for preservation’) colonized Crete, Cyprus and a number of cities in the Levant as a means of establishing its control over lucrative trade routes in the Mediterranean. Indeed, by the early thirteenth century, Venice had begun to build ‘a vast commercial and territorial empire’.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the notion of a territorial ‘empire’ simply refers to the subjection of entrepôts vital to the commercial survival of the

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therefore be put on the ability of the republic to expand. Plato is creating a republic for preservation, not for expansion. Both Plato and Aristotle privilege the stability of agrarian life over the dynamism of commercial society.

<sup>36</sup> This is Andrew’s position. See Andrew, *Imperial Republics*.

<sup>37</sup> Cicero, *De Officiis*, p. 58-59. He qualifies this by stating that trade that is oriented to a wide distribution and done without misrepresentation is ‘not entirely to be criticized.’ He clearly, however, prefers agriculture to commerce.

<sup>38</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* book I ch. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Cicero, *De Re Republica* III, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination*, p. 171.

republic in a way that precluded either self-determination or political equality within the periphery. Political ‘expansion’ in the sense of extending the rights of citizenship would jeopardize the nature of the Venetian republic as a kind of mercantilist corporation in which political power was employed to enforce the exclusive exercise of Venetian trade that was essential for its survival. While Venice remained a commercial republic *par excellence*, Sparta went so far as to prohibit its citizens from the mere handling of money. Republics for ‘expansion’ therefore refer to republics that, in the process of their territorial or commercial enlargement, expand the size of their citizen body. Thus, a republic for expansion may ‘expand’ by extending citizenship downwards to the lower classes within a delimited territory and still be considered ‘expansionary’. Indeed, this was the case with Rome early on in its formation as a republic in the context of the ‘conflict of the orders’, and was also the case in Florence prior to the rule of the Medici. The converse is also therefore true: a republic that expands territorially but does not open the ranks of citizenship to newly conquered peoples remains a republic for preservation. For example, in his discussion on commonwealths for preservation versus commonwealths for expansion, James Harrington identifies the key point of distinction in terms in which ‘the former taketh in no more citizens than are necessary for defence, and the latter so many as are capable of increase.’<sup>41</sup> Venice, that most ‘equal’ commonwealth in practice, according to Harrington, is nonetheless a commonwealth for preservation; ‘and such an one, considering the paucity of citizens taken in and the number not taken in, is externally unequal’ in relation to its provincial acquisitions.<sup>42</sup>

This presents us with a more nuanced picture about the nature of commercial and territorial expansion as well as its status within the canon of republican political thought. Such forms of expansionism were often opposed by republicans only insofar as it empowered social groups and/or institutions that supported the concentration of power in the hands of ‘tyrants’, ‘despots’ or absolutist monarchs in ways that facilitated the development of state autonomy from elite or aristocratic power.<sup>43</sup> The republican ideal of liberty pertained to active self-government by the citizen body, however exclusive that body may be. If the territorial and/or commercial expansion of the state was mediated through institutions that supported the exercise of absolutism, then these processes of expansionism—as well as the institutions and social groups responsible for expansionism—may be opposed. If, however, territorial and/or commercial expansionism occurred outside of, or at the expense of, those groups and institutions, then republican opposition to ‘empire’ could either become muted, or become transformed into support for ‘empire’. Indeed, as is the case in 18<sup>th</sup> century America, it may in fact result in a redefinition of empire in ways that reconcile it with republicanism.

It stands to reason then, that the changing social composition of political and economic power—or, to put it another way, the transformation of politically constituted property into purely economic forms of property resulting in the development of capitalism—will result in a change in the relationship between the expansion of state power and the political constitution of ruling class power and a corresponding

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<sup>41</sup> Harrington, *Oceana*, 32-33.

<sup>42</sup> Harrington, *Oceana*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Again, the exception here may be Machiavelli, if we accept McCormick’s interpretation that Machiavelli’s expansive republic is essentially popular and constrains the ability of elites – the *grandi* – from acting independent of the will of the people.

transformation in the problematic that has informed the history of republican political thought.

## **The Social History of Republicanism and Empire**

Ultimately, the point is that understanding the antagonism between republics and empires in the history of political thought as well as the history of international relations, requires us to move beyond conventional intellectual histories of republicanism that either merely describe its conceptual transformation in the early modern period, or explain this transformation by way of the influence of competing intellectual forces such as ‘political economy’, ‘modernity’ or ‘liberalism’. Such approaches fail to appreciate the degree to which political thought is subject to socio-political contestation rooted in conflicting interests of social class and status.<sup>44</sup> Rather, it is important to situate the specific discourses of republicanism in relation to the character of power relations that constitute the historical context in which they are articulated. ‘Power relations’, however, refer to something inherently abstract, and thus, great precision must be employed in specifying what types of power relations are most relevant for the study of republicanism.<sup>45</sup> The conceptualization of power relations employed here is comprised of three interrelated ‘levels of analysis’<sup>46</sup>: social property relations, political institutions and patterns of social conflict. Each of these components corresponds to a level of historical experience in which relations of exploitation are formed, practiced and contested. As such, while social property relations attain a degree of priority in this conceptualization, they are themselves reinforced or challenged by various political institutions and the existence of social conflict.

