

# Who defines the common good?

## - a critique of the republican tradition

### **Abstract:**

For some years now, philosophers and intellectual historians (J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Maurizio Viroli, Phillip Pettit, etc.) have endeavoured to show the existence of a republican tradition in Western political thought and called for a revival of the republican discourse. Central to this discourse is the concept of *civic virtue*, that is, a concern for the *common good*. In a healthy society, republicans claim, individuals are not (only) motivated by their personal interest, but (also) by a concern for the common. While one might accept the historiographic thesis of the existence of a specific republican tradition, it could be questioned whether this tradition has indeed played a progressive or emancipatory part in history. Thus the political *function* of the concepts of civic virtue and common good stands in need for examination. Central to this investigation is the question: *who defines the common good?*

A Marxist approach could consist in claiming that the common good is defined by the (economically and therefore ideologically) ruling class and consequently is but a disguise for the interests of that class. This critique, however, needs a slight correction. In fact, according to both the major representatives of the discourse of civic virtue, that is, Machiavelli and Rousseau, the common good is not necessarily defined by the ruling class, but often emerges from struggles between different social groups. However, such (class) struggle should only take place inside the frame of a given political community. Consequently, if the ruling class does not directly define the common good, their ideological hegemony lies in the ability to decide whether a specific struggle is in fact taking place inside the frame of the community or not. Instead of defining the common good, they define the common.

Another way in which elites can use the republican discourse as a means of repression is by proclaiming the unfortunate disappearance of the concern for the common good. Such a statement, in fact, often amounts to a delegitimization of popular demands. More optimistically, the concern for the common good can also be conceived of as an ideal which should be created. Once again, however, the question is who should create it. Thus, on the one hand, certain tendencies in the republican tradition conceive of an authoritarian public education where the allegedly unselfish elite enlightens the allegedly egoistic masses. When, on the other hand, the need for civic virtue has been pronounced as a part of an egalitarian struggle, the republican project of implanting civic virtue in the population has had a more emancipating function.