



INTERVIEW

Interview with Professor Philip Pettit

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By/Par Sandrine Berges

Professor **Philip Pettit**

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Sandrine Berges SB: - “ In *Republicanism* (Oxford University Press, 1997) you develop the concept of freedom as non-domination and explain its centrality in Republican theory. You mention Rousseau throughout the book. How closely related are your conceptions of Republicanism and freedom as non-domination to Rousseau’s thought?”

Philip Pettit PP: - “I think that Rousseau stands at the intersection of two traditions of thought, though as a thinker of the first rank he transforms each into something original and distinctively his own. The first tradition is the neo-Roman tradition that I try to describe, in which the main emphasis is on the connection between being free and not being dependent on the goodwill of other individuals or groupings: not being subjected to others as to a master who can interfere arbitrarily in one’s life. The other tradition that is important to Rousseau is medieval in origin, rather than Roman. It represents the people in a polity as a ‘corporatio’, in the language of medieval law: an entity that can act as a single person, having distinctive rights and obligations, even distinctive views and purposes. Rousseau’s image of ‘le peuple souverain’ derives directly from that tradition, I believe, and is quite independent of his commitment to republican principles. His work consists in taking the two traditions forward and melding them into a novel, organic whole.

My own approach builds on the republican approach, and not at all on the corporatist one. Hence there are real points of contrast between the sort of republican synthesis that I try to describe and Rousseau’s image of things. I think that republicans should worry about the relation of individuals to the public power of the people and state, as well as to the private power that other individuals and groups may have over them. In particular, I think that they should worry about this in a more intense way than

Rousseau might suggest. I am less optimistic about the rule of the people-en-masse, even a people that is committed, as he wants, to a rule of law and that operates only in a legislative role. The danger of a tyranny of the majority is just as real, in my view, as the danger of a tyranny of the elite.

SB: - “ You mention Amartya Sen’s work on capabilities in Chapter Five. Have you had any further thoughts on the links between your account of freedom as non-domination and his account of freedom as development?”

PP: - “Sen emphasizes the importance, not just of people functioning well, but of their having the capacity to function well. I think that this capacity to function well should have a rich social dimension. It should mean, not just that I can act as I will without others interfering, but also that my ability to act as I will in that manner is not contingent on others being favorably disposed towards me. It is not contingent, for example, on the continuing benevolence of some potentate in my society. In arguing for this line, I connect Sen’s work with the republican tradition. For one of the mainstays of that tradition is the claim that just to be under the power of another — just to have someone in the position of a master or ‘dominus’ — means that one is not really free; one acts only by the leave or permission, ultimately by the grace and favor, of that other. In taking this line, I go beyond anything that Sen explicitly argues but I think that I remain true to the spirit of his work, in particular his emphasis on the enabling people to function rather than forcing them, as Rousseau might have put it, to achieve an appropriate level of functioning.”

SB: - “ You’ve written in the past on the close links between Utilitarian moral theory and Virtue Ethics. Is your political theory predominantly utilitarian, and if so, do you think it would be very different if it were based on virtue theory?”

PP: - “As Sen himself emphasizes, utilitarianism has at least two distinguishable components. It offers a way of ranking states of the world in telling us that utility, however interpreted, is all that matters. And it offers us a way of ranking alternatives by telling us that in any choice — any choice of action or plan or design — the right choice to make is that which maximizes expected utility (in the appropriate sense of utility). This first component is welfarist, the second consequentialist.

I am a consequentialist, so far as I believe that the right choice, say the right choice between institutional designs, is that which maximizes expected value. But I am not a welfarist in Sen’s sense. In politics — in determining the right institutional designs and governmental policies — value should be measured, at least in the first instance, by freedom as nondomination. The best constitution for a polity, taking constitution in a broad sense, is that which maximizes the expected enjoyment of nondomination overall. (You may or may not wish to be more specific and say: expected equal enjoyment of nondomiantion. I happen to think that that is unnecessary since I have argued that with freedom as nondomination, the best way to increase it from any

unequal distribution is always to increase it for the worst off, thereby reducing inequality.)

