European World BK 01/19

**The Political Landscape: Republics**

Long neglected in historiography. *Term*: from Latin *res publica* (public affair); in narrow sense used for polities governed by (a more or less extensive no of) members. Building on classical models, (male) burghers are viewed as equal ‘citizens’ rather than ‘subjects’. They enjoy political rights in return for (financial / military) obligations and ideally serve the common good with a strong sense of civic responsibility / virtue.

1. Historical overview
   * Examples include Greek *polis*, high medieval Italian *commune*, late medieval *Imperial Free Cities*, early modern urban (and rural) *federations* and ‘special cases’ of *mixed* (strong aristocratic power in Poland-Lithuania) and *temporary* republics (English Commonwealth).
2. Strands of political thought
   * Classical division into 3 (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy; Aristotle); Renaissance distinction between 2 (principalities and republics; Machiavelli) forms of government
   * Early modern ascendancy of ‘absolutist’ thinkers, according to whom human *self*-interest and need for order requires strong ruler (Bodin/Hobbes), but resistance theories emerge in context of religious wars; notable republican models/tracts by James Harrington (*Oceana*/England) and Johan / Pieter de la Court (*Interest van Holland*/Dutch Republic); Enlightenment calls for a separation of powers & adherence to ‘general will’ (Montesquieu, Rousseau).
3. Early modern Republics
   * The *Dutch* *Republic* was highly urbanized and distinguished by (overseas) trade, (shipping) industry and commercialized agriculture; reluctant coexistence of Calvinist majority and Catholics. Authoritarian Spanish rule triggered military resistance & ultimately declaration of independence 1581; resulting government de-centralised, based on representative assemblies (States General) with princely figurehead (*stadholders*/House of Orange). Relatively tolerant and ‘middling’ culture, with urban patrons; large print industry, extensive art market catering to mass demand for ‘moralistic’ everyday scenes. Meteoric rise in 17thC linked to colonial expansion, trading wealth, *entrepôt* services and military innovation/naval power.
   * In comparison, the *Swiss* *Confederation* had a stronger rural component and more agricultural character; officially bi-confessional (since Kappel Peace 1531), it stayed neutral in military conflicts (often fought with Swiss mercenaries); operates a (weak) diet, but no princely court.
   * *Venice* practiced a mixed form of government with ‘monarchical’ (Doge), aristocratic (Senate) & ‘democratic’ elements (large council; indirect role of popular need/ discontent).
   * *England* became a temporary republic in 1649, adopting its only written constitution in 1653.
4. Historiographical perspectives
   * Some historians stress intellectual links from Antiquity via Renaissance to Atlantic Revolutions (Pocock), others constitutional affinities between communal self-government and modern democratic regimes (Blickle), recent work (Maissen) relates growing republican self-consciousness and representation to need for status/legitimacy in system of sovereign states after Peace of Westphalia 1648. Much interest in symbolism (classical allusions/civic virtues).

Conclusion

* + Early modern Europe was dominated by strong monarchies and Empires, but republican forms of government built on a long tradition and provided a viable alternative (in a variety of formats). Indirectly, at least, elements like regular elections, decentralised government and civic virtues formed precedents of modern democracy.

Holenstein, A., Prak, M. and Maissen, Th. *(eds), The Republican Alternative: The Netherlands and Switzerland Compared* (Amsterdam,2008);

Pocock, J.G.A., *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (1973)