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Republican Discourses and Imperial Projects: Liberty and Empire in American Political Discourse

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Introduction

During his campaign for the office of the Presidency, George W. Bush stated that 'America has never been an empire...We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused.'[1] During an interview on Al Jazeera on April 28, 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld responded to a question regarding the perceptions of American 'empire building' by stating that, 'We don't seek empires. We're not imperialistic. We never have been.'[2] To the casual observer, this may merely be interpreted as political propaganda masking the true nature of American foreign policy; but for historians of political thought, it relates to a long-standing issue in republican political discourse: namely, the republican antagonism to forms of imperial power.

Traditionally, republicans opposed the development of 'empire', but not because empire was considered to be an unjust relationship of domination of one polity or society by another. Rather, empire was understood as a form of absolute and arbitrary form of domestic political domination—what the Greeks referred to as despotism—that denied the liberty of its citizens regardless of the state's relationship to its peripheral acquisitions. The emphasis on the domestic aspect of empire is significant because in a pre-modern context characterized by unfixed territorial borders between geopolitical 'units', it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between processes of state formation and what we would later refer to as 'imperialism'. Thus, the territorial aspect of pre-modern empire did not distinguish it from its republican antagonist; after all, Republican Rome could conquer and subjugate with as much force and ruthlessness as its imperial successor.

1 Cited in Niall Ferguson, 'Hegemony or Empire?', *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2003.
2 Max Boot, 'American imperialism? No need to run away from label', *USA Today*, 5 May 2003.

What commentators on American foreign policy often forget is that at its founding, the architects of the American state—on both sides of the Federalist/Democratic-Republican divide—accepted the idea that the new republic would represent a new kind of empire. For Jefferson, the United States would exemplify an 'Empire of Liberty', whereas for Alexander Hamilton, the new republic would be a 'Republican Empire'. What is at issue in this history is an evolving relationship between political liberty, economic power and territoriality that serves to frame the problems and issues being taken up by republican political thinkers and statesmen. It stands to reason then, that a change in the nature of this configuration will transform the *problématique* of republican discourse. This paper will attempt to theorize the changing social context of empire and situate the transformation of classical republicanism and its traditional antipathy to empire within this changing context; a context that culminates in 18th century America.

Republicanism and Empire

Prior to the American Revolution, republicanism as it is broadly defined, stood in opposition to "Empire."[3] The roots of this opposition to 'empire' can be found in the anti-democratic writings of Plato and Aristotle. While neither 'republic' nor 'empire' (nor liberty for that matter) existed in ancient Greek political discourse, both political theorists elaborated on the constitutional arrangements and social relations of republics that were organized not for territorial or commercial expansion, but rather for the preservation of the social order. Small scale republics like Sparta were exalted as the closest approximations to the ideal society in which either the 'good men' or the philosopher kings ruled.[4] Against these republics were expansionary republics like Athens, which were said to have degenerated into tyrannies, or the 'oriental despotisms' of the east, notably that of the Persian Empire, characterized by profligacy, ostentation and slavery.[5]

Machiavelli, drawing on the works of Sallust and armed with the insights of Roman history, provided perhaps the most insightful—and no doubt the most influential—analysis of this tension between the expansion of the republic and republican liberty, or self-rule.[6] Greatness (*grandezza*)[7] was based upon the

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3 Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Patrick J. Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans* (Lexington Press 1999); David Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty: a Republican Dilemma', in Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: a shared European Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

4 For an insightful history of the denigration of Athens and the exaltation of Sparta in the history of political thought, see Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Athens is rejected not only for its democracy, but also for its commercial dynamism, a dynamism that is said to have resulted in its 'imperialistic' tendencies. Sparta, on the other hand, is said to have resisted democracy, commercialism and imperialism in the interest of virtue and social order.

5 For a very interesting study of the prevalence of 'orientalism' in the history of Western political thought, see Patricia Springborg, *Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince,* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992).

6 Benedetto Fontana, 'Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli', *History of Political Thought* (Vol. 24, No. 1, 2003), pp. 86-108.

establishment of republican liberty, and greatness, in turn, was crucial to the maintenance of republican liberty and republican constitutions. Both were mutually reinforcing and necessary. But in greatness lay the seeds of the destruction of republican liberty.[8] Using the history of Rome as the basis of his analysis, Machiavelli argues that the greatness of Rome was established through the overthrow of the Tarquins and the establishment of republican institutions that safeguarded the liberty of the people. However, with greatness came territorial expansion, and in order to maintain this expansionary dynamic, the Romans armed the plebs and allowed foreigners to be citizens. The unintended result was an increase in social unrest in the republic. Such internal discord reached its height under the dictatorships of Sulla and Marius, as well as the rule of the Gracchi. Prolonged social discord and intra-class factionalism amongst the patriciate laid the foundations for the destruction of republican liberty, personified by Julius Caesar, and the establishment of empire. What distinguishes Machiavelli's interpretation of the decline of the Roman republic from Sallust's is that Machiavelli claims that it is 'impossible for any state to avoid the compulsions of expansion, and hence to escape the loss of its liberty.'[9] The dilemma that Machiavelli identifies stems from his assertion that although greatness leads to the overthrow of republican liberty, the alternative, mere preservation of republican liberty, also spells certain doom at the hands of foreign conquerors. Thus, a republic must choose between greatness *or* mere preservation: if a republic expands, it most certainly will degenerate into an empire; if it seeks to preserve its liberty through internal stability, it will eventually fall prey to aggressive enemies.