How does this position connect with virtue theory? It doesn't connect with virtue theory in the sense in which that is a rival to consequentialism: in the sense in which it says that the right option in any choice is that which the virtuous agent would make rather than that which maximizes expected value. I happen to believe that virtue theory in that sense is barely coherent. But the republican approach does connect with virtue theory in another sense. It argues that for the promotion of freedom as nondomination it is important, not just that the polity have appropriate institutions of government, but also that the citizenry display civic virtue: that they are ready to keep an eye on government, and to force it to stay on suitable tracks. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance. And the only assurance of eternal vigilance is reliable civic virtue: the sort of virtue that is most evident nowadays in the various social movement and nongovernmental organizations that characterize the best democratic societies."

SB: - "In the introduction, you state that political philosophers enable the renewal of the terms used in political debates. This would seem to be a fair characterization of the work of people like Sen, Nussbaum and other political theorists and economists involved in the Capability Approach network (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~freedom/>) which has directly influenced the terms used in the UN development report. Is this one of the ways you had in mind in which political theorists can be influential? If not, then what is?"

PP: - "This is a very good example of what I had in mind. And for this reason I am happy myself to be affiliated to the network; I have learned a great deal from Sen and Nussbaum. They have made a deep impact in a world where the dominant concepts for some time have been those of neoclassical economics. They have introduced into public debate the concept of functioning and of having a basic capacity to function in one's own society. And those concepts have had an enormous impact, because they are theoretically well-worked out; because they have readily derivable implications for policy-making; and because, while they hold out the prospect of a greatly improved world, they do not direct us to any sort of fanciful utopia. I would like to think, as suggested above, that my own attempt to argue for replacing the concept of freedom as noninterference by the notion of freedom as nondomination tends in the same direction, and indeed that it is quite readily connected with the capability approach."

SB: - "It seems as though the concept of freedom as non-domination has strong economic implications. You quote Machiavelli (p.32) as saying that non-domination tends to go hand in hand with economic prosperity. Later in Chapter Five, (p.163-165) you argue that conversely, a certain kind of economic prosperity i.e. good levels of employment and stability of the financial system is a precondition of non-domination. What kind of implications if any, do you think this has for theories of sustainable development, and

the kind of international policies that should be encouraged regarding developing countries?”

PP: - “The implications are relatively straightforward, I think. First, the promotion of freedom as nondomination in a country requires universal access to a basic level of welfare and security, as well as universal access to education and information, political knowhow and legal justice: the items that figure in any account of what the capacity to function requires. Without these fundamentals in place, there will be many people who will be vulnerable to others and not assured of freedom as nondomination.

Second, the promotion of freedom as nondomination requires the reduction, ideally the elimination, of discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, caste and the like. To the extent that one belongs to such a vulnerability class, as I have called it, one is in a position of always having to hang on the goodwill of the more powerful. That is directly opposed to the ideal of freedom as nondomination.

Third, the promotion of freedom as nondomination in a developing country requires that the people of that country, and in particular the government, is not forced to depend on the grace and favor of donor countries; if they have to depend in this way, then they will be collectively — and ultimately, individually — subjected to a power that may, arbitrarily, turn against them. The lesson here is twofold. Aid should always be directed to enabling developing countries to become independent or, in effect, interdependent in the manner of developed countries; they should not become client states of any advanced countries. And aid should always be provided on the basis of a framework that is established firmly for a fixed period — say, under the aegis of the United Nations or the World Bank — and that does not continue to be available just at the whim of the donor state.”

SB: - “What would a Republican government’s international policies be and why? Does being a ‘good international citizen’ (p.152) have implication beyond peace keeping? For example, does a Republican country have a duty not to dominate other countries whether or not these countries may in turn dominate it? In particular, should the Republican state abstain from economic domination of other states?”

