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PS 377

Money and Politics in Modern Republics

In our current moment, the government appears out of our control. The current presidential administration proves itself time and time again to be one of the most controversial reigns in U.S. history. The controversy extends far beyond the president himself. Despite running a campaign centered on an idea of the American dream as empowering the little guy, the sitting president swims with some big fish. Among his cabinet members are some of the wealthiest business people in the country. Each came along with their own interests: namely those pertaining to business and finance. Most recently, the administration endorsed a proposed tax-reform bill designed to cut taxes for the wealthiest individuals and corporations in the country despite its lack of public support. However, the problematic relationship between money and politics cannot be understood by a single administration or bill. Rather, it is the result of enduring, unchecked, and simplified power concentrated into societal institutions lacking the means to control such power.

Machiavelli conceptualizes a Republic as a form of government which behaves in a principled manner in order to achieve two things: serving the public and managing elite power. For Machiavelli, form follows principle: a particular form of government is only as desirable as the effects of the principles underlying it. The state of a Republic and its progress are measured by the extent to which society benefits from being orientated towards these principles. The survival of a Republic is contingent on how well it preserves “liberty” as an organizing principle

of its political discourse (Machiavelli 11). This begs the question of in whose hands an ideal Republic ought to place such a responsibility and why.

Political liberty only exists when power is not abused, and humans are prone to abuse power. Any form of government must carefully consider how to best protect its citizens from its consequences. Montesquieu defines a *democratic* Republic as a political body in which the people hold “sovereign power” (Montesquieu 10). Machiavelli argues that liberty must be “guarded” by those “who have the least desire of usurping it” (Machiavelli 12). Therefore, power conferred onto the people, who merely want to avoid being oppressed by the elite class, is the safest form of power for a Republic. “Bottom-up” power not only serves as a restraint on elite ambition, it also empowers individuals to take control of their collective livelihood and survival: “A people having sovereign power should do for itself all it can do well, and what it cannot do well, it must do through its ministers” (Montesquieu 11). If individuals cannot hold their ministers accountable for their actions, then they effectually have no control over the outcomes of their power and, thus, their lives.

This is increasingly the case in the U.S. today, due to a powerful, yet unchecked force: the *logic of capital accumulation*. In early, developing capitalist societies, Marx observes a telltale shift in the role of money in society. Money was once seen as a means to an end; individuals sell goods and services in capitalist markets in exchange for money in order to obtain one’s immediate survival needs. Juxtaposed, money transforms into *capital* when it is used and seen as an end in itself. Its social function is no longer a representation of the *use-value* of an object necessary for our survival. In a Republic like ours, money functions as a universal representation of the value of commodities in markets. Marx defines a “commodity” as an object which, when produced, is not used to satisfy the immediate survival needs of its producer.

Money as a commodity is exchanged for other commodities for the sake of increasing its own value (Marx 483). It is infinitely circulated in markets for reasons other than survival, is capable of increasing exponentially and indefinitely, and assumes an influential role in social relationships, particularly between the ruling class and the laboring class.

The logic of capital accumulation engenders class conflict in modern, capitalist Republics insofar as it determines one's relationship to the means of production and subsistence. For the capitalist, the use-value of things are irrelevant: the "restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at" (Marx 487). Things are only useful to him insofar as they increase his capital. For the laborer, on the other hand, the logic of capital accumulation renders him dependent on the capitalist's desire to increase his capital. The laboring class must sell their labor as a commodity as a means to create and increase the volume of capital (Marx 489). In order for capital to accumulate, there must be societal arrangements must stifle ordinary citizens' access to the means of self-subsistence.

The concentration of elite power over the means of subsistence as a result of the logic of capital has caused wealth to disproportionately accumulate in a small minority of citizens in the U.S. As the logic of capital underpins social, economic, and political activity in the U.S. today, ordinary citizens are further and further deprived of the means to self-subsist. For the laborer, there is no longer a functional use for their labor power in terms of meeting one's survival needs; this is the natural function of labor in Marx's view. In our current moment, labor has become socially redefined. Ordinary people no longer work merely to sustain themselves. They work for money as an end in itself. Such behavior is, in part, due to the social role of labor as a commodity. Marx argues that, since labor is bought and sold as a commodity, it only constitutes an attractive investment for the capitalist class when the cost of labor is less than value it creates

as a mode of production. The laborer is always paid less than the real value of his work in nature, while the capitalist always withdraws more money from the pot than he put into it (Marx 485). We have jettisoned the natural value intrinsic to labor for a concept of work solely founded on the logic of capital accumulation.

