

**Geoffrey C. Kellow and Neven Leddy, eds.** *On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*. University of Toronto Press 2016. 352 pp. \$75.00 CAD (Hardcover ISBN 9781442637498).

*On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics* is the fourth installment in the *Ancient Lessons* series. Like its predecessors, its aim is to repair and rehabilitate an ancient concept that has proved vulnerable to modern misunderstanding or misapplication. The fifteen essays in this volume are dedicated to reviving what Kellow and Leddy call ‘civic republicanism.’

In the introduction, Kellow defines republicanism, or ‘res publica,’ as concern for public matters. He finds this too inclusive, however, as almost all modern governments would claim to be concerned with public matters. So, ‘republic’ is a noun in search of an adjective; it needs a qualifier: ‘democratic,’ ‘people’s,’ ‘liberal,’ etc. (3). Due to this semantic confusion we should not look to contemporary statecraft for clarification but ‘more essentially, across time’ (3). ‘In the ancient world in particular, a government genuinely concerned with public things—a government committed to the very idea of public things—stood in stark contrast to the alternatives’ (3). So, ‘[a]s Thucydides’s Pericles declares in his funeral oration, “This is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business, we say that he has no business at all”’ (3). Kellow identifies this type of active political participation as civic republicanism. It is an examination not just of how the system of government shapes its people, but also of how the people shape the system. This distinctive political activity is the ostensible subject of study.

There are two distinct traditions that contribute to our conception of republicanism: the ancient and the modern. This duality is central to the discussion of civic republicanism and is therefore a major point of contrast developed by many of the essays in this volume. Accordingly, Kellow presents three goals for the book. The first of these is to discuss ancient lessons about civic republicanism; the second is to explore modern attempts to rework them. The same duality, however, lies at the center of a hotly contested philosophical debate over the fidelity with which the modern conceptions adhere to their ancient counterparts (4). Here Kellow strikes a neutral pose, insisting that the book will not attempt to support either side. It is indeed prudent to stay out of such weeds given his third (and most important) goal: ‘to apply the lessons of both ancient and modern republicanism ... to the current state of the *res publica*’ (5).

The collection is divided into two distinct parts. The first part, ‘The Classical Heritage,’ consists of five essays that engage the ancient conception of civic republicanism. Each examines the foundational republican philosophy in hopes of establishing a historical-theoretical basis for the second part, which tackles the concept’s translation into modern idioms. It is here, in the first part, that we find for the first time a tension inherent in the very notion of civic republicanism, namely, the tension between the individual interests and the republic’s concern for the common good. Civic republicanism recognizes and respects the importance of the individual as the essential living component of a republic but opposes unfettered democratic selfishness. It becomes clear that a republic, or at least the ‘civic republicanism’ as understood by the contributors to this collection, exists in part for the perpetuation of the system itself. A governing structure that is incapable of sustaining itself will be incapable of reliably serving other functions, e.g., promoting the flourishing of its citizens.

This is perhaps best explained in Coates’ essay, ‘Groundwork for a Theory of Republican Character in a Modern Age,’ which examines the problems that face aging liberal democracies as inevitable outcomes of their democratic political structure. Coates claims that democracy is inherently a ‘sub-political’ motivation, driving itself through physical wants and selfish urges (72).

It de-abstracts necessary political abstractions, such as the common good, concretizing them, for example, as the simple equality of dispersed goods (75). Without some republican influence, an attitude that promotes an abstract state for state-self, the system will collapse under the weight of its ‘reductionist tendency,’ driven only by the pursuit of private material gain (75). He argues, in turn, that we must adopt a democratic mindset based in conscious republicanism (85). The system is a means to an end; it facilitates education, physically and philosophically, with an eye to communal well-being. Thus, the perpetuation of the system must become the focus for a politically active people. This is what prevents us from falling prey to democratic shortsightedness.

Coates’ essay transitions nicely to the second part, ‘The Enlightenment: An Accelerated Reception?’ In the modern era, republicanism is still characterized by the interactive dynamic between the state and its citizenry, but thanks to the normalization of democratic institutions, its processes are both subtler and more evolved than in ancient republics. This is to say that governments are allowing the people to decide what virtue means and define it for themselves. It is a more democratic process encompassing republicanism. To fashion ourselves after either of these two regimes, argues Varad Mehta in ‘Sparta, Modernity and Enlightenment,’ would undo two millennia of political progress. To wit, we should take lessons from the ancient world, but we should avoid directly imitating any specific ancient model (205).

The ancient republican regimes decried certain human vices—selfishness, corruption and greed—while acknowledging these as features, not bugs, of the system. They cultivate drive and ambition, which push society in the direction of progress. Democracy gives these vices breathing room, but, in so doing, it risks leaving them unchecked. Here civic republicanism finds its place in the contemporary world. Insofar as it supports education *in* and *for* the public good, it remains true to its ‘classical heritage’ while reinventing itself for modern liberal democracy.

By locating the spirit of civic republicanism in the body of the modern state, the essays in this volume are well suited to meet the editors’ aim. But how completely are those aims actually accomplished? It is fair to say that the first two of the stated aims are accomplished in full, but the third is trickier. Some readers may find the volume’s ultimate practical lessons underwhelming. A project that claims to distinguish itself by its focus on practical relevance might be expected to provide something clearer and more profound (5). Moreover, some readers may suppose that a project promising practical relevance will produce arguments with concrete conclusions that can be put into immediate action. These seem in short supply in *Civic Republicanism*, and this no doubt explains Kellow’s cautious statements of purpose at the outset. This is the way of most, if not all, historical philosophy, but this offers little solace to the non-specialist.

**Joel E. Mann**, St. Norbert College

**Frank Cushman**, St. Norbert College