

# What is a republican?

*Alain Policar*

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**According to Jean-Fabien Spitz, republicanism's foundational ideals have been betrayed by the very people who purport to defend them against liberalism. An overemphasis on questions of identity makes it possible to forget that the republic was, from the outset, a principle of social justice.**

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Reviewed: Jean-Fabien Spitz, *La République? Quelles valeurs? Essai sur un nouvel intégrisme politique* (The Republic? What Are its Values? Essay on a New Political Fundamentalism), Paris, Gallimard, 2022, 346 p., 22 €.

Does a republican fundamentalism exist in France that is the very negation of the republican ideal? This important book is dedicated to proving this proposition's truth. Jean-Fabien Spitz carefully describes the mechanisms by which the meanings of the concepts on which the republican project is founded have been distorted, and he articulates the minimal requirements of a republic that remains faithful to its emancipatory goals. Over the course of its eight lucid and erudite chapters, Spitz traces the contours of the society in which we would like to live. His anger at the way these foundational principles have been travestied follows from the sincerity of his convictions. As Alain Soupiot notes, "to give words their meaning back is the first step to regaining control over one's future" (quoted in Spitz, note 26, 315).

## The strange alliance between the “republic” and neoliberalism

To understand the strange alliance between the “republic” and neoliberalism, the supposedly natural association between political and economic liberalism. An examination of reality — the past as well as the present — pleads for their disassociation. Political liberalism is founded on the preservation of individual liberty, the expression of political rights, pluralism, and the mutual limitation of powers, whereas economic liberalism maintains that a society regulated by the market is the highest form of freedom. It is precisely the necessary link between the market economy and political liberalism that must be untangled if one wants to reclaim liberal philosophy’s intellectual resources. In doing so, Spitz draws on the thought of Adam Smith. For Smith, freedom in the market was not first and foremost about prosperity; rather it was “an instrument of individual emancipation, a form of social organization that freed [individuals] of personal dependencies by liberating them from any statutory and obligatory relationship with a supplier, a service provider, an employer, or a monopoly holder” (p. 164). Commercial society, in Smith’s time, could promote liberty — in other words, according to Spitz, individual independence.

Yet the social conditions that once made the market a liberating force no longer exist. We now live in an age of extraordinary concentrations of wealth, mass industrialization, the generalization of salaried work, and the financialization of the economy. At present, personal liberty requires emancipation from market pressures that impact access to the essential goods that guarantee independence: education, health, housing, employment, and retirement.

Clearly, neoliberalism does not satisfy these requirements. Economic actors are so unequal that relationships between them result in forms of domination. This situation results from the wrong turn that occurred when Hayek and libertarian thinkers sanctified property rights. This sanctification subordinated social rights to respect for property rights, whereas liberalism’s founders, to the contrary, “always made universal access to the material means of freedom the condition of the legitimacy of the private appropriation of natural resources” (p. 167).

It is this point that has been forgotten by republican fundamentalists, who, since the 1980s, have set out to dismantle social institutions (particularly those protecting the underprivileged, because these institutions are suspected of encouraging dependency), often in the name of protecting civil liberties. Yet the dismantling of the

social welfare state increases inequality and results in cleavages that stoke violence and justify the repression of so-called civil liberties. *Authoritarian liberalism* (a term coined by Hermann Heller and borrowed by the English political scientist Michael Wilkinson), which is generally indifferent to democracy's virtues, turns its back on liberalism's foundational principles. It turns the market economy into the sole basis of freedom and prosperity and makes civil law a realm in which the interests of the weak are subordinated to those of the powerful. As for the state, it is charged with guaranteeing that competition occurs and hence of producing the social and moral conditions of its possibility by distributing representation in a way that will achieve this effect" (p. 59).

There are two possible outcomes to this tension between capitalism and democracy: either one concludes that capitalism, due to property concentration and rising inequality, threatens democracy, or one decides that the opposite is true, a belief embraced by European and North American elites. The latter view can have unfortunate consequences, such as the search for workarounds to referendums that rejected European treaties and the fact that working classes increasingly refrain from voting, "excluded from voting by the smug idea that there is no alternative" (p. 62). Deregulated capitalism is inherently inclined to authoritarianism so as to protect itself from democracy's inclination to place limits on it. Now, according to Spitz, questions that are essential to the future of society—"inequality, increasingly precarious living conditions, urban ghettos, and equity in access to education, employment, and housing are systematically downplayed and even excluded from public debate" (p. 62). As Wolfgang Streeck noted in a recent book,<sup>1</sup> the neoliberal project is to expose the nation-state to competition in a global economic that scrupulously protects property rights, which means restricting political rights. How does this project justify itself?

## Principles and values

Spitz attaches considerable importance to the fact that, in speeches by republican fundamentalists, principles have been replaced by values. Principles are rules that all citizens are expected to follow in their conduct. Values are moral propositions to which one can choose to adhere or not (see p. 161). The replacement of

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Streeck, *Critical Encounters. Democracy, Capitalism, Ideas*, London, Verso, 2020.

principles by values demonstrates the specificity of republican fundamentalism: the tendency of public debates to focus on questions of identity rather than relationships of domination. The so-called “republican” idea becomes an “intellectual instrument for protecting a form of society that turns its back on the republican idea, political democracy, and social equality” (p. 78). This mechanism is evident in the way foundational principles are treated.

