

Tobiasz Adam Bocheński*

Freedom in community or freedom in solitude? Remarks on republicanism and liberalism

Every human being possesses an intuitive, deeply rooted notion of freedom, which they refer to when discussing the notion. It is natural, since freedom, being an axiologically marked term, has accompanied human reflection from time immemorial: the free people of Israel, the contemplations of Buddha, free Greeks and Romans, etc. The fundamental nature of the theme, and the richness and diversity of associated matter further complicate the discussion. That requires one to conduct an arbitrary classification, and to define, if only a fairly general, methodological framework in order not to become lost in the labyrinth of freedoms.

The search for the answers to such questions as: “What is freedom? How should one understand it?” has throughout the ages occupied theologians, philosophers, historians, jurists, artists of all sorts, as well as many other universal minds. Resembling polymaths, their ambition was to reach an objective truth, which could constitute a firm basis for the understanding of the world. Amongst the concepts developed through the years, there exist myriads of interrelated mutually and internally contradictory ideas. For some, that might be a proof of the feebleness of Western culture; for others, an indication of its strength resulting from its fertility and discursiveness. Clearly, there exists a deep diversity of forms and contents hiding behind the façade of a single word: freedom. We know the grand interpretations of it, as a subjective experience expressed in the sensing of one’s existence.¹ Such a type of experiencing was described by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Night Flight*, when being exposed to two expanses, he could in silence gaze into *himself*². Already in this example it becomes evident that the existentialism-inclined 20th-century reflection referred to ancient problems

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¹ Vide T. Gadacz, *Historia filozofii XX wieku. Nurty. Tom 2: neokantyzm, filozofia egzystencji, filozofia dialogu*, Znak, Krakow 2009, pp. 363–375; E. Mounier, *Wprowadzenie do egzystencjalizmów*, trans. E. Krasnowolska, Znak, Krakow 1964.

² Vide A. de Saint-Exupéry, “Nocny lot” in: *Pocztą na południe. Nocny lot*, trans. A. Olędzka-Frybieszowa, M. Czapska, S. Stempowski, PIW, Warsaw 1977, pp. 121–189.

by describing them using a new language from a different perspective. Yet the essence of the notion remains the same: man, i.e. a being limited and liberated through his mind in contact with *apeiron*. That, however, is only one of the many reflections of the emotional experience of freedom. Did not Henryk Elzenberg, toiling with strenuous self-disciplines with existence, thus express his spiritual independence, subjectivity, and separateness? In short: freedom?³ At the time when he was developing his philosophical journal, Andrzej Bobkowski managed to describe his experience of freedom viewed from a bicycle, and from the edge of a Paris table bent under the weight of piles of books.⁴ Elzenberg was still creating his intellectual testament when Czesław Miłosz fled towards freedom in the, still controversial even today, Taqiya cloak⁵, while Herbert was constructing his fortress of spiritual aristocracy. All the mentioned intellectuals directly or indirectly struggled with freedom trying to understand and tame it. It is nearly a cliché to conclude that the reading of each of them offers enriching food for thought. Yet that banal statement is necessary to realise that within the zone which applies to every individual experience, the above-mentioned output is priceless, but at the same time it has no ambition to transcend outside the zone of description or sensation. That deficiency constitutes neither a flaw nor an advantage; it is the immanent characteristic of the presented form and content of the experience of reality.

A considerably different nature applies to political and legal philosophy, the essence of which lies in its particular claim for reality, the aim of which is to ensure its revolutionary or evolutionary change, or to preserve the existing state. One characteristic of such a reflection is the search for axiological solutions which could serve the institutionalisation of various human pursuits within the public sphere. Yet freedom has always constituted the object of a conflict both at the layer of its definition and within the sphere of practice it implies. Since the Greek philosophers there have been battles waged in the pages of various treatises over the shape and the extent of freedom. At this point one must consider why, from amongst such important disputes as the one between Saint Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo, Protestants and Catholics, the adherents of absolutism and the eulogists of limited rule, Enlightenment reformers and revolutionaries standing against the first conservatives, liberals and socialists, or anarchists and socialist democrats. As the focus of my reflection I chose the relationship between republicanism and liberalism present at the level of defining freedom.⁶

³ Vide H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2002.

