

Culture and Collective Memory in Ancient Republicanism

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“Republicanism” names a large, ambitious, and internally diverse tradition of political theory and practice. In an important series of studies, Quentin Skinner (1978, 1984, 1998) has shown that in early modernity the “neo-roman” emphasis on non-dependence gradually gave way to the liberalism of non-interference. In one way or another, the contemporary champions of civic republicanism – Philip Pettit, Maurizio Viroli, and Michael Sandel, to name a few – have built upon the opposition between republicanism and liberalism. They have sought not only to improve the quality of our theoretical conversations, but also to revitalize democratic practices. Beyond an emphasis on freedom as non-domination, contemporary republicans hold in common the core ideals of the tradition: the rule of law, civic participation and self-governance, civic education, and the mixed constitution. And, despite their differences on questions of perfectionism and non-interference, contemporary republicans are united in the belief that their theories should guide practice.

My chief concern is that the contemporary republicans' conversations, altogether, have thus far taken place within all too narrow a frame of reference. Both “civic humanists” and “civic republicans” are admirably attentive to the history of republicanism (e.g., Arendt 1958, Beiner 1992, Pettit 1997, Pocock 1975). Yet, in my view, they have not adequately taken account of the ancient republican tradition in all its range, diversity, and depth. If we widen the republican lens in this way, then we find that contemporary republicans are much closer to one another, and to the liberal ideals of modernity, than their self-presentation might suggest. For example, contemporary theorists could never embrace the ancient republicans' radical emphasis on the primacy of politics – their willingness to seek political solutions to an extraordinary range of religious, economic, educational, and moral problems. The moderns' hesitation is understandable in light of the disturbing modern experiences of unconstrained political authority. Few contemporary theorists, moreover, could celebrate the ancient republicans' disconcertingly agonistic and aggressive conception of politics. Finally, few contemporary theorists could endorse the ancient republicans' unqualified respect for manliness or their unabashed willingness to rank courage first among the moral virtues.

Beyond these important differences, the ancient republicans also confront contemporary theorists with unresolved questions. For example, what does a republican theory of international relations look like? What is the republican understanding, both descriptively and normatively, of the relationship between politics and culture? The ancient thinkers had well-developed views on such questions, yet modern theorists have maintained an audible silence about them. It would be worthwhile to explore the ancients' understanding of these issues, both to stimulate the development of contemporary republican theory and to expose its largely unacknowledged modernism and liberalism.

A few quick examples from history will illustrate the gulf that separates ancient and modern republicans. From the *Lex Oppia* of 215 BC onward, the SPQR instituted sumptuary laws to limit expenditure on expensive clothing and private entertainment, down to such details as the type of food provided and the number of guests allowed at banquets (see, for example, Crawford 1978: 75-76). In 186 BC, the Roman Senate outlawed the worship of Bacchus in the belief that spread of the Bacchanalian cult would undermine public security and elite authority (Livy 19.8-18). In 133-123 BC, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus carried an ambitious land reform designed to distribute the profits of empire fairly, to allocate to poor citizens a traditional small allotment, and to reduce the polarization of wealth that followed upon Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean world. As Cicero said, the *res publica* is the *res populi*: the republic (broadly construed) is the property of the people. Considering these points might well lead us back in the direction of liberal constitutionalism. As Nancy Rosenblum has argued, republicanism has a darker side, when it encourages "civic fundamentalism," by which she means "insistence on the civic virtue of vigilant patriots, a reluctance to relax jealousy and suspicion of government, and a propensity for direct action to 'take back' power from corrupt or alien usurpers" (Rosenblum 1998: 284). What would we think today of re-instituting popularly elected censors, as in Rome – officials to supervise morals and disenfranchise unethical citizens?

Admittedly, these examples are drawn from Roman political life, rather than from ancient political theory. But these details help to orient the discussion. As political theorists have understood at least since the 17th century, a profound gulf separates ancient and modern expectations, assumptions, and experience. Although my focus will be on ancient political thought rather than historical reality, the ancients' understanding of republicanism could hardly have taken shape as it did apart from the lived experience of Roman politics. This makes ancient theory no less interesting for us, but it does suggest that the ancient political experience provides important guidelines for, and sometimes imposes limits upon, the interpretation of ancient texts.

In order to explore republicanism through a wider lens, I focus on Polybius' *Histories*, a founding text in the republican tradition. In the *Histories* Polybius outlines his famous theory of the "mixed constitution." It is already a mistake, however, to extract this theory from the *Histories*, like a gem from the dirt, without taking account of its rich historiographic setting. Polybius' *Histories* is an account of the Romans' military conquest and political unification of the Mediterranean from roughly 220 BC to 168 BC. Polybius was constantly attuned to the realities of international power and domination, particularly as they motivated or constrained his protagonists. His central question was this: "Who is so worthless or indolent as not to wish to know by what means and under what type of political regime (*tini genei politeias*) the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjecting nearly the whole inhabited world to their sole power – a thing unique in history?" (1.1.5, tr. Paton, adapted; cf. 6.2.2-4). Polybius offered his account of the Romans' *politeia*, or "regime," specifically in order to explain the Romans' imperial success (1.64.2).