In general, the theoretical solution to this problem was the elaboration of a conception of civic virtue that censured the free pursuit of self-interest at the expense of the public good. Again, we can see the roots of this tension between self-interest and common good in the works of the ancient Greeks. In *The Republic,* Plato famously prohibits his guardians from owning private property or handling currency. Indeed, the deterioration of the polis begins with the corruption of the ruling class which itself is a result of the introduction of private property amongst members of this class. In *The Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between a self-interested form of property ownership (*chremetistike*) characterized as an end in itself, as opposed to a form of property ownership that is a means to a greater end: household management, or, at the social level, the management of the state or polis. In privileging the latter over the former, Aristotle is ensuring the health of the 'public good' from the corruptive influence of private interests. Both positions represent different ways of maintaining the civic virtue

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7 Quentin Skinner traces the linguistic use of *grandezza* to the pre-humanist vernacular writers of the late medieval period and defines it in terms of the 'grandeur and magnitude' of the commune or city-state. Quentin Skinner, 'Machiavelli and the pre-humanist origins of republican ideas', in Gisela Bock, Maurizio Viroli and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8 For an alternative interpretation of Machiavelli's characterization of the republican dilemma, see Jonathan Scott, *Commonwealth Principles: Republican Writing during the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

9 Armitage, op. cit. in note 3, p. 31.

of the ruling class in ways that preclude the commercial and territorial expansion of the polis.

This tension between virtue and interest persists right up through the early modern period. For Machiavelli, the virtú of the citizen body was to be supported through good laws and good arms. Proper institutions and the fostering of military virtue would stave off the inevitable decline of the republic and its degeneration into empire. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu reproduces the classic republican dilemma, stating that extensive republics are impossible to maintain. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau's republicanism takes this problem to even greater extremes by postulating both an anti-territorial *and* anti-commercial republic based upon a rather homogeneous class of rural and urban independent property owners. According to Pocock, the republican discourse of virtue, as articulated by Machiavelli (and replicated in some form by both Montesquieu and Rousseau) was in many ways antagonistic to the rational pursuit of self-interest espoused by later bourgeois theorists and acted as an obstacle to the advent of bourgeois society and the subjective constitution of *homo oeconomicus*.[10] This suggests that, at the least, there existed a subjective understanding of antagonism between individual self-interest and the common good of the *res publica*. And insofar as 'interest' as opposed to 'virtue' was equated with the practice of empires, republicanism evolved as an anti-imperial political discourse. This neo-Machiavellianism (or, as Pocock refers to it in its Anglo-American form, neo-Harringtonianism) acts as the dominant language of politics that frames the controversies of 18th century Britain and America—including, most notably, the founding of the American republic. In this sense, the anti-imperialism of the American revolution is necessarily republican in its discursive form.

This influential interpretation of the development of republican political theory therefore establishes a link between commercial society, territorial expansion and 'empire'. The corollary of this link is that the self-governing republic often becomes associated with a static form of agrarianism and a rejection of commercial society.[11] In conjunction with this is an association between vice or corruption and the pursuit of self-interest: empire is thus intrinsically associated with vice, corruption and the pursuit of self-interest, often by the imperial power at the expense of its citizens.

The Political Constitution of Empire

To characterize the republican problem of empire as merely one of scale, however, is to misunderstand the social dynamics at work in the development of the various societies within which republicanism emerges as a discursive and political force. Classical Republicans conceived of empire as a politically con-

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[10] John Graville A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[11] For a critique of this view, see Steven Pincus, 'Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth', *The American Historical Review* (Vol. 103, No. 3, 1998), pp. 705-36.

stituted form of tyranny that had more to do with the relations between the state and the citizen than it did with the relationship between a metropolitan 'core' versus a subject periphery. The territorial element of empire related strictly to the ways in which the expansion of the state transformed the constitutional structures of the state and undermined the traditional relations between the state and the body of self-governing citizens. The same can be said for the issue of commerce or the advent of 'commercial society'.

This insight is important for a number of reasons. First, we tend to equate republics with small-scale city-states that are organized for 'preservation' as opposed to 'expansion.' Extension of the boundaries of the *res publica* breaks the bonds of communal solidarity that is required for a self-governing political community to properly function as a self-governing community. Secondly, and this is related to the previous point, we tend to relate commercial development, *in general*, to the process of state expansionism and imperialism, thus incurring the opposition of republicans. Commercial development is viewed as an intrinsic threat to the existence of the republic because it results in the corruption of an enlarged citizen body. We are therefore confronted with a neat dichotomy between republics which are small-scale, agrarian and anti-commercial communities on the one hand, arrayed against empires that are expansionist and commercially oriented on the other.