⁴ Zob. A. Bobkowski, *Szkice piórkami*, Towarzystwo Opieki nad Archiwum Instytutu Literackiego w Paryżu, Warsaw 2011.

⁵ Vide Cz. Miłosz, *Zniewolony umysł*, Instytut Literacki, Paris 1980.

⁶ This issue constitutes an area of interest of researchers due to the revival of republican thought, and an attempt to adapt it to the reality of liberal democracy (vide M. Gajek, *W stronę*

Both streams of political and legal reflection consider freedom as a central value, but, at the same time, they display different approaches to it, which for ages have competed for supremacy. Both intellectual traditions considerably shaped the political and social reality of continental Europe and the English-speaking world, and despite the fundamental differences separating them, they dialectically complement each other. The synergy was not overlooked by some thinkers, who tried to reconcile contradictory categories; hence the non-accidental name of the American republican party, the demands of which express the 19th and 20th-century spirit of liberalism. Both streams were particularly interrelated in the 17th and the 18th c. when republicanism, being a mature intellectual movement, experienced its second rebirth, while the basic categories of liberalism were only forming. At that time, some Dutch, English, and French authors discussed the issue of freedom from the liberal and republican perspective, which stimulated the change of existing political, cultural, and legal paradigms. Yet the alliance between the two traditions did not last long, as the already mature Enlightenment and the 19th c. forgot about or modified republicanism, which in the new form was presented to the world during the French Revolution, and they made liberalism the most popular mode of thinking about politics and law.

Republicanism constitutes a stream of political and legal philosophy the roots of which reach antiquity. Despite the numerous disputes regarding the diagnosis of its origins, one must conclude that the first concrete study, republican in nature, was offered by Aristotle in *Politics*⁷. He introduced the now classical assumption on the social nature of man, who is to fully fulfil his pursuits within a community of man. That was also the starting point for the arguments of republican thinkers on the need for mutual cooperation between citizens focussed on the care for the community, which was supposed to constitute an expression of natural human predispositions. The reflections of Alexander the Great were further enriched by Roman authors: Cicero, Titus Livius, and Sallust. The mentioned authors created the core republican literature, which was read and analysed in the Renaissance in Italian cities (Florence and Venice in particular), 16th and 17th-century Netherlands,

republikańskiego liberalizmu. Kategoria cnót liberalnych we współczesnej amerykańskiej myśli politycznej, OMP, Kraków–Warsaw 2016; B. Brugger, *Republican Theory in Political Thought. Virtuous or Virtual?*, MacMillan Press Ltd, London 1999; S.D. Collins, *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006; R. Dagger, *Civic Virtues. Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997), as well as in consideration of historical syncretic projects which combined the categories of those two intellectuals streams (vide D. Armitage, A. Himy, Q. Skinner (ed.), *Milton and Republicanism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995; N. Bobbio, M. Viroli, *The Idea of the Republic*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003; Q. Skinner, B. Stráth, *States & Citizens. History, Theory, Prospects*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003).

⁷ Vide D. Pietrzyk-Reeves, *Ład Rzeczypospolitej. Polska myśl polityczna XVI wieku a klasyczna tradycja republikańska*, Księgarnia Akademicka, Krakow 2012, pp. 7–164.