In what follows, I sketch out certain lines of Polybius' political thought under the following subheadings: historiography as theory, the ends of republican politics, the dialectic between state and society, and republican international politics. Polybius teaches us which questions to ask, which solutions to avoid, which dangers inhere in

human nature, and which risks we run as political animals. He provides us with formidable resources of political criticism, but his long political experience made him wary of inflicting robust normative theories on his readers.

Why Theorists Should Be Interested in Ancient Historians

One initial worry might be that an ancient historian, such as Polybius, is not in the position to make meaningful contributions to the study of republicanism. The worry might take this form: historians, limited by the facts as they really were, cannot be deep or daring or speculative as theorists, or as sources for theory. Thinking of Machiavelli's *Discourses* or Book IV of Rousseau's *Social Contract* should help to banish the thought from our minds. Ancient historians and ancient history were extraordinary resources for theory. As for the question of historians as theorists, this worry embodies what we might call a "pre-postmodern" mistake. Despite their respect for facts, narrative historians are constrained neither in the selection nor the interpretation nor the normative assessment of those facts.

As for selection, Polybius compares himself *qua* historian to the well-traveled Odysseus: only experience and judgment enabled him to ask the right questions of and draw the right conclusions from eye-witnesses (12.28.8-10). Polybius' analysis of the Roman *politeia* picks up the Roman thread of his story just where the Romans were panicking over their disastrous defeat at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC (3.118.1-9, 6.11.1-2). Polybius shaped his narrative this way because he held the controversial view that the explanatory case was the extreme case, not the typical one (6.2.5-6). As for interpretation, Polybius argues that studying history does no less than cultivate sound political judgment – which he specifies as “the rational understanding (*theōria*) of causes and the choice (*hairesis*) of what is better [not “best”] in each case” (6.2.8). Polybius casts himself as a teacher whose primary lesson was that we must take responsibility for our lives in a world we did not choose or make (cf. 4.21.1-12 with 3.47.6-48.12, 10.5.9, and Eckstein 1995: 276). We must act “nobly” (*kalōs*) in spite of the power of Fortune (*Tuchē*) (cf. 23.12.3-7 with 23.14.12 and Eckstein 1995: 272-74). As for normative assessment, Polybius aspires not only to explain Rome's success but also morally to evaluate its end or *telos* (3.4.1-13). Political or military success is not enough, Polybius argues, because conquest is not intrinsically an end, but rather simply a means – and Polybius plans to judge the Romans based on the welfare of their subjects after the Roman conquest (3.4.9-12). He offers an increasingly critical assessment of Roman arrogance and despotism at the time of their destruction of Carthage (149-146 BC) – the culmination, as well as the cause, of the Romans' incremental loss of political equilibrium (cf. 38.21.1-3-22.3).

Apart from the ancient historians' own theoretical ambitions, consider, too, that their narratives often force us to recognize ourselves – citizens of modern republics, after all – in a disturbing new light. As Polybius tells it, for example, the ancient Roman republicans took great pleasure in humiliating foreign authorities before their own peoples. In 168 BC, Gaius Popilius Laenas was sent to defuse an impending war between Antiochus IV and Ptolemaic Egypt. When Antiochus IV asked for time to think things over, Laenas drew a circle in the sand and responded that he would need an answer before Antiochus left the circle (29.27.1-8). If arrogance toward foreign powers sounds

all too familiar even today, then we should credit Polybius' characteristically republican focus on humanity as it is, not as it ought to be. Polybius ruled out Plato's *politeia* as a constitutional *comparandum*, because Plato's citizens were like statues, rather than living, breathing human beings (6.47.7-10). Thus, despite appreciating the gulf that separates ancient and modern, we should ever remain attuned to the ways in which ancient theorists grasped the permanent features of political life.

The Nature and End of Politics

What do republican theorists regard as the nature and end of politics? John Adams, the most Polybian of the American Founders, took as his *telos* the "ease, comfort, security, or, in one word, happiness, to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree" (Adams, *Thoughts on Government*, qtd. at Rahe 1992: 351). Philip Pettit, drawing, as he proclaims, on the Roman tradition, advances a modest, instrumental republicanism dedicated to the cause of negative liberty, understood as non-domination. Hannah Arendt, Michael Sandel, and Ronald Beiner advance an Aristotelian or neo-Athenian model of "civic humanism," as it is called, according to which political participation is intrinsically valuable as a constituent of human flourishing. Other goals, or partial goals, are easily imaginable within the republican tradition, ranging from *eudaimonia* for all citizens (e.g., Plato's Magnesia) to the fulfillment of natural human sociability and obligations (e.g., Cicero's *De Officiis*) to the attainment of social justice (e.g., the Marxist utopia) to the management of natural human conflict (e.g., Machiavelli's *Discorsi*).

Where does Polybius stand on this question? As an historian, Polybius offered few reflections in his own name on the most appropriate political *telos*. Just before describing the Roman regime, however, he offered an account of the evolution of political life as such. He initially stressed the achievement of distributive justice, supported by the citizens' sense of reciprocity and gratitude. The political authority, initially a monarch, distributes rewards and punishments according to desert (6.6.10-11), while all citizens internalize reciprocity, which is based on duty – and duty is, for Polybius, the "beginning and end of justice" (6.6.7). Polybius says explicitly that in the mixed constitution of Sparta, the elders always ranged themselves with justice, which ensured that each sub-group had an appropriate share of political power (6.10.7-11). Justice also cements the political equilibrium of the Roman Republic (6.11.1).