While there is an element of truth to this generalization, casting republicanism in this way obscures more than it reveals. It needs to be stated that commercial and territorial expansionism was often opposed by republicans—in the early modern period—only insofar as it empowered social groups and/or institutions that supported the concentration of power in the hands of absolutist monarchs. The republican ideal of liberty pertained to active self-government by the citizen body, however exclusive that body may be. If the territorial and/or commercial expansion of the state was mediated through institutions that supported the exercise of absolutism, then these processes of expansionism—as well as the institutions and social groups responsible for expansionism—may be opposed. If, however, territorial and/or commercial expansionism occurred outside of, or at the expense of, those groups and institutions, then republican opposition to 'empire' could either become muted, or become transformed into support for 'empire'. Indeed, as is the case in 18th century America, it may in fact result in a redefinition of empire in ways that reconcile it with republicanism.

In other words, the question of empire is about the political constitution of the ruling class: will commercial and/or territorial expansion undermine the self-organization of the ruling class, resulting in the degeneration of republican rule into a form of tyranny, in which the interests of the ruling class are held hostage to the arbitrary will of an emperor? Or will commercial and/or territorial expansion strengthen the power of the ruling class by fostering new and stronger forms of institutional self-organization and rule?

To understand the relationship between republicanism and empire it is important to situate the specific discourses of republicanism in relation to the character of politically constituted property within the particular socio-historical context being studied. By politically constituted property I mean relations of surplus extraction in which the appropriation of the surplus product of the direct pro-

ducer occurs through 'politically constituted' or 'extra-economic' means. Extra-economic surplus extraction is required in pre-capitalist contexts where producers are in direct possession (sometimes, but not always, through ownership) of their own means of subsistence—be it land or tools. In these instances, surplus extraction cannot occur merely through economic imperatives of the market. Such extra-economic forms of surplus extraction can occur through personalized forms of coercion as in the case of the relations of feudal lordship, or, as is more often the case, through institutions of the state.[12] This conceptualization of politically constituted property is more useful than concepts such as 'commercial society' or generalized processes such as territorial expansion for an understanding of the conflict (or lack thereof) between republicanism and notions of empire precisely because it helps us attain a greater sense of the relationship between political and economic power. More specifically, it helps us understand the ways in which the contradictions that are present in politically constituted forms of private property express themselves in particular ways that poses the public against the private and forms the context for persistent forms of politicized economic conflict.

Casting the problem of republicanism and empire in this way can be supported by recourse to the context within which this discursive and conceptual dichotomy first emerged: in late republican Rome. Initially referring to the power to command within the state, the notion of *imperium* began to assume an increasingly territorialist and expansionist meaning as the Roman republic gave way to the principate and the empire.[13] By the time of Tacitus, the concept of the *imperium romanum* was broadened out to refer to "the kind of political, and cultural, unity created out of diversity of different states widely separated in space" under the auspices of what was in his time, a formally imperial Rome.[14] Initially referring to the powers of consuls informally subordinated to the power of the senate, the power of *imperium* increasingly became detached from the "republican" self-government of the landed aristocracy with the rise to prominence of men such as Caesar. As such, the republican resistance against arbitrary and absolute rule—which the power of *imperium* potentially signified when concentrated in the person of one man—merged with a territorialist conception of republican liberty: external expansion of the *imperium* had the potential to weaken the institutions of republican self-government. While prominent republicans never had a problem with Roman "greatness" and wars of "defensive expansionism" *per se*, the dynamic relationship between the expansion of the *imperium* and internal liberty pre-occupied the likes of Cicero and Sallust.[15] Insofar

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[12] See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: a longer view* (London: Verso, 2002). Robert Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', in Trevor H. Aston and Charles H. E. Philpin (eds), *The Brenner Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[13] John S. Richardson, 'Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power', *Journal of Roman Studies* (Vol. 81, 1991), pp. 1-9.

[14] Pagden, op.cit. in note 3.

[15] Peter Brunt, 'Laus Imperii: Conceptions of Empire Prevalent in Cicero's Day', in P. Garnsey and C. R. Whitaker (eds.), *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Benedetto Fontana, 'Tacitus on Empire and Republic', *History of Political Thought* (Vol. 14, No. 1, 1993), pp. 27-40. Indeed, in *On Duties*, Cicero goes so far as to characterize the Roman Republic as a 'protectorate' rather than an 'empire' of the world.

as populists like the Gracchi and Caesar sought to redistribute land to the lower classes, territorial accumulation as a form of agrarian policy became linked to the populist threat to the rule of an Optimate-dominated senatorial republic: in a word, tyranny. "Empire" as the rule of an *imperator* over and against the senate signified simultaneously a political and economic phenomenon and the death of republican liberty.

It stands to reason then, that the changing social composition of political and economic power—or, to put it another way, the transformation of politically constituted property into purely economic forms of property resulting in the development of capitalism—will result in a change in the relationship between the expansion of state power and the political constitution of ruling class power and a corresponding transformation in the problematic that has informed the history of republican political thought.