England, and the First Polish Republic. That republicanism, which is the focus of my study, is defined as classical contrary to modern republicanism, the main quality of which is anti-monarchism.⁸ One must assume after Pietrzyk-Reeves that classical republicanism is based on two pillars: the view of the state as a teleological political community which constitutes a common good of all the citizens, and the view of politics as the creation and maintenance of political order based on law and justness, i.e. bearing the name of a fair order. A characteristic quality of that approach is the absence of the individual perspective and the fact of emphasising a communal nature.⁹ A republican will assign importance to a community understood as a political body realising care for a common good, i.e. she/he will not consider it within the categories of the sum of individual benefits, rather as a self-contained value independent of those. That assumption results in the conviction about the duties of every citizen to care for the community, which is expressed in the active creation of that which is generally beneficial to all. When considering that perspective, one recognises the principle of equality as the duty of every member of a community is to participate in the creation and ensuring of the common good, which in itself is egalitarian as it spans over all citizens in equal measure – not allowing the establishment of any privileges or special concessions. Therefore, republican thinkers revered the Greek procedure of ostracism highly, the essence of which they saw in the ousting from common space any individuals threatening the existing order, even if they could have possessed great virtues. Yet it was not the grandness, in the spirit of Thomas Carlyle's philosophy, that, according to republicans, was admirable, but the communal nature. Thus, the described paradigm was closer to the well-known legend by Aristotle about the counsel Periander gave the tyrant of Miletus Thrasybulus *to cut the tallest ears, which indicated that one must always cut off the principal citizens*.¹⁰ Everything, though, depended on how one defined the term *principal citizens*. Periander suggested that Thrasybulus remove those individuals who could endanger his despotic rule. For a republican to *cut off the principal citizens* meant a mechanism for removing exceptionally talented individuals who, due to exorbitant passions and ambition, could lead to a subversion of the order, and replacing it with tyranny or another captive system. Thus we arrived at the issue of freedom.

For the republican tradition, freedom was one of the main values. It was described on two complementary strata: the state and community, and the individual. The former was reflected in the stipulation to establish and maintain free order. It was a result of the implementation of all republican assumptions of a political and legal nature, which were to lead to the existence of a free system. The

⁸ D. Pierzyk-Reeves, *Lad Rzeczypospolitej...*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Arystoteles, *Polityka*, trans. L. Piotrowicz, PWN, Warsaw 2008, p. 157.

sine qua non of the fulfilment of freedom within that stratum was the principle of equal justice under law, of the rule of law, of a sovereign people, of the priority of the common interest over individual interests, etc. Individually viewed republican freedom possessed a participatory nature. Man could define himself as free when he was a citizen, i.e. when he was entitled to participate in the state's political life. Thus defined freedom, Benjamin Constant, a French liberal thinker who lived at the turn of the 19th c., called ancient.¹¹ In his opinion freedom in antiquity was not realised within the private zone, and it was actually separated from it. The fact of being free meant active participation in the creation, and the application of law, passing judgments, and voicing opinions during public meetings. Therefore, it was "freedom to", i.e. a free man was a citizen who became free through his own political activeness. The characters from the pages of *History of Rome* by Titus Livius could shout in unison: we are free because we have the right to care for the common good!

That would cause fear in a liberal, who saw the source of freedom in other streams of thought. Liberalism cannot boast a Virgilian pedigree, even though it refers to individualistic categories developed by sophists, Epicureans, and Stoics. Its history began in the 17th c. when, under the influence of the school of the laws of nature (notable representatives of which included Grotius, Pufendorf, Hobbs, and Spinoza), as well as Protestant articles, there formed its first foundations in opposition to the proponents of monarchic absolutism.¹² John Locke, an English Empiricist, is considered the author of the first organised and mature liberal concept; when in *Two Treatises of Government* he presented his basic philosophical assumptions, he triggered the most influential ideological stream which has remained the leading stream since the end of the 18th c.¹³ Even though one would be accurate to associate liberalism with a reflection which considers freedom as the foundation of all public relations, one should not reduce it only to the special manner of defining the notion, and to the superior role assigned to it in relation to other values. Just as in the case of republicanism, liberalism is based on a range of philosophical assumptions, which are supposed to bring people's freedom in a society. To achieve that, it refers to the concept of an individual as the subject of natural laws and rights, an individual who possesses axiological priority in relation to the state or the society. Liberalism is based on the anthropological individualistic perspective which precludes the priority of the common good over the good of an individual. Thus the liberals' emphasising the limited nature of

¹¹ B. Constant, "O wolności starożytnych i nowożytnych", trans. Z. Kosno, *Arka* 1992, issue 42, pp. 243–254.

¹² Vide Z. Rau, *Liberalizm. Zarys myśli politycznej XIX i XX wieku*, Fundacja Aletheia, Warsaw 2000, pp. 9–15.