The beginning of the project therefore builds on the themes and arguments put forward in this paper. The main theoretical approach of historical materialism will be employed to relate states and empires to historically and socially specific forms of social property relations. In terms of conceptual development, a specific republican conception of empire will be discussed. In terms of understanding the processes of state formation and territorial expansion, emphasis will be placed on the qualitative difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist forms of social property relations and the consequences these differences have on capitalist and pre-capitalist forms of imperialism. The historical evolution of the concept of *imperium* in the context of Rome will be examined along with an analysis of the development of Roman republican political thought, particular in the work of Cicero.

The second case study examines Machiavelli’s contribution to the republican dilemma on liberty and empire within the context of the social property relations that

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<sup>44</sup> For an articulation of a ‘social history’ of political theory, see Neal Wood, *Reflections on Political Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; and Ellen Meiksins Wood, *From Citizens to Lords: a social history of Western political thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, London: Verso, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to say, therefore, a conceptualization of power relations rooted in gender relations or conceptions of racialization are not significant to an understanding of republicanism. For the particular problematic being studied here, however, a conceptualization of power relations ultimately rooted in class is more appropriate.

<sup>46</sup> I use the term ‘levels of analysis’ very cautiously, as it often connotes a hierarchy of experiences that are considered to be independent of each other both analytically and empirically.

formed the basis of the Florentine republic in the late medieval and Renaissance periods. Particular emphasis will be placed on the recurrent conflicts in Florence around the composition of guild republicanism that shaped Florentine politics in the pre-Medici period and the factional struggles amongst the elite. These social conflicts will be examined in relationship to the oligarchic interests of the commercial republic, plebeian struggles over citizenship, the prevalence of factionalism and the military weakness of the city-state.

The third case study examines the evolution and transformation of English republicanism within the contexts of the English revolution and the rise of 'agrarian capitalism'. The impact that the formal de-politicization of capitalist social property relations had on the relationship between political and economic forms of power will be examined in order to understand the political implications for republicanism of English designs for territorial and commercial expansionism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Within this context, English republicanism undergoes a substantive theoretical split, with some embracing the new economic developments and finding new ways of reconciling the problem of republican liberty and empire and others adhering to the classic problem articulated by Machiavelli. In particular, the ideological implications for English republicanism of the strategic alliances between radical republicans, colonial merchants and 'improving' landlords will be examined.

The fourth case study looks at the development of republican political thought in the context of the early American republic. Particular emphasis will be on the contributions of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's anti-metropolitan 'Empire of Liberty' represents an attempt to reconcile republican liberty and 'empire' based on the spatial reconfiguration of political power rooted in a relatively even distribution of independent proprietors as citizens. Hamilton's 'Republican Empire' represents the de-territorialization of republican expansionism, thereby altering the institutional dynamics of 'empire'. These divergent conceptualizations of republicanism and American 'greatness' frame much of the political evolution of the republic in the early years of its expansion; in particular, the conflicts between Democratic-Republicans and Federalists over the project of westward expansion at the expense of developing the maritime commercial and manufacturing capacities of the emerging capitalist state.

The fifth case examines French republicanism and its inability to move beyond the parameters of the republican dilemma. The analysis will situate French republicanism within a social context characterized by the persistence of feudal social property relations and the problems of 'parcellized sovereignty' despite the radical nature of the revolution of 1789. The degeneration of the republic into a territorialist empire under Napoleon conforms to the classical republican problem as it was first articulated in the context of non-capitalist societies. The second part of this chapter will examine the contributions of Montesquieu, Abbé de Mably and Jean-Jacques Rousseau prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution, with specific emphasis placed on the differences between Montesquieu's reverence for the British constitutional model versus Rousseau's and Mably's more radical rejections of commercial society. The remainder of this case study will examine the influence of classical republicanism (particularly in its more radical anti-bourgeois form) on the politics of the French Revolution. An examination of the debates around the republican constitution will be conducted through three periods: first, the Jacobin period during the National Assembly; the problem of executive power during

the Directory; and finally the drift to empire under the Consulate. This analysis will occur within the context of the attack on feudal power and the territorial pretensions of the revolutionary state.