Commerce, Virtue and Interest in Revolutionary America

The discourse of republicanism enjoyed a privileged place in the political discourse of the revolutionary era if only because the primary intention of the revolutionary war was to gain independence from a monarchical Imperial Britain. With its anti-monarchical implications, republicanism represented the most obvious motivating 'ideology' within the colonies. This republican interpretation, however, obscures more than it reveals about the substantive ideological differences between the main architects of the American state, and it obscures the substantive change of certain classical republican presuppositions that in themselves signify profound changes in the relations between different sectors of the economy, as well as the relationship between economic and political power.[16]

In particular, we begin to see in American republican discourse, the redefinition of classical notions of republican virtue, as well as an accommodation to the 'doctrine of interest' that had become commonplace in mercantilist literature. Differences over the meaning of virtue and the place of interest divided the republican 'community' (if one can call it that) because these differences represented profound differences of opinion regarding the nature of social organization and social relationships in the new republic. Some republicans, particularly the more ardent anti-federalists, adhered to the classical republican conception of virtue that subordinated private interest to the pursuit of the public good. The

[16] The literature on the nature of American republicanism in the late 18th century is voluminous. See Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthmen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Pocock, op.cit. in note 10; Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1990); Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Robert Shalhope, 'Towards a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography', *The William and Mary Quarterly* (Vol. 29, no. 1, 1972), pp. 49-80; Lance Banning, 'Republican Ideology and the Triumph of the Constitution, 1789-1793', *The William and Mary Quarterly* (Vol. 31, No. 2, 1974), pp. 168-188.

public engagement of the active citizen took precedence over the private life of commerce and labour and required the requisite freedom from 'mechanical' activity in order to act in a disinterested fashion regarding political affairs. Typical of this position was Carter Braxton, who believed that republican virtue was 'historically the ideal of a circumscribed, privileged citizenry with an independent propertied base that provided the leisure and time for fulfillment in public life through the moral pursuit of public things, *res publica*.'[17] This is the kind of Aristotelian *zoon politikon* that Pocock identified as being antagonistic to the development of bourgeois society and its corresponding conception of *homo oeconomicus*.[18]

From this classical republican perspective, interest was viewed with suspicion for it could lead to a number of undesirable consequences. In the first instance, 'interest' in terms of accumulating money on the repayment of loans could compromise the independence of a citizen and force them into relations of obligation they would otherwise have avoided. In the second instance, interest—in the sense of particular interests—implied a loyalty to something that was set against the good of the community, and hence, would undermine the republic. Thus, for classical republicans, economic excess characterized by commercial opportunities undermined civic or public virtue.

However, as Isaac Kramnick has shown, American conceptions of virtue underwent a conceptual transformation within the auspices of republican political discourse during the closing decades of the 18th century. For many self-identified republicans, virtue ceased to be a martial quality along the lines proposed by Machiavelli; it ceased to be associated with the contemplative man of leisure and learning as elaborated by Aristotle; and most importantly, it ceased being associated with the man who sacrifices his own particular interest for the interest of some common good. In *The Federalist* no. 8, Alexander Hamilton wrote that the 'industrious habits of the people of the present day, absorbed in the pursuit of gain and devoted to the improvements of agriculture and commerce, are incompatible with the condition of a nation of soldiers, which was the true condition of the people of those [ancient Greek] republics.'[19] For the likes of James Madison, virtue becomes something that is non-civic in its orientation and apolitical in its character. By the late 18th century, virtue became equated with private, individual qualities like industry, sobriety, frugality and prudence.[20] Indeed, the kinds of attributes that scholars have associated with economic man, become increasingly identified as virtuous traits. In a late 18th century pamphlet, an anonymous Virginian asks: "Have we that Industry, Frugality, Economy, that Virtue, which is necessary to constitute it [republican government]?" John Adams believed that the foundation of 'virtuous government' rested upon men who were "sober, industrious and frugal."' Even some anti-federalists shared in this reconceptualization of virtue. The pseudonymous 'Candidus'

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17 Isaac Kramnick, 'The "Great National Discussion": The Discourse of Politics in 1787', *The William and Mary Quarterly* (Vol. 45, No. 1, 1988), pp. 3-32, p. 22.

18 Pocock, op.cit in note 10.

19 Cited in Kramnick, op.cit. in note 17, p. 9.

20 In *The Ethics*, Aristotle identifies such qualities as temperance, magnanimity, generosity, liberality and courage amongst his virtues.

believed that more important than a new constitution for America was the need to return to the virtues of 'industry and frugality.'[21]

