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FREEDOM, VIRTUE, AND SOCIAL UNITY: GORDON WOOD'S "CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION"

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I have no quarrel with the broad outlines of Gordon Wood's account of republicanism in the American revolution. Rather than registering dissent over details, I want to use this opportunity to reflect on the significance of his account (which is considerable) for the topic of this Symposium and for our understanding of contemporary American politics.

The central eighteenth-century concern that Wood's article addresses may be stated as a question: What is it that binds members of a polity together and makes possible a common life? By way of answer, Wood's story offers a descending triad. The "classical" republicanism of the early eighteenth-century, still visible at the time of the Revolution in the thought of John Adams, revolved around public virtue—citizens' capacity to set private interest aside and devote themselves wholeheartedly to the common good. By the mid-eighteenth century, this brand of republicanism had been supplemented, and in some measure displaced, by what might be termed "affective" republicanism, which emphasized benevolence, fellow-feeling, and the corresponding private virtues as the prime source of community. For American constitutional politics of the late eighteenth century, by contrast, the emphasis on virtue (whether public or private) was to a significant degree overlaid by a novel focus on the artful arrangement of personal and group interests.

Overlaid, but not replaced. According to Wood, both classical and affective republicanism have left important residua in the American mind. From classical republicanism, we have inherited our belief in equality and distaste for pretense and privilege; our yearning for individual autonomy and quest for freedom from dependency; our continuing hope for truly disinterested leaders and conversely, our periodic revulsion from politicians whose exploitation of public office for private gain is condemned as corruption; and the continuing obsession with our national virtue, which (as Wood drily remarks) "still bewilders the rest of

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the world."¹ From affective republicanism we derive our view of government as (at best) a necessary evil; our understanding of private society as the prime arena of virtue and mutual regard; our belief in a kind of mildness and decency as core social virtues; and our desire for the unity of emotional intimacy and warmth. As Wood puts it, "[w]e still yearn for a world in which everyone will love one another."²

On its face, Wood's presentation suggests two propositions of great significance. First, by the early nineteenth century (at the latest) there was virtually no trace left in America of the normatively privileged position, established by classical republicanism, for direct political participation. Post-revolutionary America, that is, had quickly shed the sense of politics as an intrinsically elevated activity (though exemplary leaders were a perennial possibility) and the belief that political involvement was essential to personal development and satisfaction. A residuum of classical republicanism remained, of course, and is available even today for reappropriation by "civic republicans."³ But it is nothing like the dominant American view.

Second, the simple opposition characteristic of much recent scholarship between a participatory, public virtue-based classical republicanism and a purely interest-based modern liberalism is much too simple. There is a third possibility: an understanding of the virtues compatible with, necessary for, and in some measure evoked by the operation of a diverse, dynamic commercial society. These virtues might, with equal justice, be called "modern republican" or "liberal." However they are denominated, it is of utmost importance to describe them with some specificity, for they are the virtues we most require here and now. The question of whether contemporary Americans could function successfully as citizens of Sparta (or Swiss cantons, for that matter) is not very important, but the question of whether contemporary culture tends to foster or repress the virtues needed to sustain free institutions is vital by any measure.⁴

One of the advantages of Wood's schema is that it enables us to pose a series of questions about classical republicanism. Four seem especially germane for our purposes, and I will devote the remainder of my article to them.

1. Wood, *Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution*, 66 CHI-KENT L. REV. 38 (1990).

2. *Id.* at 33.

3. For some skeptical comments on this reappropriative movement, see Herzog, *Some Questions for Republicans*, 14 POL. THEORY 473 (1986).

4. For ruminations on all this, see Galston, *Liberal Virtues*, 82 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 1277 (1988); and Galston, *Public Morality and Religion in the Liberal State*, 19 PS 807 (1986).

I. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM, AS WOOD PRESENTS IT, AND GREEK POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY?

Wood's classical republicanism is predominantly Roman in inspiration. More specifically, it draws upon the events of the two centuries from the breakdown of the Republic to the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The writers most cited by eighteenth century classical republicans represent the Roman senatorial opposition to imperial rule—the spirit of aristocratic highmindedness and independence, and of heroic (if ultimately futile) self-sacrifice.