¹³ Vide Z. Rau, *Wstęp*, in: John Locke, *Dwa traktaty o rządzie*, trans. Z. Rau, PWN, Warsaw 1992, pp. CVII–CVIII.

government, the origin of which they traced back to the individual. A government had to, according to them, be bound by law for it not to endanger the rights of the citizens, which could be broken through a state's pressure existing only based on a voluntary acceptance of the government. Often, liberals have referred to the concept of a social contract, thus deriving the competences to govern as well as the requisition for obedience towards the government from an individual's consent.¹⁴ In order to limit a governing power which they associated with a threat, they stipulated the introduction of a division into governing bodies and the institutions of the right of revolution, which in time transformed into the concept of civil disobedience.

All the quoted categories and safeguards were supposed to ensure an individual's freedom. Liberalism did not deprecate the obligation to participate in governing nor did it negate the importance of the public sphere for the society. Its main assumption was the reversal of the philosophical and political order. For liberals, the zone of freedom is a space of unconstrained, i.e. free of any external interventions (e.g. of the state), activity, the limits of which would be damage or harm caused to another individual. Thus liberalism defined a definition of freedom different from the republican one; one which is often called a negative freedom, a freedom "from". According to a liberal, man can only be free when her/his zone of governance and decision-making will not be violated by factors external in relation to it, e.g. the actions of a government, taxes, legislation, etc. Obviously that does not mean the absolutisation of the spheres of freedom and property. It applies to internal interventions which transcend the framework of a legal order (natural and positive), which threatens the system of the above-mentioned institutional safeguards.

The difference between the republican and the liberal understandings of freedom can be illustrated with a simple example: a liberal going on holiday would say: I feel free from work; a republican giving up his holiday would say: I am free because I can work.

By employing the presented ideal models, which in a general manner characterise republicanism and liberalism, one can arrive at several important questions, answers to which carry serious consequences for political and social life. One of those, which is particularly significant for the issue of freedom, was studied in the 19th c. by Alexis de Tocqueville. The French thinker considered individualism which constituted one of the axiological foundations of liberalism.¹⁵ He noted that in a democratic system, individuals who become interested in the sphere of private egoisms lose interest in the course of public affairs. That lack of care

¹⁴ Vide Z. Rau, M. Chmieliński, *Umowa społeczna i jej krytycy w myśli politycznej i prawnej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2010, pp. 7–32.

¹⁵ Vide M. Tracz-Tryniecki, *Myśl polityczna i prawna Alexisa de Tocqueville*, Księgarnia Akademicka, Krakow 2009.

for the extra-individual sphere leads, according to Tocqueville, to governance by a majority, which transforms into the despotism of equality because socially alienated individuals interested only in their own benefit are helpless in the face of the omnipotence of democratic rule.¹⁶ The ascertainment of the French aristocrat touched the sensitive tension between liberalism and republicanism, i.e. the balance between the qualitative and quantitative engagement of an individual in public affairs. Tocqueville emphasised the significance of the mutual relationship between the individual and public affairs indicating that individualism may lead to a decline of freedom.

The debate regarding the superiority of the republican vision of freedom over the liberal vision and vice versa has remained one of the fundamental problems of political and legal philosophy. Not surprisingly, it has not been conclusive. Yet in the situation of the slow but gradual revival of the republican discourse, e.g. in the works of Philip Pettit,¹⁷ when liberalism is still a lively idea-based force, the question about the two types of freedom remains valid.

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¹⁶ Z. Rau, *Liberalizm...*, pp. 62–65.

¹⁷ P. Pettit, *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002.

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(Summary)

A political thought is an area of legitimate contribution of competitive ideas. Liberalism is often considered as one of the most significant and influential paradigm of our times. The common acceptance of liberal conception of negative liberty can be acknowledged as a proof of this tendency. At the same time clearly visible is the renaissance of republicanism and the conception of active participation in governance. The liberal and republican assumptions have similar roots but different social practices. The aim of this paper is to examine in contrast liberal and republican conceptions of freedom. The author discusses main categories of both political traditions: state, commonwealth, common good, citizen, individualism, law, limited power and freedom itself. The author attempts to compare republicanism and liberalism as the competitive political paradigms to show the dilemmas of modern states and societies where there is no common consensus referring to definition of liberty.

Keywords: republicanism, liberalism, freedom, common good, commonwealth, political thought, politics, political philosophy, history of ideas, individualism