According to Kramnick, this transformation represents the influence of Protestant notions of the work-ethic and its synthesis with classical notions of republican virtue. The virtues of industriousness and frugality—private virtues—were juxtaposed to the vice of public dependency; that is, the dependence upon others, or upon the state for their livelihood. This could apply to both the idle rich as well as the idle poor. This transformation represents a privatization of what classical republicans took to be fundamentally public virtues. Within this newly emerging paradigm of republicanism, the man of virtue 'partook less and less of that republican ideal that held sway from Aristotle to Harrington—the man whose landed property gave him the leisure necessary for civic commitment in the public arena, be its manifestations political or martial.'[22] In this new paradigm, property was not significant in the sense of providing the virtuous man with a livelihood that was independent of labour; rather, it became the vehicle through which the man would attain his virtuous through industry and improvement. [23] Kramnick summarizes this late 18th century development:

What we now know is that one hears more and more in the course of the late eighteenth century a different language of virtue, one that rejects the assumptions of civic humanism. Citizenship and the public quest for the common good were for some replaced by economic productivity and industrious work as the criteria of virtue...The moral and virtuous man was no longer defined by his civic activity but by his economic activity. One's duty was still to contribute to the public good, but this was best done through economic activity, which actually aimed at private gain. Self-centered economic productivity, not public citizenship, would become a badge of the virtuous man. At the heart of this shift from republican to Protestant notions of virtue was also a transvaluation of work and leisure. Many Americans in 1787 would have dissented vigorously from the centuries-old republican paradigm set forth in Aristotle's *Politics*.[24]

In general, this emphasis on the virtues of productive *private* activity finds its parallel in a similar conceptual transformation in 17th century England in relation to the debates over the enclosure of land for the purposes of agricultural 'improvement.'[25]

In conjunction with this change in the meaning of virtue, we can also see a change in the place that interest occupies in acceptable discourse, as well as its

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21 Cited in Kramnick, op.cit. in note 17, pp. 16-7.

22 Ibid., p. 22.

23 This seems similar to Locke's conception of virtue in his writings on the Poor Law; indeed Kramnick links this Protestant work ethic to Locke's discussion on property with his emphasis on industriousness and labour. For a stimulating study of Locke's interest in agricultural improvement and productive labour, see Neal Wood, *John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

24 Kramnick, op.cit. in note 17, pp. 22-3.

25 I have argued elsewhere that a similar change in the nature of virtue and the place of interest in political discourse occurred in 17th century England and that this discursive change occurred within the context of the development of agrarian capitalism and the consequent impacts it had on the nature of social conflict and commercial development.

place in the maintenance of—and shaping of—the new republican state and American foreign and commercial policy. In latter half of the 18th century, mercantilist notions of interest became increasingly prevalent in American economic discourse. Interest was increasingly characterized as a form of enlightened private activity, one that benefited the larger community.[26] Thus, the 'aggregate of personal fortunes' did not come at the expense of the common good; rather, it formed the basis of the 'wealth of the nation.' In 1767, one anonymous New Yorker wrote that the 'private interests and passions of men naturally lead them to divide and distribute the stock of society...as nearly as possible in the proportion which is most agreeable to the interest of the whole society.'[27] Here we begin to see the social 'rehabilitation' of merchants in the body politic: the 'traditional conception of commercial enterprise as a means of "fraud upon strangers" began to give way to approval of the exchange of "refinements" which enriched and civilized the national community.'[28] As a result of this conceptual development, 'the public interest would be defined through the uninhibited play of private interests in the marketplace.'[29]

This general rehabilitation of the mercantile interest was part of a larger transformation in the relationship between the sectional interests that comprised the American economy. Conceptions of interest and their relationship to the common good underwent a transformation as powerful sectional actors began to perceive a convergence of their economic interests. The belief in a harmony of intersectional economic interests was put forward by the New York Chamber of Commerce in 1785, arguing that the landholder and the merchants were 'seduced into a false idea that their real interests are different.'[30] As Matson and Onuf point out, the 'old dichotomy between merchants and the landed interests was beginning to give way to an awareness that an array of domestic producers in myriad economic pursuits contributed to the well-being of the community.'[31] To an important degree, this perception had its basis in reality. A real organic relationship had begun to develop between agriculture and commercial activity. The American political economist Tench Coxe argued that 'agriculture appears to be the spring of our commerce, and the parent of our manufactures.'[32]

While this is not the proper place to pursue the debates around capitalist development in 18th century America, the above evidence suggests that a real and perceived convergence of interests began to emerge within the post-colonial economy that transformed conventional republican understandings of virtue and interest. In general, this development rests on a refutation of the 'agrarian myth'

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[26] This intellectual development was anticipated, to some degree, in 17th century England. For study on the introduction of the doctrine of interest into English economic discourse, see J.A.W. Gunn , *Politics and the Public Interest in the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

[27] Cited in Peter S. Onuf and Cathy Matson, 'Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America', *American Quarterly* (Vol. 37, No. 4, 1985), pp. 496-531, p. 510.

[28] Ibid., p. 503.

[29] Ibid., p. 510.

[30] Ibid., p. 521.

[31] Ibid., p. 521.