Where these Roman writers are clear and direct, Greek political philosophy is complex. Consider, for example, the ambiguous status of aristocratic public involvement in Plato and Aristotle vis-à-vis private contemplation; or the difficulties posed for an ethic of self-sacrifice by Platonic-Aristotelian moral theories based on self-development rightly understood; or the obstacles to a theory of the common good created by what Plato and Aristotle saw as deep and politically decisive divisions of interest and psychology, even within relatively small communities like the polis. These problems come to a head in the Platonic-Aristotelian depiction of Sparta, which is at least as critical as it is approving. All of which says we cannot presuppose anything like a seamless republican tradition stretching from Greece to Rome—let alone from classical antiquity to Renaissance Italy.

II. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM AS WOOD PRESENTS IT AND ITS MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TRANSFORMATION INTO AFFECTIVE REPUBLICANISM?

The evidence compels us to answer: distant at best. Classical republicanism is rooted in the small republic (or least republics in which the number of politically relevant actors is relatively limited) while affective republicanism reflects the early modern experience of emerging nation-states. Classical republicanism is a public ethic of martial virtue most suited to war and the threat of war; affective republicanism is a sustained ode to peace and the pacific character. Classical republicanism praises severity of manners, self-restraint, and self-sacrifice, while affective republicanism inclines toward mildness, softness, and self-expression. The virtues of classical republicanism are almost wholly male, while those of affective republicanism are female in at least equal measure. Classical republicanism embodies an anti-commercial bias, while affective republi-

canism accommodates itself to, or even affirmatively embraces, commercial activities and traits of character. Finally, classical republicanism espouses the primacy of political association and public deeds; affective republicanism gives pride of place to social relations.

As Wood depicts it, the emerging republicanism of the mid-eighteenth century seems to have far more in common with the liberal tradition (and even with Hobbes) than with classical republicanism. One is led to wonder, in fact, just what it is that the two forms of republicanism have left to share beyond the core concerns with the bonds of human connection and with the virtues.

This perplexity is brought to a head in Wood's treatment of Cato. Within the classical republican tradition, he remarks, "Cicero and Cato . . . were the Romans to be admired It was almost always classical standards—Catonian and Ciceronian standards—that British opposition writers invoked to judge the ragged world of eighteenth-century politics."⁵ But for affective republicanism, matters were completely different. According to Wood, "the powerful appeal of Addison's play *Cato* could scarcely have rested on the austere and self-denying character of Cato himself. The hero's forbidding sternness and his inexorable suicide on behalf of liberty represented behavior not easily emulated by the prosperous and civilized audiences of the eighteenth century."⁶ Wood goes on to contrast Cato with Addison's Prince Juba, the affective republican hero of mildness, sociability, and civilization in opposition to martial fierceness and severity. The gulf of moral sensibility separating the older from the newer republicanism could hardly be more vividly exemplified.

III. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM AND AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM?

There are several reasons to doubt that this relationship is very intimate. To begin with, the title of Wood's article calls our attention to republican influences on the American Revolution. But it is Wood himself who has taught us to recognize a fundamental shift from the Revolutionary mind to that of the federal constitution-makers.⁷ Early in his present argument, Wood invokes Franco Venturi's distinction between a political outlook as "form of government" versus "form of life."⁸ In the

5. Wood, *supra* note 1, at 21-22.

6. *Id.* at 32. In this connection, it is noteworthy that when Rousseau in the FIRST DISCOURSE penned his memorable protest against the politics and morals of mildness, politeness, and commerce, he found it altogether natural to invoke Cato as witness for the prosecution.

