

Philip Pettit
On the People's Terms
A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy
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In *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* Philip Pettit outlines a particular version of the republican theory that provides a concrete model of democracy, tracing the history of traditional and contemporary republicanism. Thus, although the starting point of this book deals with a broad historical reconstruction of the principal ideals of the republican concept, its purpose is essentially philosophical, since Pettit aims to provide a particular interpretation of freedom, justice and legitimacy, which shows a definite model of democracy.

The historical background is represented by three central ideas of the history of republican thought and by the description of the main objections represented by liberalism and communitarianism. The core ideas of traditional republican thought are the ideal of freedom as non-domination, the mixed constitution and – what Pettit calls – the *contestatory citizenry* (citizens' virtue to contest public policies in order to keep the republic to its proper business: the price of liberty is eternal vigilance).

It is useful to focus on the conception of freedom as non-domination presented in the first chapter. Pettit analyzes the nature of the impediments that undermine the freedom of choice, deeming important to distinguish between the factors that *influence* it (represented by *general* impediments that undermine the *opportunity* to choose freely) and the factors that *compromise* it (represented by *specific* impediments that prevent one from *exercising* the freedom of choice). The first factors are only *incidentally* enemies of freedom since they are constituted of all those factors that weaken the agent's ability to use her resources to satisfy her desire, but they do not derive from the imposition of the will of another agent; the second factors threaten freedom *intrinsically* because they are planned to thwart the agent's will.

Domination is conceived as the exposure to the others' power of interfering in an uncontrolled manner. Domination is a necessary condition of the reduction of freedom of choice, while the presence of mere interference, without a

dominant power, is not a sufficient condition: there can be no invasion without domination. Conversely, domination is also a sufficient condition for the invasion of freedom of choice, since a *dominus* can invade an agent's freedom without interfering directly in her options, but simply possessing an uncontrolled power to do so: there is no domination without invasion.

Moreover, Pettit identifies two significant ways by which others can ensure the agent's freedom as non-domination: putting the resources at the agent's service and providing her with protection in order to enjoy the status of a free person. The ideal of freedom as non-domination is the best direction that governments, forming and supporting their own people, should follow.

The State should not only defend people from the *private* domination (the condition of social justice), but it should avoid exerting itself a form of *public* domination (thereby satisfying the requirements of political legitimacy). In order to avoid public domination it is necessary to establish a rich set of checks on the government, and Pettit derives a precise theory of democracy characterized by a double aspect. On the one hand, people should be provided with an equally accessible form of effective influence on the government and, on the other hand, people's influence support the republican form of democracy only if people impose its own directives on the government. Thus, by promoting the ideal of freedom as non-domination, the theory would establish a specific link between republicanism and democracy, since the institutions of the latter legitimize the normative proposals of the former. On the other hand, liberal theories would not be able to establish a genuine link with democracy.

Therefore, in Pettit's view the conception of republican freedom against the liberal one has the leading role. Pettit maintains that the non-interference, as it is conceived by the liberals, leads to not recognizing the link between political systems and individual freedom. According to liberal view, there is the possibility that people living in a democracy are less free than people living in a dictatorship, because it could happen that they enjoy a condition of non-interference due to contingent circumstances (like the favor of the dictator). Instead, non-domination is characterized by two aspects: the absence of *arbitrary* interference (the kind of interference that is subject only to the judgment of *dominus* and that does not respect agent's interests); and the presence of a *robust* non-interference, since it needs institutional rules that guarantee non-interference.

The difference between non-domination and non-interference, as Pettit notes, becomes apparent in the calculation of the probability of the realization of a free choice: if freedom as non-interference limits itself to minimize the sum of the probabilities of realization of an impediment to option X and option Y, the freedom as non-domination adds to this sum the consideration

of the attitude that others have towards the realization of an option rather than the other. If we ask what is required to promote your freedom of choice between X and Y, the most plausible answer, according to the liberal view, is that we should minimize the sum that we get by adding the probability of your impediments on choosing X and the probability of your impediments on choosing Y. Thus, schematically, we should minimize $P(H \text{ if } X) + P(H \text{ if } Y)$, where P stands for “probability”, H for “impediment” and X and Y for the available options. If instead, in line with the republican position, one wishes to increase the probability of freedom as non-domination, the sum to minimize would be more complex: $P(\text{if } X \text{ H \& F}) + P(\text{if } X \text{ H \& M}) + P(\text{H if } Y \text{ \& F}) + P(\text{H if } Y \text{ \& U})$, where F stands for the friendly attitude and U for the unfriendly attitude of others.

Nevertheless, we can finally observe that even the reference to the probability of impediments and to the availability of options shows that the individuals described in Pettit’s counterexamples enjoy less freedom as non-interference than what he seems to presuppose. Certainly, a low degree of freedom as non-domination can be observed in the case of an individual constantly depending on the ruler’s benevolence, but there is a low degree of freedom as non-interference as well. Therefore, the republican theory as freedom as non-domination does not seem to be an alternative to liberalism and it is not enough to justify the link between political systems and individual freedom. Pettit’s argumentation seems to have a normative relevance only if we assume it as a set of empirical hypotheses (which points to certain sets of institutional arrangements) about how freedom has to be maximized. So, the theory of freedom as non-domination would ultimately amount to a set of empirical generalizations about freedom as non-interference: for example, that a person cannot be free if she is subject to the arbitrary will of a dictator, that freedom requires a distribution of power and that citizens are more free if their governments are forced to act in their best interests. As it was noticed (See I. Carter, *A Measure of Freedom*, 1999, pp. 237 ss.), the question of the truth of these sentences should not be confused with the question of what freedom is.