[32] Cited in ibid.

that conceptualized a fundamental antagonism between a self-sufficient yeomanry engaged in a natural economy of subsistence against a profit-oriented merchant class engaged in interdependent commercial activity. Recent work has challenged this view by demonstrating the prevalence of commercially oriented, petty-commodity producing farmers.[33] Joyce Appleby speaks of the 'core common interests' that developed between farmers, merchants and food processors during the period of increased European demand for grains and other foodstuffs during the 1780s and 90s. Thus, as long as 'food prices remained high, the conventional divisions of North and South, subsistence and commercial, yielded to a core of common interests, among American farmers, food processors, and merchants in this favored region.'[34] However, it would be a mistake to suggest that this convergence of interests was itself a result of capitalist development. Rather, it seems to have been a temporary result of emerging market opportunities that cannot be associated with capitalism in any simple way. Charles Post has cautioned scholars from associating self-organized, rural petty commodity production by independent farmers with capitalist agriculture subordinated to the *imperatives* of market competition.[35] The difference here is in conceptualizing the market as a sphere of compulsion as opposed to a sphere of opportunity.[36] The point is that commercially oriented agriculture—petty commodity production—resulted in a temporary harmony of interests amongst commercially oriented sectors of the economy—mercantile, industrial and agrarian—to the extent of fostering a greater degree of ruling class cohesion. This convergence of interests, however, must not be understood to mean that early America was characterized by an absence of class divisions or class conflict. On the contrary, class and conflict played an important role in American post-colonial development. Nor is it to suggest that this convergence of interests formed the context of long-term capitalist development in America. As Post has argued, the process of subordinating agricultural production to the imperatives of market competition and the law of value was spearheaded by merchant interests who took the lead in the commodification of land—at the expense of farmers' interests—starting in the 1840s.

The conceptual transformation of classical republicanism, therefore, cannot be 'reduced' to capitalism in any simplistic way. More important than the development of capitalism in post-Colonial America is the relative absence—outside of the slave-owning plantation South—of politically constituted property either in terms of feudal forms of lordship or in terms of a surplus-extracting tax/office state like those of absolutist Europe. In most of the American states, political power had been formally separated from economic forms of surplus extraction

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[33] See Robert E. Mutch (1980), 'Colonial America and the Debate about the Transition to Capitalism', *Theory and Society* (Vol. 9, No. 6, 1980), pp. 847-863; Charles Post, 'The American Road to Capitalism', *New Left Review* (133, May-June, 1982), pp. 30-51.

[34] By South, Appleby is referring to the state of Virginia, which witnessed a shift from tobacco planting to the production of grains. Joyce Oldham Appleby, 'Commercial Farming and the "Agrarian Myth" in the Early Republic', *The Journal of American History* (Vol. 68, No. 4, 1982), pp. 833-849, p. 844.

[35] Post, op.cit. in note 32.

[36] Ellen Meiksins Wood has done more than any other scholar to emphasize the compulsory nature of market activity under capitalism. Wood, op.cit. in note 12.

within a society that was dominated by petty commodity forms of production that, while not capitalist in themselves, would in hindsight, form the basis for capitalist development in 19th century America.

Thus, despite being integrated into Britain's transatlantic imperial trading empire, a relationship that resulted in colonial exploitation that supported the British Crown, American society was free of the kinds of politically constituted property that dominated the various states and societies of continental Europe. As a result, American republicanism was less concerned with advocating certain forms of citizenship and social relationships that were intended to address the specific problems that emerged in pre-capitalist societies due to the contradictions of politically constituted property, than it was geared towards gaining independence from the British Empire.

An Empire of Liberty or a Republican Empire?

It is in this context—one defined by newly won political independence within an economy dominated by, but not monopolized by, petty commodity production and mercantile capital—that the American reconciliation of republicanism and empire takes place. Yet, this process of conceptual reconciliation is not a smooth one; rather, it is characterized by contestation between 'republican imperialists' and classical republican anti-imperialists on the one hand, and a contestation over what kind of empire the new republic will become between republican imperialists on the other hand. Thus, on the one extreme of the political debate, we can identify an atavistic, classical republicanism that rejects the corruptive influences of commercial society and embraces the conventional notion of a republic for preservation.[37] From this perspective, post-revolutionary America should be organized as a loose confederation of individual republican states with no central, executive power. Due to spatial constraints, I will not deal with this classical republican rejection of empire. On the other extreme, we have the enthusiastic embrace of commercial society—particularly the case of manufacturing—of 'energetic' national government, a caution towards territorialism and an ambitious trans-Atlanticism expressed in the writings of Alexander Hamilton. In the middle resides the expansionism of Thomas Jefferson, who is cautious in his enthusiasm for commercial manufacture yet an ardent proponent of commercial agriculture and scientific agrarian improvement and who proposes a new empire of liberty that will be based on westward territorial expansion.

