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Free and equal

The radical republican tradition

By Ben Rogers

Graffiti of Karl Marx in Berlin | © Kyle Little/Alamy

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IN THIS REVIEW

Citizen Marx
Republicanism and the formation of Karl Marx's social and political thought
440pp. Princeton University Press. £35 (US $39.95).
Bruno Leipold

The Wealth of Freedom
Radical republican political economy
320pp. Oxford University Press. £99 (US $130).
Stuart White

What does it mean to be a republican? In the US, it is to support the party of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump. In the UK, it is to favour the abolition of the monarchy. In France, it is to oppose any encroachment of religion into the public sphere. And in the realm of political theory, it is to identify with a tradition that stretches from writers such as Pericles, Aristotle and Cicero to Machiavelli, Rousseau and theorists of the American Revolution, on to John Dewey and Hannah Arendt.

It is hard to define this tradition with precision. But perhaps most fundamentally republicans understand relations between freedom and the state in a distinct way. Where liberals tend to identify freedom with the absence of interference, republicans identify it with the absence of subjection. It follows, according to republicans, that freedom can only be realized where citizens rule together as equals

and no one is permitted to dominate anyone else. For a liberal, any law that constrains an action represents an invasion of freedom, even if it can be justified in other ways.

In practical terms, republicanism tends to involve commitment to certain political institutions and practices. Republicans believe strongly in constitutions that distribute and check power, and give citizens a direct role in government. They favour direct democracy over representation, civic militias over standing armies, citizen juries over professional judges, active citizens over paid civil servants, and regional and local councils over central governments. Where they have developed views on the organization of government, however, republicans have less to say about political economy – something these two books go some way to rectify.

In *Citizen Marx*, Bruno Leipold has to battle against two trends: first, a tendency to read Karl Marx in a naive way, without much attention to his intellectual context; second, a widespread assumption that republicanism had ceased to be a significant force in nineteenth-century Europe, eclipsed by the forces of liberalism, with its adherence to free markets, and, later in the century, by socialism, with its faith in state control of the economy. As Leipold shows in this close and suggestive exploration, however, republican ideas were alive and well in Marx's time – especially on the radical or "democratic" left. Marx, in fact, had a long and rich engagement with republican thought, from a close reading of Rousseau in the early 1840s to his writing on the Paris Commune in 1871.

The author highlights two particularly important respects in which Marx drew on and contributed to republicanism. First, his "principal political value was freedom", rather than equality or community – and he worked with a republican understanding of freedom as the absence of subjection to the arbitrary will of another. The problem with capitalism was that it entailed the domination of capital over labour. Domination could not be overcome at the level of the individual business, through the development of worker-run co-operatives, as many contemporary communists believed. As Marx pointed out, it was structural – all businesses need to deliver ever-greater efficiencies and extract ever-greater surplus labour from workers to survive. Only the collective ownership of the means of production could free society from capitalism's arbitrary power.

Second, Marx became a champion of a distinctively republican politics. Through much of his career, he envisaged that revolution would be delivered through workers taking over the machinery of the bureaucratic liberal state. But as he grew older, and inspired in particular by the Paris Commune, he came to believe that

communism required a distinct republican political order, with workers using tools such as frequent elections, the power of recall, citizen-run public services and workers' co-operatives to retain control of the state and the economy. Against the conventional view that Marx looked forward to the end of politics, Leipold argues that he remained open to the possibility that even an advanced socialist society would require some level of everyday political participation and contestation.

Building on Marx's republicanism in *The Wealth of Freedom*, Stuart White begins by rejecting our present tendency to treat the "Economy" as an external, inhuman force – "like some kind of ill-tempered deity" that we are obliged to mollify with repeated communal sacrifices in the form of spending cuts and deepening inequality. A rather Marxian figure who combines abstract political theory with applied policy analysis and activism, the author invites us "to think anew about the basic structure of our social world and to join with others in the exercise of creative popular sovereignty to change it".

White puts forward a clear, robust set of proposals for a universal basic income and capital entitlements for all citizens, and for the fair taxation of inheritance and wealth – proposals that, in true republican spirit, will give "individuals a high degree of independence from the will of others". Quoting Rousseau's dictum that "No citizen should be rich enough to buy another, and none so poor that he has to sell himself", White is particularly supportive of providing an initial sum of capital to all citizens in early adulthood as of right. Today in the UK, the US and other countries, many young people start their adult lives with a huge amount of debt in the form of student loans – a policy of "negative Basic Capital, which arguably has the effect of constraining ambition formation" and "channelling it into narrowly instrumental, market-related ... directions".

As a republican, the author is also concerned with expanding democracy into economic and social life, and argues for greater citizen control over individual enterprises, public services and collective investment. Advocates of universal basic incomes or "asset-based welfare" tend to believe that these policies alone will achieve the freedom and civic equality that they value. But White argues that domination is so pervasive, defeating it requires a more varied "toolkit". We all know that business and public services have a way of discriminating against low-status groups, even when they have the spending power and social entitlements that should theoretically ensure their equal treatment. Yet empirical evidence suggests that giving these groups greater say in how organizations are designed and managed can overcome the effects of long-term structural

inequalities.

The final section of *The Wealth of Freedom* sets out proposals for reform of transnational governance and a programme of international investment to address climate change. Republicanism has not, traditionally, had not a strong concern with the environment, but that is beginning to change with an emerging school of "green republican" thought. White argues that the unparalleled scale of public investment and "market making" required to reduce carbon emissions provides an opportunity to restructure national and global economies on more republican lines - by, for instance, using carbon taxes to fund basic incomes and promoting employee-owned companies. He also sees republicanism as helping greens elaborate a vision of the good life that goes beyond economic growth.

Fifty years ago, political theorists showed little feel for the distinctiveness or depth of republican thought. That has changed, and these books make a significant contribution to its continuing and welcome revival.

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