Although the citizens' sense of justice is real and non-instrumental, however, justice is not the best way to capture Polybius' underlying view. Nor is it enough to say, as Polybius' early descriptions might indicate, that the central political goal is security, enjoyment, and the satisfaction of daily needs (6.7.4). Such simplicity and non-heroic decency could have been the end of politics, if only the early kings had continued to live, as they did at first, on an egalitarian basis with others (6.7.5). But human nature necessarily disrupts tranquility. A particular human tendency now comes to sight as the chief political problem: the self-aggrandizement of those with abundant resources, unassailable security, and no experience of difficulty. Polybius' wheel of constitutions is turned at each stage by those who have inherited power, acquired too much wealth, or forgotten the bloodshed of previous revolutions (6.7.6-7, 7.7.4-5, 6.8.5-9). Political hubris is primarily a problem of the elite, although Polybius, ever the aristocrat, also

holds the demos responsible for being manipulated by demagogues (6.57.7-9). Yet if political hubris is an inherent tendency of human nature, then so too is the heroic, daring, and courageous resistance of tyranny (6.7.9, 6.9.1). The self-respecting tendency to push back is also a part of human nature and transcends the particularities of class or status. In short, Polybius wishes for simplicity, decency, and justice in politics, but he recognizes that, human nature being what it is, resistance to domination is the best that politics can deliver. Justice and material welfare require an active defense (6.18.5-8; cf. 6.10.7-11).

The resulting picture, however, must strike us as grim. If Polybian politics is a project designed to free humanity from the dangers of elite hubris, then the concept of politics, as such, is based on fear. Polybius understands the Spartan “constitution” as a form of institutional equilibrium based on the mutual fear of kings, Senate, and people (6.10.8-10). This captures the essence of the Roman system, too. After outlining the legal privileges and duties of consuls, Senate, and people, Polybius repeatedly emphasizes that each element has the power to support or harm the others, which leads them to develop cautious and even fearful relationships with one another (6.15.11, 6.16.5, 6.17.1, 6.17.9, 6.18.1). The people must fear the consuls, who are their future commanders, and the Senate, which administers the courts; the consuls must fear the people because they will be strictly held to account upon leaving office, while they fear the Senate because only the Senate can pay for their triumphs; and so on. (Despite Polybius’ account of the Romans’ dispersal of power, Roman historians are aware, of course, that during the Republic most decisions were in fact taken by the Senate, and that in practical terms Rome was an oligarchy; cf. Polybius 6.51.5-8.)

Unlike the Spartans, however, the Romans arrived at this tense equilibrium, not through the logos of Lycurgus, but rather through their bitter experience of “many struggles (*agōnōn*) and troubles (*pragmatōn*)” (6.10.14). It is possible, with many modern scholars, to celebrate the Roman achievement as an expression of the Romans’ talent for political compromise. But Polybius understands the Roman achievement in a less congratulatory way, as the culmination of an Aeschylean process of learning through suffering. Since they have come to understand the dangers of political hubris, the Romans have integrated fear and caution into every detail of their political lives. Unlike the sons of kings in Polybius’ cycle of constitutions, the Romans will never forget the bitter conflicts that shaped their political life. Even fear of a common enemy produces civic unity only through inspiring competition among the three governing elements (6.18.1-4).

Polybius’ picture is grim, not only because civic friendship is off the table, or because Polybius neglects the intrinsic fulfillments of exercising political judgment. Polybian politics is calculating, fearful, pervasive. Unlike Cicero, among others, Polybius offers little account of the common good. He concentrates instead on the fractures of republican politics and on the obtrusive claims of politics. To do the business of community, and even to live our lives, we must constantly be doing politics with one another. We must constantly be defending our standing and resisting encroachment. Polybius avoids theorizing *eudaimonia* or social justice, à la Plato, because we cannot find these things even in the best of constitutions. The most we can find is an adequate self-defense, a defense of our honor. Equivalently, we can attain self-respect through resisting the encroachment of other groups. Provisionally, we may say that pugnacious self-defense – not *eudaimonia* or social justice or self-creation or pleasure – had to

suffice as the political good. As we will see, this means that we can all be men, but also that our lives will all be so exhausting.

Until we consider the dialectic between politics and culture, not to mention international politics, the foregoing account can only be provisional. For now, however, we can appreciate the value Polybius places on pugnacious self-respect by observing Polybius' utter contempt for servility. In the winter of 167/6 BC, King Prusias II of Bithynia appeared before the Roman Senate in order to curry the favor of his overlords:

This Prusias was a man by no means worthy of the royal dignity, as may easily be understood from the following facts. In the first place when some Roman legates had come to his court, he went to meet them with his head shorn, and wearing a white hat and a toga and shoes, exactly the costume worn at Rome by slaves recently manumitted or "liberti" as the Romans call them. "In me," he said, "you see your libertus who wishes to endear to himself and imitate everything Roman"; a phrase as humiliating as one can conceive. And now, on entering the senate-house he stood in the doorway facing the members and putting both his hands on the ground bowed his head to the ground in adoration of the threshold and the seated senators, with the words, "Hail, ye saviour gods," making it impossible for anyone after him to surpass him in unmanliness, womanishness, and servility. And on entering he conducted himself during his interview in a similar manner, doing things that it were unbecoming even to mention. As he showed himself to be utterly contemptible, he received a kind answer for this very reason. (30.18.2-7, tr. Paton; cf. 36.15.1-3).