Thomas Jefferson envisaged the United States as a new kind of empire, an 'empire of liberty.' In the discursive context of republicanism that seemed to dominate the discussions around the creation of this new American state, such a notion of an empire being founded upon liberty—that condition that can only be secured by republics—must have appeared quite provocative. To be sure, such a notion of empire was, in Jefferson's hands, innovative to say the least: territorial expansionism would proceed within the constitutional confines of republican self-government. This in itself represented a rejection of the classical republican

[37] Karl Friedrich Walling, *A Republican Empire* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1999), pp. 102-03.

dilemma that compelled ancient republicans to eschew expansionism—or to at least be wary of its socially disruptive effects—and it represented a rejection of the contemporary revival of this conceptual and political dilemma—in particular, by Montesquieu—by anti-federalist republican forces in the late 18th century.[38]

For Jefferson, territorial expansionism did not pose an inherent problem for republicans. Rather, it was the relationship between territoriality and the constitution of political power that had troubled classical republicans for most of European history. The problem of empire was a political and moral problem. Imperial government, for Jefferson—and unlike classical republicans—was fundamentally characterized by the enrichment of the metropolis at the expense of the periphery. The point then was to disassociate 'empire' from the political architecture of imperial metropolitan rule. The problem with the British Empire was not so much the expansiveness of its power, but rather, the formal and substantive inequality that it institutionalized within its imperial framework. The domination of London over the imperial periphery ensured the unequal distribution of economic resources within the empire. Part of this problem is to be found in the monarchical form of British imperial rule. This feudal element signified the formal hierarchy that legitimated the substantive inequality that existed between London and the colonies. Because of this, Jefferson's empire would necessarily require a republican constitutional form in order to avoid this structural defect.

As an alternative, Jeffersonian expansionists initially rejected the consolidation of executive power proposed by Federalists and sought to move away from the conventional 'imperial framework' of executive authority and propose a diffusion of power that could exist alongside a territorial expansionist republic.[39] Jefferson's empire 'would be an empire without a center, or dominant metropolis. Dynamic and expansive, it would spread, diffuse, and equalize benefits through the vast system of inland waterways, improved and extended by the art of man, to its farthest reaches: this would be an empire without peripheries.'[40] It thus needs to be said that Jefferson's empire of liberty does not seem to be an empire *over* other subjects outside the boundaries of America, but rather the extension of the boundaries of liberty and republican self-government. His empire would be an empire of the states within the constitutional confines of republican self-government.

Jefferson envisioned an empire of liberty that would not only reject the monarchical state form of the British empire, but would also reject the mercantilist commercial policy that privileged British metropolitan manufacturers and trades over those of the peripheries. Free trade would become the commercial

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[38] Joyce Oldham Appleby, 'What is Still American in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?' *The William and Mary Quarterly* (Vol. 39, No. 2, 1982), pp. 287-309.

[39] I say initially, because as Horsman points out, Jefferson and his supporters would allow for the concentration of executive power for the purposes of expanding the frontier of the republic westward, largely in a bid to appease the sectional interests (yeoman farmers) that served as Jefferson's political base. Reginald Horsman, 'The Dimensions of an "Empire for Liberty": Expansion and Republicanism, 1775-1825', *Journal of the Early Republic* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 1989), pp. 1-20.

[40] Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: that language of American nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 68-9.

basis of this new empire.[41] He thus turned his imperial vision westward, toward the frontier, and away from the eastern seaports that to him represented the arteries of British imperial rule and the vehicles of metropolitan domination. Cities, as hubs of British commercial dominance, would be denigrated in favour of the agrarian virtue of the yeoman farmer working the land of the western frontier.

Both of Jefferson's prescriptions—no carrying trade or free trade—were inspired by his determination to preserve the new republican empire from the pernicious effects of metropolitan domination. Indeed, Jefferson's vaunted agrarianism was an artifact of his devotion to a republican political economy, not its fundamental premise. It was only by means of internal commercial expansion through its great system of rivers that the American union could offer a viable alternative to the mercantilist regime of unequal benefits in a monarchical empire. Commercial expansion into the hinterland was the necessary precondition for the proliferation of Jefferson's freeholding farmers; similarly, Jefferson's apotheosis of the yeomanry ("I repeat again, cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens") constituted his tribute, case in the most self-consciously archaic, neoclassical, republican terms, to the dynamic, decentred, and progressive political economy of the post-mercantilist age.[42]

This is an important observation that Onuf makes. For Jefferson, it was not a matter of a static agrarian economy versus the dynamism of trade, but rather, internal commercial expansion rooted in a 'virtuous' agrarian political economy characterized by hard work and improvement as opposed to a mercantile dominated trans-Atlantic commerce that would buttress the political institutions of metropolitan domination and exploitation. The expansion of the republic posed no problem for the liberty of the citizenry because it merely entailed the westward expansion of a politically and juridically free petty-commodity producing citizenry. Expansion did not entail the aggrandizement of lordly power over a dependent peasantry, nor did it require the extension of a surplus-extracting tax/office state like those that existed on the European continent. Similarly, free trade would preclude the pernicious influence of the mercantile elite, preventing it from becoming the locus of a new monarchical power that would reproduce the relations of traditional empire. Thus, where French and Spanish colonization served to buttress the architecture of absolutism by transplanting feudal social relations into the New World, American expansionism would be predicated upon the freedom and liberty of its citizenry.

