



Republics

from ancient Rome to the modern world

Lifelong Learning Course

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course outline & important texts

The *res publica*, or “public thing,” is a general phrase implying a kind of democratic rule where all citizens within a unified political entity are the ultimate authority in making political decisions that affect them. The modern world defines “republicanism”, more narrowly, as concerning a system where the People choose officials to make those decisions in their name. It continues to assume, nonetheless, that we the People continually exercise our ultimate authority, by remaining politically engaged, including holding these officials accountable. This assumption implies that only through responsible political stewardship, civic virtue, and the dispensation of one’s duties as citizen can political freedom be achieved and upheld. But if most systems that have and do call themselves “republics” claim to adhere to these principles, implementations in different cases are wildly skewed by prevailing political ideologies.

Topics we will touch on in this course include: the historical development of republican political thought from the ancient to the modern world; republicanism’s relationship to empire; the role of civic virtue; competing notions of freedom; the contemporary (re)emergence of republicanism and “neo-republicanism” in political philosophy; and what stresses pull republics apart.

week 1 | introduction: what is and is not a republic?

Plato, *Republic*
Aristotle, *Politics*

week 2 | The Roman Republic – reasons for its rise and fall

general histories of the Roman Republic

The Roman Republic: A Very Short Introduction, by David M. Gwynn (2012).

Roman Republics, by Harriet Flowers. A very readable, engaging look at the politics of the evolution and collapse of what she sees as a sequential series of distinct Roman Republics.

The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic, Mike Duncan. Just out and influenced by the Trump challenge to American republican institutions.

Polybius, *The Histories*, Bk VI

Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*. Catiline’s conspiracy provides a fine example of the toxic mix of powerful ambition, high-octane politics, and the deceptions of

populism. Sallust is a fine source for the event, and Cicero's *Orations against Catiline* a superb championing of republican values.

political philosophy & thought

Cicero. The most influential single figure produced by ancient Rome; e.g. Jim Powell (The Fight For Liberty), "Marcus Tullius Cicero expressed principles that became the bedrock of liberty in the modern world." There are many collections of Cicero, most would be OK. I use basic works of Cicero, trans. Moses Hadas (Modern Library, New York). Much in Cicero applies to this course, e.g. on the subject of civic virtue and "virtue politics", see *On Duties* (Bk II, §52-§87)

The Roman Mind: Studies in the History of Thought from Cicero to Marcus Aurelius by M. L. Clarke (1968).

Connolly, Joy. *The Life of Roman Republicanism*, especially, Introduction & ch.1 & 2.

week 3 | medieval & Renaissance republics – their strengths and weaknesses

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince* shows him an advocate of hard-nosed *realpolitik*, but his *Discourses on Livy* reveals him also a republican. Specifically,

on civic humanism & the republican revival:

The Prince (Ch. VI-VIII; XXV)

The Discourses (Bk I, ch. I-VI, IX, X, XVI-XX)

on *libertas*, & *imperium*:

Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (Bk II, ch. I-IX; Bk III, ch. I, III)

For Machiavelli revisited, see, *Machiavelli's Politics*, by Catherine Zuckert

week 4 | anti-monarchism & neo-Roman liberty – rise of modern republicanism

John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

John Locke, *Second Treatises on Government*, and the *Letter Concerning Toleration*

Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*

political science of republicanism

Montesquieu (Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de) *The Spirit of the Laws*, selections (including Bk 1, ch.1.3; Bks 2, 3, 5, 8; Bk 11, ch. 11.1-11.4)

week 5-6 | republican revolutions in Britain, America, France, and elsewhere

Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*

for a brief into, see *Rousseau, a very short introduction*

or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81KfDXTTtXE>

handout -- John Adams, "Letter to Mercy Otis Warren" (16 Apr 1776)

handout -- Thomas Jefferson, query 13 on constitutions in *Notes on the State of Virginia*
Letters from an American Farmer (1782), by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. In this classic
American memoir and social commentary, an 18C French immigrant explains
America.

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

week 7-8 | “republics” rule the modern world

Arendt, *On Revolution*, selections

Michael Sandel’s Harvard lectures (available free online) “Justice”