As unattractive as Prusias' servility may be, it is almost equally unattractive to think that one had to fight for one's honor, day in and day out, in the midst of a pervasive, fearful, and agonistic politics. The price of maintaining honor makes Polybius' political vision vastly different, I would say, from that of all contemporary republicans, and even from those, such as Arendt or Bonnie Honig (Honig 1993), who self-consciously embrace agonistic politics. Pettit's version of republicanism, though frequently referring to "eternal vigilance" as the price of non-domination, doesn't endorse eternal vigilance in Polybius' disconcertingly profound sense. Even Pettit, not to mention John Adams, lists non-interference as a secondary political goal, whereas for Polybius it was a merely idle fantasy.

The Dialectic between State and Society

In his appreciation of the horrors of politics as a perpetual game of power, Polybius' nearest ally might have been Foucault. But, despite the pessimism of his political vision, Polybius was not a Foucauldian, nor even a Machiavellian, because he believed in the possibility of psychological transformation, at least to a limited extent, through education. If stability often required courageous resistance and the memory of bloodshed, then the intensity of political relations could be slightly diminished through

the cultivation of restraint, or *sōphrosunē*. Polybius was pessimistic about human nature and cautious about the prospects of politics to improve our condition. Yet he also envisioned a dialectical interaction between state and society, which provided an opening, albeit a limited one, for the transformative power of education.

Polybius' concept of the regime (*politeia*) is the key to the dialectic between state and society. By *politeia* Polybius means, in typically Greek fashion, the Romans' *ethos* (customs or national character) and their *nomoi* (laws) (6.47.1-2). Why, in Polybius' view, is the *politeia* more important to political health than (say) relations of production or climate and geography or the level of a city's scientific control over nature? Polybius' answer is clear: the city's *politeia* is the *fons et origo* from which "all designs and plans of action not only originate but also reach their fulfillment" (6.2.9-10, tr. Walbank, adapted). The regime not only maintains institutional stability and order but also ethically educates the desires, intentions, aspirations, and judgments of citizens. The citizens' goals and accomplishments spring from and make sense only with reference to the customs and laws of the city. (On the traditionalism of this picture, consider Thuc. 2.36.4; Isocr. 7.14, 12.138; Plato *Rep.*, *Laws*; Arist. *Pol.*).

Polybius reveals the political importance of *ethos* with exceptional clarity. Discussing the affairs of Greece from 220-216 BC, Polybius describes the Aetolian take-over of the Peloponnesian city of Cynaetha. Cynaetha fell through the traitorous activity of a minority opposed to the pro-Achaean authorities. The betrayal of the city was the culmination of "constant massacres, expulsions, robbery of goods, and confiscation of lands by the one faction or the other" (4.17.4, tr. Paton). But what initially inspired the Cynaetheans' cruelty towards one another, not to mention outsiders? According to Polybius, it was the abandonment of traditional musical studies, including singing and ritual dancing. Such practices had been established by early statesmen with a view to moderating the Cynaetheans' harsh character, itself the product of hard manual labor and gloomy conditions (4.20.3-4.21.6). Polybius takes pains to emphasize that in this particular case, music was not a luxury, or a mode of aesthetic enjoyment, but rather a political necessity (4.21.10). In the absence of musical education, the Cynaetheans dedicated themselves to local political rivalries. The relentless pursuit of ambition (*philotimias*, 4.21.5), in turn, precluded the possibility of a renewed musical education.

Two points deserve emphasis. First, for Polybius, the state/society dialectic is not airtight. As Polybius points out, the Cynaetheans have room to change, if only they should "humanize themselves by turning their attention to education and especially to music" (4.21.11). Though Polybius points out that such changes will require moral luck, the choice is up to the Cynaetheans themselves. Second, the state/society dialectic influences not only individuals, sub-state groups, and internal political functioning, but also the behavior of the state as international actor. The Cynaetheans' neglect of musical education led to worse individual lives, contentious domestic politics, and savage and ultimately self-defeating international policies. The necessities imposed by these policies, along with Cynaetha's fractious intra-state politics, led to an ever firmer repudiation of musical education.

The state/society dialectic informs Polybius' comparisons between different constitutions. Polybius argues, for example, that even despite their occasional successes, the classical Athenians were doomed to fail because of the citizens' ill-tempered and inconstant character, which both gave rise to and was cultivated by Athens' licentious

democratic institutions (6.44). The Cretans, he says, are insatiably greedy, in part because wealth is held in “honor” (*timē*) and is considered most “noble” (*kalon*) (6.46.1-3); as a result, the Cretans “are involved in frequent seditions, public and private, murders, massacres, and civil wars” (6.46.9, tr. Scott-Kilvert). Polybius’ observations on specific constitutions culminate in the following general theory:

In my opinion there are two fundamental things in every state, by virtue of which its principle and constitution is either desirable or the reverse. I mean customs and laws. What is desirable in these makes men’s private lives righteous and well ordered and the general character of the state gentle and just, while what is to be avoided has the opposite effect. So just as when we observe the laws and customs of a people to be good, we have no hesitation in pronouncing that the citizens and the state will consequently be good also, thus when we notice that men are covetous in their private lives and that their public actions are unjust, we are plainly justified in saying that their laws, their particular customs, and the state as a whole are bad (6.47.1-4).