PP: - “There are a number of fairly clear lessons for the international domain, in particular for an international domain in which military power and economic influence is so unevenly developed. The ideal in such a world is that while countries will naturally be interdependent in relation to one another, no country should have to depend on any other country or league of countries in a way that exposes it to state-level domination, making it inevitable that the dependent country will have to tailor its policies so as to keep the more powerful country sweet. And equally, of course, no country should have to depend in the same way on any single corporation or group of corporations or the same result will follow.

How to achieve the independence (or symmetrical interdependence) that I describe as an ideal? Two things seem to me to be necessary. One is the development of trading and other blocs among the weaker countries: blocs that can give them power against strong states and corporations in the way that unionization gave nineteenth century workers a certain power against employers. And a second is the introduction of international bodies and networks that can regulate, under more or less widely agreed terms of reference, the relationships between states. Bodies like the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and the like are of the first importance here. As government can serve domestically to regulate private relationships in a polity, so these bodies can provide a sort of regulation and regularization that guards against possibilities of abuse by strong governments or corporations.

But at this point a question will arise that republicans have traditionally raised in the domestic sphere. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?* Who will protect us from our protectors? If we are to have international bodies that carry significant powers, then those bodies themselves must be held accountable if they are not to be arbitrary and dominating. This is an area of great contention — witness the debates in the EC — but my own belief is that accountability can be ensured under standard procedures associated with rule of law constraints and measures of review. In particular, it can be successfully achieved in that way so far as governments and nongovernmental organizations combine to exercise vigilance about all their doings.

One last thought. With countries and corporations and international bodies, perhaps the most powerful influence by which they can be regulated is the fear of being shamed at exposure of some abuses. This influence is not well enough explored, I believe, in contemporary schools of institutional design. If I may be narcissistic, I would recommend attention to the themes examined in my 2004 book, co-authored with an economist, Geoffrey Brennan, entitled The Economy of Esteem (OUP).”

SB: - “ You explain that the concept of freedom as non-domination can be used to articulate environmentalist views, even when these are radically eco-centric. Our dependence on the environment is such that inflicting environmental damage is a way of exercising domination on those who depend on that environment, even if they are not actually harmed by that damage. (This in the same way that a master dominates a slave even if he does not interfere with his day to day movement – the possibility of interference is enough of a threat). Could you say a little more on what the Republican position would be on environmentalism?”

PP: - “If the republican concern for promoting freedom as nondomination extends to future as well as to present generations — as surely it must do — then environmental protection and preservation is vital for providing the infrastructure for the enjoyment of such freedom into the future. Let the quality of water decline world-wide; let ocean levels rise so as to inundate low-lying countries; let fish stocks become polluted or radically reduced; let any of these familiar catastrophes materialize, and the capacity of at least large sections of the world’s population to enjoy freedom as nondomination

will be severely jeopardized. Populations may be reduced internally to states of anarchy, lawlessness and mafia-like domination. They may be put in a relationship of utter dependency in relation to other peoples and states. Or at the least they may find themselves so impoverished that, even if domination does not increase as such, their opportunities for enjoying freedom as nondomination will have been greatly diminished; the freedom may still be formally there but its value or worth will have fallen towards zero.”

Philip Pettit is William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics at Princeton since 2002.

The following was taken from his web page : <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppettit/>

“Philip Pettit works in two broad areas: the foundations of economics and the social sciences, where this includes issues of psychology and metaphysics as well as methodology; and moral and political theory: the theory of what values our social institutions should realise and of how they can be best organised to promote such values. In both areas he works sometimes in more purely philosophical mode, sometimes in a mode that engages with economic and related methods; and in both areas, he works sometimes on his own, sometimes in collaboration with colleagues in philosophy, economics, political science and law.”

Le livre de Philip Pettit *Republicanism* a été traduit en Français chez Gallimard en 2003.

Pour une bibliographie complète, voire le curriculum vitae de Prof. Pettit sur <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppettit/CVPettit.pdf>