Such logic is a primary source of rising levels of income and wealth inequality. Blue-collar work such as manufacturing or manual labor, although productive in terms of creating valuable commodities, is undervalued in the U.S. Many folks who work in sectors integral to social functioning, like teachers and public servants, are not paid commensurate with the significance of their labor. Conversely, occupations with more propensity to create substantial, sustained profit for its employer are paid exorbitantly. Concentrated economic activity in large, corporate firms is considered preferable to smaller, more local commerce. The widening gap between the rich and poor is a manifestation of the logic of capital: we continue to distribute resources, wealth, and opportunity based on the probability that specific pattern of distribution perpetuates the production of capital and increases its value.

Using Montesquieu's understanding of political liberty to evaluate our current system unmasks its despotic nature. Despotic power is power left unencumbered or unchecked. Our system today uses the logic of economic efficiency and productivity in order to rationalize its tremendous power. In addition, wealth-seeking folks who wish to dominate politics or economics seek to simplify this power. Evaluating the desirability or value of the world and ways of living only in monetary terms is an example of a mode of thought which Montesquieu would argue oversimplifies the world in which we live. Furthermore, a state which perpetuates this notion can only be characterized as despotic, for it "governs according to [its] own wills and caprices" (Montesquieu 21). There are a plethora of examples from our current state which lend

themselves to Montesquieu's definition of a despotic government: the legislature's focus on preserving corporate interests, tax cuts for those it seems most "productive", calls for deregulating markets, etc. Taxes and regulation in particular are two policy actions which are objected to on the grounds that it impedes economic growth and development; therefore, the state deems them irrational barriers to progress.

The oversimplified vision of living in our world which is founded on a belief in humans as rational beings is not conducive to our survival. Our current arrangement does not reflect what we require to ensure the survival of our society. We are failing to attend to the spirit of the law as Montesquieu describes it. The law ought to reflect a resolve to preserve the relationships which preserve social order and sustain us (Montesquieu 3). Currently, many folks residing in the U.S. feel that they are not free to do what is necessary to preserve themselves. This sentiment also compels individuals to behave in ways we should not wish to behave, according to the spirit of the law.

As a democratic Republic, the U.S. will not survive much longer if we do not critically assess the principles underlying our form of government and laws. Specifically, we do not operate according to virtuous principles. One such virtue that we are missing is behaving in a sustainable fashion. A Republic's law must reflect the "principle of government" it seeks to establish (Machiavelli 8). From his examination of the Roman Empire, Machiavelli concludes that the fate of a Republic depends on its choice to either exist comfortably and sustain itself, or expand its reign and power (Machiavelli 12). The domination of the logic of capital in our existing institutions requires that we use the law to place prohibitions on expansion, particularly considering Montesquieu's distrust in human beings to refrain from abusing acquired power. The spirit of the law is not reducible to a "rational" purpose or function, like economic growth. Unlike the physical world, Montesquieu argues, the world of collective human existence does not follow its laws uniformly or unflinchingly (Montesquieu 4). Therefore, modern Republics should err on the side of caution and prioritize survival.

We currently do not have any powerful political body tasked with enforcing the principle of sustainability. In large, modern Republics like ours, it is especially important to establish “bottom-up” power in order to counteract the concentration of power in the ruling class. Political behavior must be checked by “intermediate, subordinate, and dependent powers” (Montesquieu 17). As opposed to simplified power, which can exponentially grow without regard to boundaries or relationships, bottom-up power fosters interdependence between institutions, thus minimizing the concentration of power. Due to its sheer size, there is bound to be some degree of inequality in a modern Republic; however, states must continue paying close attention to the degree that inequality exists between the classes.

We are lacking an effective arsenal of various obstacles designed to slow down the course of concentrated, despotic power. In the status quo, the largeness of our Republic hinders the law’s capacity to hold the ruling class accountable for their destruction, leaving us vulnerable to a corrupt ruling class. Elites who have the financial and political capital to shape international and domestic policy have so much power that they can get away with disregarding the consequences of their actions. As the logic of capital continues to dominate social life, more and more individuals are beginning to view themselves as independent of their fellow humans and of society. They do not have to collaborate or cooperate with others. It is not enough to establish hierarchies of power within more powerful institutions themselves; when wealth-seeking individuals of this kind inhabit institutions, they tend to simplify the mission of those institutions in a way subverts the spirit of the law.

To counteract the dominating logic of capital accumulation, we must tolerate some inefficiencies in our societal argument. Accounting for the complexity of our world in our government, institutions, and law is a fundamental survival strategy in an increasingly

interdependent world. Similarly, we must account for the destruction the logic of capital accumulation has empirically caused not only in the U.S., but around the world. Only then will we reliably act in accordance with virtuous principles.

Works Cited

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