How are these insights developed in Polybius’ appreciation of Roman culture? The historian is often criticized for his neglect of central Roman practices such as patronage. But Polybius was a politically influential Achaean aristocrat, brought to Rome as a hostage in 168 BC, where he became the political advisor and friend of Scipio Aemilianus. According to Cicero (*Republic* 1.34; cf. Polybius 38.22.3), Scipio – aristocrat, general, statesman – often discussed political life with Polybius and Panaetius the Stoic philosopher, their focus being the best regime, and their method, an ambitious enquiry into comparative law, culture, and history. In my view, therefore, Polybius could not help being aware of the patron/client relationship, among many other social practices. Instead, I would suggest that Polybius specifically tailored his account of Roman society to emphasize the Romans’ dedication to a traditional, manly, and pugnacious brand of courage. Polybius calls “manly courage” (*andreia*) “nearly the most essential virtue in all states and especially so in Rome” (31.29.1, tr. Paton). If Polybius has, as I propose, chosen to emphasize courage in book VI, then his presentation of Roman culture would be perfectly consistent with his representation of other states, where his emphasis, as we have just seen, was on their leading virtues and vices.

Recall that Polybius introduces his discussion of the Roman *politeia* just at the moment of Rome’s disastrous defeat at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC (3.118.1-9, 6.11.1-2). He concludes his treatment of the *politeia* by favorably comparing Rome to Carthage. His chief emphasis is on the superior bravery of Roman citizens as compared to Carthaginian mercenaries (6.52.5). In part the Romans’ superior courage derives from their concern for their families and their city (6.52.7), but it also derives in part from their customs (*ethismōn*, 6.52.10). Polybius offers just one example of such a custom, he says, in order “to illustrate the pains taken by the Roman state to produce men who will endure anything to win a reputation for valor in their country” (6.52.11, tr. Scott-Kilvert). (It is possible to suggest that Polybius’ emphasis on reputation here as elsewhere might constitute a subtle criticism of Roman courage, on the grounds that Roman courage is not true courage; but I must explore this implication elsewhere.) Polybius’ example,

famously, is the aristocratic funeral. At an aristocratic funeral, the public rehearsal of a great man's deeds will, Polybius says, inspire the young to imitate his courage and to conceive extravagant military designs in order to win glory (6.53-54, esp. 6.54.3). Polybius then recounts the story of Horatius Cocles, who sacrificed himself to save Rome and astounded his enemies "not so much by his physical strength as by his endurance and courage" (6.55.2, tr. Scott-Kilvert). Horatius Cocles was one of many exemplary figures who loomed large in the Romans' collective memory and education of the young.

In light of Polybius' decision to emphasize courage as the leading value of Roman culture, we can make better sense of Polybius' extended analysis of the Roman military (6.19-42). Polybius' account of numbers, logistics, and encampment practices is extraordinarily detailed and precise. He weaves into this account a number of comments about the Roman character: the centurion is steadfast, imperturbable, and brave enough to die at his post (6.24.9); there are precise regulations defining unmanly and dishonorable conduct, which is punished severely (6.37.10-13); the Romans are obsessively concerned with rewards for bravery and punishments for cowardice, which explains their brilliant military successes (6.39.7-11). Contrary to recent arguments (Eckstein 2006), Polybius, the contemporary student of comparative *politeiai*, judged that Romans were, to an unusual degree, militaristic (6.39.11; cf. 31.29.1).

Scholars have wondered why Polybius inserted this analysis between his account of Roman institutions and Roman society. The answer is now clear. Romans were intensely militaristic. They cultivated manly and pugnacious courage. Militarism was a foundational part of their politics and culture. Accordingly, Polybius' analysis of the military is not a digression, so much as an additional explanation of the relationship between Roman politics and culture. Polybius wanted to indicate, clearly though subtly, that the Romans were distinctive and unusual in their pursuit of militarism. Given Polybius' previous account of the fear, pugnacity, and agonism of Roman political life, we should not be surprised to find that Roman culture, too, promoted manliness and courage as central virtues.

Militaristic currents flowed freely between the political and cultural worlds in Rome. Polybius' analysis should lead us to recognize that, in general, our politics cast us as particular kinds of individuals and thus exert a formative power over ethos; and our cultural ethos, in turn, shapes our political aspirations, institutions, and ideals. The political importance of ethos is perhaps the most powerful insight of republican theory from Polybius to Machiavelli to Rousseau. Among other things, Polybius' analysis can awaken us to the relationship between culture and politics in our own politics. As Polybius' *Histories* illustrates, there is no self-contained political realm or private life. Even modern liberal democracies have an ethos – that is, the "lack of ethos" (Beiner 1992: 22), the maximization of choice, the paradoxical cultivation of rootlessness. Polybius heightens our awareness that, without explaining the relationship between politics and culture, political theory can hardly do its job – whether that job is to guide practice or simply to criticize it.

