Between Machiavelli and Hobbes
The Republican Ideology of Johan and Pieter De la Court

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1 The Many Faces of Republicanism: Some Preliminary Remarks

In this essay I will endeavour to frame the political thought of the brothers De la Court within the material and ideological context of Holland’s Golden Age, to emphasize their importance, within but not exclusive to the Dutch sphere of influence, not only as precursors of some themes of Spinoza’s own political philosophy,¹ but above all as thinkers who in their own right can be included in the multifaceted “Dutch Legacy” of 17th and 18th century Europe.² I hope, in such a way, to offer a useful contribution, not only by re-examining the originality of their political thought, but also by attributing to it the right collocation within the political and economic systems of early modern Holland, which although atypical is at the same time very relevant when considering the historical genesis of the modern political state; and, last but not least, in order to, hopefully, enrich the contemporary debate on the legacy of early modern republicanism with some new theoretical issues.

Further to the last point: it is well-known that the concept of republicanism is a relatively recent discovery of the historiography of political philosophy, since it can only be dated to the beginning of the 1970’s; whence, it has received significant attention (which however has been greatly reduced in the last years), due to a specific political conjuncture, being that of the late-twentieth century crisis of Nation-State and, especially, that of the close relationship between democracy and liberalism. More precisely, the discovery (if not the invention) of a modern republican tradition can be related to an attempt to rethink the theoretical fundaments of democracy from both a descriptive and

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¹ Regarding the consonance between the De la Courts’ and Spinoza’s political thought see Blom, *Spinoza en De la Court*; Id., “Virtue and Republicanism. Spinoza’s Political Philosophy in the Context of the Dutch Republic”; Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*; Visentin, “Passioni collettive e leggi politiche nel repubblicanesimo olandese del XVII secolo: dai fratelli De la Court a Spinoza”.
² For a survey on the European heritage of the De la Courts see Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, ch. 10 (*The Origins of Modern Democratic Republicanism*), 240–263. On the Dutch (and above all spinozistic) philosophical heritage for XVII and XVIII century Europe see Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, chapters 8, 9, 10.
prescriptive point of view. Fueled by this philosophical and political demand, several scholars tried to trace, within the history of modern political thought, some “alternative paths” to the liberal mainstream; however, originating with the pioneering works of John G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, a problematic development arose, namely the historiographical reconstruction of a modern republican stream into a plurality of different, and even opposed, interpretations; therefore Pocock’s original idea of republicanism as the “secret inspiration” of some fundamental events in modern political history (e.g. the American revolution) rapidly turned into a multiplicity of doctrines, which influenced the landscape of modern political thought in a very peculiar and somehow equivocal manner—thus confirming John Adams’ assertion that “There is not a more unintelligible word in the English language than republicanism”. As a consequence, the contemporary debate encompasses a vast and varied range of republican theories: from a deliberative republicanism to a contestatory one; from a communitarian and patriotic republican model to a juridical republicanism as a renewed system of checks and balances; and from a republican ideal of the control of rulers by the ruled to a republican anthropology aiming to take individual rights seriously.

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5 This awareness is now considered common sense among scholars; see e.g. Blom, “Morality and Causality in Politics. The Rise of Naturalism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Political Thought”, 219: “Republicanism is a many-sided concept, difficult to discuss outside the political context in which it is deployed”; Geuna, “La tradizione repubblicana e i suoi interpreti: famiglie teoriche e discontinuità concettuali”, 111: “il concetto di repubblicanesimo non sembra più disporre di una univoca definizione”; Weststeijn, *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age. The Political Thought of Johan and Pieter De la Court*, 5: “Was there ever a single unitary tradition of republican thought in early modern Europe? Whoever considers the recent historiographical debate on the ‘republican heritage’ should hesitate to answer this question in the affirmative”.

6 For a brief summary of these distinctions see Laborde and Maynor, “The Republican Contribution to Contemporary Political Theory”. Taking into account the republican conception of freedom, Nadia Urbinati recently wrote: “freedom as non-domination plays a prominent role not only in political theory and the history of political thought, domains in which it arose in the mid-1980s, but also in the theory of justice, public policy, and economic researches (Ackerman and Alstott 1999; Casasas 2007; Sen 2009, 301–4; White 2011); constitutionalism and human rights studies (Bellamy 2007; Bohman 2008; Laborde 2010; Miller 2007); and studies in globalization governance (Slaughter 2005; Waldemar 2006)” (“Competing for Liberty: The Republican Critique of Democracy”, 607).