Freedom, when subjected to the market and measured by its needs, becomes, as Wendy Brown has shown,<sup>2</sup> an authoritarian, anti-democratic, and anti-social pseudo-freedom. From this perspective, “any social disposition aimed at protecting specific categories of vulnerable people from domination ... is presented as an infringement of freedom, as well as an infringement of the principle of the law’s impartiality and universality” (p. 79). This perspective rejects the idea that society might have a structural responsibility vis-à-vis the power and dependency relationships inherent in its institutions (labor law, family law, and so on). Specific rights that would allow those excluded from property to limit forms of domination are rejected in the name of a distorted conception of freedom, which maintains that the social welfare state contradicts individual freedom.<sup>3</sup> But we cannot be free if we have no access to the resources that guarantee our independence.

Freedom has often been presented as irreconcilable with equality. Measures aimed at equalizing independence are, from this perspective, infringements of individual rights, particularly property rights. But they are also held to violate the freedom to do what one wants with one’s possessions. Ronald Dworkin’s position on this issue is well known. For Dworkin, one should try to achieve a “plausible theory of all the central political values—of democracy, liberty, civil society as well as of equality—that shows each of these growing out of and reflected in all the others, an account that conceives equality, for example, not only as compatible with liberty but as a value that someone who prized liberty would also prize.”<sup>4</sup> Spitz belongs to the same lineage (which does not mean that he shares all of Dworkin’s positions, particularly those relating to the happenstance of birth). For Spitz, equality<sup>5</sup> is in fact

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth analysis of political liberty, see Spitz’s earlier book, *La liberté politique: essai de généalogie conceptuelle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Republican equality must not be conflated with equal opportunity. The former entails a struggle against actions and institutions that make domination possible. The latter assumes that chance can be neutralized, which admits a reasonable doubt.

the fundamental concept of political liberalism, which presumes that all citizens deserve equal respect.

Equal treatment is flouted when republican fundamentalists turn secularism into a value rooted in identity. Spitz often cites, with good reason, the work of Jean Baubérot. The latter helps us to understand the transformation that has been carried out, over the past thirty years, by those who would forget the 1905 law's deeply liberal character. They condemn the allegedly nefarious influence of British and American liberalism. They maintain that the essentially republican French model of *laïcité* (secularism) has been compromised by a form of liberalism that is hostile to our political traditions, because it embraces an excessively tolerant view of individual relationships and neglects the crucial bond in a republic: the bond between citizens. At the same time, they invoke the Athenian model while forgetting its crippling shortcomings, particularly its exclusion of foreigners (metics), slaves, and women. They also overlook the fact that the Greek polis remained closed—the prisoner of a mindset that, in contemporary parlance, might be called *ethnic*.

In this distorted vision, *laïcité* is presented as a value that is deeply rooted in French history and national heritage. Consequently, Islam is deemed foreign to this history and potentially contrary to the republic's principles, as Danièle Sallenave notes:

When one reads, in the Manifesto of the Republican Spring, the celebration of the concepts of the nation, universality, and *laïcité*, it is clear that they are being invoked for a restoration and a struggle, in which the enemy is not named. But everything suggests that the target is Islam and Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

Yet tolerance, which republican fundamentalists are so inclined to denounce, is by no means contrary to *laïcité's* principles. It means neither resignation nor indifference. While it does not allow every idea to be represented, it authorizes those who defend them to be heard as citizens (and not as partisans of an intolerant viewpoint). This is the position of Thomas Scanlon, a writer that Spitz refers to often. Despite the risks that come with tolerance, any other position would place us in “an antagonistic and alienated relation to [our] fellow citizens, friends as well as foes.”<sup>7</sup> Republican fundamentalists are placing social harmony at a serious risk by suggesting

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<sup>6</sup> Danièle Sallenave, “L’identitarisme est la maladie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Le Monde*, 23 June 2018. While Spitz generally refrains from mentioning his adversaries by name, there is no doubt that he is targeting the Republican Spring.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Scanlon *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 201.

that Islam threatens “French identity.” The “republican values” they invoke participate in the distortion of the meaning of republican concepts. Spitz rightly believes that this usurpation must be urgently denounced.

## Republicanism and cosmopolitanism

As readers will have noticed, we enthusiastically embrace Spitz’s defense of republican freedom as non-denomination. He offers a timely reminder of what this vision owes to Louis Blanc and his emphasis on the idea that “equal citizenship, liberty, and democracy are incompatible with relations of economic dependence” (p. 141). We have, however, several reservations about his views on the cosmopolitan project, which is oddly contrary to solidarist philosophy (see p. 91-95).

Spitz obviously does not challenge the ideal of fraternity (which necessitates attention to the distribution of wealth production), but he believes that this concept is inadequately addressed by cosmopolitan thought. We do not share his diagnosis. Concern for others, which is the foundation of cosmopolitan morality, must be considered a full-fledged component of our sense of the good life. As Adam Smith writes, no matter how egotistical human beings may be, “there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.”<sup>8</sup> This moral cosmopolitanism is, moreover, the fundamental requirement for developing, in relation to foreigners, a *political cosmopolitanism*. As Étienne Tassin observes, “the most critical meaning and the greatest stakes of politics, lie in its capacity to constitute a ‘shared world’ with foreigners and their worlds, despite the fact that people often interact with each other on a conflictual basis.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, all authentic politics is cosmopolitan. There can thus be no solid basis for competition between the republican ideal and the cosmopolitan project.

This difference of opinion should not obscure the fact that we happily share most of Spitz’s positions. His work is invaluable to those who refuse the falsification

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1982 [1759], p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Étienne Tassin, “Cosmopolitique et xénopolitique,” *Raison présente*, n° 201, spring 2017, p. 101.

of ideas and will not passively accept the distortion of the ideals of political liberalism by neoliberalism, which is its absolute negation.

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