What, then, is the neo-republican account of culture? How does civic republican culture influence politics and vice versa? We do not find many extended analyses of such questions in the contemporary literature. This is one of the many challenges Polybian political thought might pose to contemporary theorists. At any rate, contemporary republican theorists need to find a much less militarized and totalizing

conception of non-domination than the Roman one. Non-domination, though a very great good, cannot be the cynosure of modern political theory or practice, as it was for the ancients.

Polybius' searching analysis of culture only intensifies this point. Here we must adjust our provisional conclusions regarding Polybian politics. At first glance, Roman politics appeared to be an exhausting, intrusive, totalizing experience that left little room for enjoying life. We are always already being called upon to come to an aggressive defense of our own honor and political power. In light of Polybius' theory of the dialectic between state and society, however, we now see that Roman politics and culture formed an uninterrupted continuum emphasizing precisely the same values: courage, manliness, pugnacity, aggression. Not just Roman politics, then, but also Roman culture formed part of the same totalizing experience of life. There was no escape – again, in Polybius' representation, which does not necessarily correspond to historical reality – from the Roman ethos of machismo and honor. The only question was whether Roman pugnacity would be directed against other citizens or sub-groups, or against other states altogether.

Where does this analysis leave us with regard to the question of political agency or freedom? Can we, as Polybius had suggested in his account of Cynaetha, choose or shape the currents that flow between politics and culture? Should we, indeed, be optimistic about the possibility of education as a means to reduce the inherent conflicts of political life? It is hard to imagine the Romans' militaristic political and cultural complex changing much from within. As the aristocratic funeral illustrates, the Romans were profoundly traditional. They prized innovation in one area alone – the military, as Polybius tells his readers, by way of offering the Romans a back-handed compliment (6.25.3-11).

Nevertheless, Polybius held out some hope that we can change our situations. As an historian, Polybius understands his own purpose to be that of educating statesman to *sōphrosunē* through his representation of suffering (1.1.2). If currents flow easily between culture and politics, as Polybius suggests, then studying truthful history, a history that accurately represents the calamities of political life, might provide one of our foremost grounds for optimism regarding the improvement of political life. Polybius has Aemilius Paullus make a suggestion along these lines:

It is chiefly at those moments when we ourselves or our country are most successful that we should reflect on the opposite extremity of fortune; for only thus, and then with difficulty, shall we prove moderate in the season of prosperity. The difference between foolish and sensible men (*tōn noun echontōn*) lies in this, that the former are schooled by their own misfortunes and the latter by those of others. (29.20.2-4, tr. Paton, adapted).

Both Aemilius Paullus and Scipio Aemilianus had managed to learn moderation despite the growing corruption of their time (29.20.1-4, 38.21.1-3, 38.22.1-3). Along with paragons of virtue, then, history itself teaches moderation, but only for those who have ears to hear (1.1.2; 1.35.7-10; 5.75.3-6). Men of action can correct their conduct by

observing both the positive and negative examples provided by historical narratives (7.11.2). Yet how many Romans had ears to hear?

Republicanism and International Politics

However far-reaching the pessimism of his picture, though, Polybius did not view the pugnacious Romans simply as “bad people.” Beyond their internal struggles, the Romans also continually experienced threats from belligerent states such as Carthage and Macedon (e.g., 1.10.6). Their fighting mentality arose in part as a response to understandable fears for their own security. The constraints imposed by international conflict are front and center in the robustly Roman republicanism of thinkers such as Polybius, Livy, and Machiavelli. Such concerns are still present, of course, in the political theory of the American Founders. But international politics is surprisingly absent from most contemporary republican theory. From a Polybian perspective, this neglect of international affairs corresponds closely to the contemporary theorists’ neglect of culture. For Polybius held, quite understandably, that a city’s political and cultural life translated into a particular approach to international politics and therewith to success or failure in foreign affairs (and currents flowed in the other direction too, of course, from international politics to local politics and culture). (As we all know, most contemporary international relations theory would seek to de-emphasize such factors in the explanation of foreign policy; but this ancient/modern contrast is the subject of a different paper.)

Such is Polybius’ standard analysis of the troubled regimes to which he compares Rome at the end of Book 6. Polybius disapprovingly outlines the cultural life and internal politics of Thebes and Athens, for example, in order to explain the reasons for their eventual breakdown in the international world. “Both are states,” he declares, “in which the masses take all decisions according to their random impulses. In the case of Athens the populace is headstrong and spiteful; in that of Thebes it has been trained to grow up with habits of violence and ferocity” (6.44.9, tr. Scott-Kilvert). Like most ancient political thinkers, Polybius was no fan of democracies (e.g., 6.9, 6.51.6, 6.57.6-9) or of the capacities of ordinary citizens (e.g., 38.11.11, 38.12.4-11; Champion 2004: 185-93, 241-44). In Athens, Polybius argues, civic breakdown and international collapse resulted from the Athenians’ instability of character and the resulting contentiousness, yet also aimlessness, of political life (6.44.2-6).