Alexander Hamilton, however, presented a fundamentally different conception of a 'republican empire' that conceived of the relationship between territoriality, political liberty and commercial dynamism in a fundamentally different—and new—way.[43] For Hamilton territorial expansion westward posed problems for the unity of the union. The larger the territory of the union became the more fragmented it would become, because citizens' first loyalty would be to that of

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41 Appleby, op.cit., in note 37.

42 Onuf, op.cit., in note 39, p. 71.

43 Robert Shalhope argues that it would be 'mistake to interpret Thomas Jefferson as the champion of republicanism and his Federalist opponents as its great foes.' This applies, in particular, to the politics of Alexander Hamilton. Shalhope, op.cit. in note 16, p. 73.

their own particular state. In this regard, the classic republican reluctance to order a republic for expansion was alluded to. But this did not mean that the republic would be ordered for mere preservation; this did not entail a capitulation to anti-Federalist sentiment, for expansionism threatened *fragmentation* and disunion, not the concentration of power at an imperial centre. In fact, the creation of a strong, federal state would not only *not* result in the kind of exploitative relationship between an imperial core and a subject periphery as Jefferson believed; rather, a strong federal state would be necessary for the creation of a republican empire whose greatness was not based on territoriality. In Hamilton's republican empire, expansionism would be based upon the dynamism of American manufacturing and commerce; but this commerce would be organized in a way that in no way inhibited the development of the institutions of extensive self-government.[44] The commercial expansion of the republic would not require the establishment of a surplus extracting tax/office state, nor would neo-mercantilist policies result in the creation of merchant oligarchies whose economic activities and interests would be dependent upon a patrimonial court that dispenses with royal charters and prerogatives in exchange for a share of the profits. Commercial expansionism would be based upon price competition of American manufacturers. Secondly, commercial expansion would be dependent upon the development of American naval power that would empower the republic to break into new markets and preclude the need for a standing army—that bastion of imperial and absolutist power in the canon of classical republicanism. Indeed, these prescriptions bare a striking resemblance to some of the ideas put forward by the English republicans of the Commonwealth period, the first republicans to hint at the creation of republican empires.[45]

Hamilton's rejection of traditional notions of territorial expansionism represented a break with the conventional belief that the economic might of the republic necessitated its subsequent political expansion. For Karl Friedrich Walling, such a conception of republican empire disconnected from traditional notions of territoriality was a century ahead of its time, as Hamilton's 'vision of national greatness' was 'much closer to his countrymen's understanding of their role in the world of the twentieth century than in the eighteenth century.' In fact, for Walling, 'American ascendancy could lead to imperialism,' 'but it did not have to do so. Under no circumstances should we conclude that imperialism was a necessary or desired outcome of any of the Founders' visions of the United States.'[46] Leaving aside the question of whether Hamilton was 'ahead of his time', this is a fair statement. But the point is not necessarily whether 'imperialism' was the necessary outcome of American thinking in the late 18th century. Rather, the point is that a new conception of the relationship between republican liberty and imperial *greatness* had been established that would make possible the development of a republican empire that *could* engage in new forms of commercial imperialism while avoiding the perils of 'empire' at home.

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[44] For Hamilton's political economy, see Michael D. Chan, *Aristotle and Hamilton on Commerce and Statesmanship* (University of Missouri Press, 2006).

[45] Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Merchants 1550-1653* (London: Verso, 2003).

[46] Walling, op.cit., in note 36, p. 115.

The creation of a republican empire, however, was not merely the outgrowth of commercial society (after all, Renaissance Italy and 18th century France were both in their own ways, 'commercial societies'). A 'union of interests' would have to be politically constructed, and this entailed some innovative political engineering. Unlike Jefferson's idea of territorial expansion within the auspices of a limited federal government, Hamilton envisioned a large and active role for the federal executive and legislative power—what he termed vigorous and energetic government—in establishing this union of interests that would underpin his republican empire. Walling argues that Hamilton granted Congress nearly absolute—but not arbitrary—power in order to fulfil its imperial mission; as much power as deemed necessary to secure its position as a dominant commercial power. 'Thus, for example, Hamilton objected to the "novel and absurd experiment in politics, of tying up the hands of government" even from "offensive war, founded upon reasons of state." Especially for a maritime power seeking to keep war at a distance, there might be times when the best defense would be a good offense.'[47]

This 'absolute' power, of course, was not the kind of absolute power exercised by the absolutist states of continental Europe; nor was it represented by the types of politically constituted forms of private property that allowed the absolutist state to extract a surplus from the direct producers of American society and bolster forms of feudal power.[48] Rather, it represented an historically new form of state, one in which ancient modes of republican discourse, and newly emerging forms of capitalist social relations would be accommodated politically through a series of institutional innovations that would differentiated the American republican state from all of its contemporaries and serve as the political carapace for the eventual development of capitalism.

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47 Ibid., p. 118.

48 For discussions of the nature of the absolutist states of continental Europe, see: Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974); Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003); Hannes Lacher, *Beyond Globalization: Capitalism, Territoriality and International Relations of Modernity* (Routledge: New York, 2006).