7. See G. WOOD, *THE CREATION OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1776-1787* (1972).

8. Wood, *supra* note 1, at 14.

American context, anyway, classical republicanism is (at most) the latter rather than the former: a language of critical distance and social protest rather than a source of laws and socio-political institutions. Witness the fate of John Adams, one of the last prominent Americans to attempt the use of classical republicanism as an affirmative guide for social reconstruction.⁹

Several other phenomena point in the same direction, to the relative marginalization of classical republicanism in the constitutional epoch. Notable in this connection is the rising importance after 1760 of the vocabulary of individual rights as a language of protest against tyranny. Of equal importance during the same period is the increasing intellectual importance of individual interests, deployed in opposition both to virtue as the basis of individual motivation and to homogeneity as the centerpiece of social reality. Finally, doubts about Greece and Rome as suitable models for America culminate in the severely negative judgments on classical politics expressed in Federalist papers six through nine.

This is not to say that all traces of classical republicanism were expunged from the constitutional understanding by 1787. Some important residua remained: a conception of the common good, as distinct from the vector-sum of clashing private and group interests; a continuing belief in the possibility of disinterested virtue in public leaders; and a notion of a distinctive socio-economic base (the leisured landed gentry) as the prime source for such leaders. Still, as Wood has elsewhere shown, the half century after the ratification of the Constitution witnessed the progressive evisceration of even these traces of classical republicanism through the commercial democratization of American society.¹⁰ What remained of it by Andrew Jackson's presidency has to be regarded as pretty thin gruel.

IV. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY "CIVIC REPUBLICAN" REVIVAL?

Like the classical republicanism of the early modern period, contemporary civic republicanism is more a form of life—a language of protest and social criticism—than it is an affirmative program of legal and institutional reconstruction. As more than one commentator has noted, civic republicans tend to be very reticent about describing the practical differ-

9. Again, Wood himself is our most reliable guide on this point. See G. WOOD, *supra* note 7.

10. Wood, *The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution*, in *THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC* 102 (R. Horwitz ed. 1977).

ences their critical views would entail.¹¹

There are, of course, distinctions between these forms of republicanism corresponding to the differing objects of their protest. The classical republicanism of the eighteenth century was directed against the dangerous tendencies of monarchy—in particular, the risks of corruption and of arbitrary authority or tyranny. While these anti-monarchic concerns are hardly extinct today, contemporary civic republicanism is directed for the most part against what it sees as the negative features of liberalism: socio-economic inequalities; structural inadequacies of, and selective exclusions from, full political participation; the progressive commercialization of all domains of life, including politics and the family; relatedly, a mounting privatization and depoliticization of our collective existence; and finally, an ever-increasing social fragmentation that renders collective action ever more difficult by undermining the unity of purpose, spirit, and sympathy on which it rests.

Contemporary civic republicanism, then, seeks a far greater measure of political participation, of individual equality, and of social unity than seems readily achievable within a strictly liberal framework. In its focus on participation and unity, civic republicanism bears at least a family resemblance to its classical forebear, but its much enhanced emphasis on equality and inclusion sets it apart as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon.

It remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, this orientation can move from the discourse of protest to constructive alternatives. This challenge is deepened by the circumstances in which contemporary republicanism must act: the extended republic, a commercial market economy, a highly diverse society, disagreement about the normative status of political participation, and deep mistrust of a character-centered politics and an inclination to rely instead on procedures, institutions, and what James Madison termed “auxiliary precautions.”¹²

The classical norms of social unity and of virtue as self-sacrificial devotion to the common good rested on war and the threat of war. But liberal societies prize peace above all, and prosperity as the means for dampening civil discord and preserving internal tranquility in the face of deep social and moral differences. One may well wonder how far con-

11. See Herzog, *supra* note 3, at 481-82; Gutmann, *Communitarian Critics of Liberalism*, 14 PHIL. & PUB. AFF. 308 (1985); W. KYMLICKA, LIBERALISM, COMMUNITY, & CULTURE 47-99 (1989). There are honorable exceptions, Professor Cass Sunstein perhaps chief among them. See Sunstein, *Republicanism and the Preference Problem*, 66 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 181 (1990), and *Beyond the Republican Revival*, 97 YALE L.J. 1539 (1988).

12. THE FEDERALIST NO. 51, at 322 (J. Madison) (C. Rossiter ed. 1961).

temporary civic republicanism can go in practice before it runs up against the limits imposed by these core liberal commitments.