However, Polybius by no means ignored historical facts in an effort to produce a simple homology between society, internal politics, and international relations. He was cultivating the judgment of statesmen in real-world political life. His method was the truthful representation of the unruly realm of historical particulars (compare Polybius’ famous “ode to truth,” 13.5.4-6). Thus, in his examination of Sparta, for example, Polybius shows that the state/society dialectic might stand in an apparently awkward relation to international decision-making. Polybius viewed the Lycurgan *paideia* – along with a simple diet and equal property – as producing a suitable balance of *andreia* and *sōphrosunē* among Sparta’s citizens (6.48.4). Virtuous Spartan citizens preserved internal political stability and protected the city from external threats. Healthy political institutions and social and ritual practices were mutually sustaining. Yet, despite this high praise, Polybius also calls the Spartans “ambitious, covetous, and grasping” in relation to other Greeks (6.48.8). He faults Lycurgus for not making provisions for the

city, *qua* international actor, to behave with moderation (6.48.6-7). There was an inherent conflict between the defensive, Lycurgan principle of the regime and the practical and material requirements of imperial domination (6.49.9-10). Whatever their virtues, not all cities are suited to subject others to power. Sparta's defect was that it failed to know itself.

If the Spartans failed to grasp their own limits, however, then no such self-ignorance beset the Romans. The Romans not only had greater natural resources at their disposal, but also proved much more flexible in their confrontations with foreign civilizations (6.50.1-6). Polybius speaks with great admiration of the Romans' capacity to project military power:

But if anyone is ambitious of greater things, and esteems it finer and more glorious than that to be the leader of many men and to rule and lord it over many and have the eyes of all the world turned to him, it must be admitted that from this point of view the Laconian constitution is defective, while that of Rome is superior and better framed for the attainment of power, as is indeed evident from the actual course of events. For when the Lacedaimonians endeavored to obtain supremacy in Greece, they very soon ran the risk of losing their own liberty; whereas the Romans, who had aimed merely at the subjection of Italy, in a short time brought the whole world under their sway, the abundance of supplies they had at their command conducing in no small measure to this result (6.50.2-5).

This statement discloses another amendment to Polybius' analysis of the nature and ends of politics. Within the international frame, politics is also the means for statesmen to win glory through successfully guiding their states in projects of imperialism. We have hinted at this prospect in the discussion of the aristocratic funeral, which made the point on an even larger scale: the exemplary life of a great man inspired all Roman citizens to seek glory collectively.

But several features of the present passage strike a peculiar note. First, rather than praising the Romans for their virtues or the health of their constitution or their self-knowledge, Polybius attaches great importance to their supplies. If we read this passage in the light of Polybius' cycle of constitutions, then we might observe that an abundance of material goods, in itself, often makes the wealthy arrogant toward their fellow citizens. This problem is likely to resurface in the Romans' relations with other states. Second, this passage sounds like nothing so much as a prescription for Caesarism, not an attempt to praise the republican citizenry of Rome for their collective nobility. As later history amply revealed, there was nothing to prevent leaders, such as Julius Caesar among many others, from directing their military force against the city of Rome itself, rather than against Rome's declared enemies. What could be more glorious? Finally, and most importantly, Polybius renders his thesis as a conditional: if a man is ambitious, then he is better off leading the Romans instead of the Spartans. But is it good to be this ambitious? After all, Polybius says, peace with honor and justice is the greatest possession (4.31.8). These peculiarities reveal Polybius' ambivalence toward Roman foreign policy. However much Polybius appears to praise Roman power, Polybius is as much critic as admirer of Roman imperialism.

Whether we are examining his praise or his censure, however, the key point is that Polybius sees the Romans' imperialism as closely tied to their republican system of government. Ancient historians will point out that all ancient republics and kingdoms were aggressive and militaristic, as a consequence of being situated in the ancient Mediterranean's "multipolar anarchy" (Eckstein 2006; contra Harris 1979). Yet Polybius persistently indicates his belief that the republican regime not only supported the Romans' imperialism, but also spurred the Romans on to conceive of the project of universal empire (1.2.3-6, 1.3.10, 6.18.4, and explicitly at 3.2.6). This belief was borne out by the distinctively gung-ho military practices of the Romans (6.19-42) and the orientation of other cultural practices toward the production of military courage and the desire for military glory.

We immediately notice the parallels between Rome's internal and external pugnacity. As Polybius emphasized the militarism of Roman politics and culture, he also stressed the Romans' bellicosity and violence in relation to other states, and their quick recourse to war. During the First Punic War, after a particularly horrific naval disaster, Polybius comments that the Romans often failed to think rationally because they "rely on force (*bia*) in all their enterprises"; Polybius believed that, in order to succeed, the Romans badly needed to moderate their arrogant daring and violence (1.37.7-10). In 197 BC, at the Battle of Cynoscephalae, the Roman legions destroyed Macedonian soldiers trying to surrender by holding up their spears in a posture of submission (18.26.10-12). In 167 BC, after the fall of King Perseus of Macedon, the ever-moderate Aemilius Paullus destroyed 70 Macedonian cities and sold into slavery 150,000 people (30.15). According to Polybius, the Romans struggled aggressively with one another in their own political life; Roman culture glorified courage and military glory, while encouraging all citizens to have a pugnacious self-conception; and Romans typically resorted to violence and force beyond the obvious demands of particular international situations.

Yet, if the parallels are clear, then what was the particular dynamic by which republican politics and culture turned the Romans toward extravagant imperial designs? It goes without saying that the Romans, like other inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean, went to war in order to obtain wealth, to acquire territory, to increase their security, and to win glory. Such motives operated throughout the classical world and beyond. But can we say anything more specific about republican international relations?

Perhaps by this stage many will find the answer obvious: that a culture intent on instilling courage and pugnacity tends to produce bellicose citizens. Certainly this much is true. At the end of his discussion of the Roman regime, for example, Polybius highlights a single episode in order to illustrate in practice "the perfection and strength of the Roman constitution" (*tēs politeias tēn akmēn kai dunamin*, 6.58.1, tr. Scott-Kilvert; cf. 1.17.11-13). The story (told at 6.58) is that of 8000 prisoners taken during the battle, Hannibal allowed a deputation of 10 representatives to travel to Rome in order to ask for ransom. The Senate refused their request. Accepting the deal would sap the courage of Roman troops by suggesting that there could be safety even in defeat. The Senate's response sent the message that Roman soldiers must either conquer or die, since no hope of safety remained for them otherwise. To Polybius, this was a strikingly manly, great-souled, and resolute response (see Eckstein 1995: 65-67). The Romans' steadfastness at

this turning-point resulted from the laws and customs which promoted courage, pugnacious self-respect, and honor.

This is helpful, but it is not a sufficiently specific explanation. We are now trying to uncover the relationship between the internal dynamics of republican politics and the Romans' external bellicosity. One clue is provided by Polybius' analysis of the Romans' cooperation with their fellow citizens in special circumstances:

These, then, are the powers which each of the three elements in the system possesses to help or to harm the others; the result is a union which is strong enough to withstand all emergencies, so that it is impossible to find a better form of constitution than this. For whenever some common external threat compels the three to unite and work together, the strength which the state then develops becomes quite extraordinary. No requirement is neglected, because all parties vie with one another to find ways of meeting the needs of the hour, and every decision taken is certain to be executed promptly, since all are cooperating in public and in private alike to carry through the business at hand. The consequence is that this peculiar form of constitution possesses an irresistible power to achieve any goal it has set itself. (6.18.1-4).

On the basis of Polybius' analysis of Roman politics, we might suspect that Rome has considerable collective action problems. This passage shows, though, that citizens would choose to cooperate when they were terrified by an external threat (this is the *topos* of the *metus hostilis*, or "fear of the enemy"). The problem was, paradoxically, that the existence of an external threat gave citizens yet another opportunity for competition. In short, individuals struggled to win military honor in order to increase their standing among their fellow citizens (the Romans called this *certamen gloriae* or "struggle to win honor"). Compare Sallust's expression of the same point:

To such men no toil came amiss, no ground was too steep or rugged, no armed foe formidable; courage had taught them to overcome all obstacles. To win honor they competed eagerly among themselves, each man seeking the first opportunity to cut down an enemy or scale a rampart before his comrades' eyes. (Sallust, *BC*, 7.5-6, tr. Handford; with Harris 1979: 9-53).

In his reflections on Roman cooperation, Polybius intends his readers to see that every citizen (*hekastou*), not just the three groups, would work together with others both in public and in private (*koinēi kai kat' idian hekastou sunergountos*, 6.18.3). Like Sallust, however, Polybius recognized that individuals increased their reputation and power through courageously defending the community (6.6.8-12).

This dynamic provides us with a way to understand the close interconnections between republican politics and Roman imperialism. The motivation for war is traceable to the citizens' inveterate competition with one another, which is the essence of republican politics for Polybius. Roman citizens, in Polybius' conception, struggled to win advantages over one another through being seen to contribute to the security and

power of the city. If that meant finding enemies where there were none, then so be it. The competition for political ascendancy had to go on. The (post-Polybian) struggle between Pompey and Caesar is perhaps only the most celebrated example of the problem. For Polybius this was a political and cultural dynamic that went all the way down. This dynamic, as harmful in the international world as it was in domestic politics, is what Polybius has in mind when he explicitly says that the Romans' *politeia* led to their conceiving a project of universal dominion: "Interrupting my narrative at this point, I shall draw up my account of the Roman constitution, as a sequel to which I shall point out how the peculiar qualities of the constitution conducted very largely not only to their subjection of the Italians and Sicilians, and subsequently of the Spaniards and Celts, but finally to their victory over Carthage and their conceiving the project of universal empire" (3.2.6, tr. Paton).

Conclusion

Polybius has many resources to offer both critics and admirers of contemporary republicanism. Despite the republicans' traditional interest in history, and in the history of political thought, my argument has been that closer attention to the deep past would both clarify and challenge contemporary efforts. It is a positive advantage that the republican tradition, perhaps uniquely, spans the divide between ancient and modern, between illiberal and liberal, between anti-democratic and democratic alternatives. Poised between Greece and Rome, and between classical Greek philosophy and Roman history, Polybius provokes us to ask large and perhaps unsettling questions, even as he exposes the limitations of our own historically situated vision. To say the least, the ancient Romans and their leading theorists do not provide a blueprint for contemporary theory or practice. But studying authors like Polybius will help to improve the quality of our reflections (or lack thereof) on the ends of politics, the relationship between politics and culture, and the nature of republican international relations.

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