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Who are 'we' anyway? Republicanism and Self-Emancipation

Abstract: This paper discusses one aspect of Dara Bascara's work on domination that sets it apart from much of the literature with which she is in conversation: a commitment to, and philosophical interest in, self-emancipation. It first considers how self-emancipation tends to be dealt with in contemporary republican theory, largely as a question of how best to educate members of oppressed groups so that they may emancipate themselves. It then contrasts this with an older tradition of self-emancipation, found in nineteenth-century labour republicanism and in Marxist, feminist, and anti-racist writing from the perspective of those directly struggling against oppression. Finally, it argues that Bascara's work brings some of these insights usefully into contemporary republicanism through a perspectival shift: from thinking about how we might emancipate them, to how we might emancipate ourselves.

I want to discuss one aspect of Dara Bascara's work on domination that sets it apart from much of the literature with which she's in conversation: a particular kind of commitment to, and a philosophical interest in, self-emancipation. Her position on this topic is distinctive, and I want to draw out the differences between hers and other work on self-emancipation in what we could broadly call republican political thought. To do so, I'll first look at the way that self-emancipation tends to be dealt with in contemporary republican theory: that is, largely through trying to find out how best to educate members of oppressed groups to allow them to emancipate themselves. Then I move onto an older and contrasting tradition of self-emancipation, found in 19th-century Labour Republicanism, and in the work of Marxists, feminists, and anti-racists writing from the perspective of those directly struggling against oppression. I'll argue that Bascara's work not only brings some of the insights from these traditions usefully into contemporary republicanism, but that it does so as a result of a similar perspectival shift: from thinking about how *we* might emancipate *them*, to how we might emancipate ourselves.

Lots of writers on domination don't discuss self-emancipation at all, or at least not in those terms. Where they do there's a common sort of story, but it's one that starts with a different issue, to do with consciousness under domination. So, let's start by saying something fairly general about that issue: we have reason to think that in circumstances of oppression or domination, things can be clouded or distorted, and that you're not a reliable and undistorted guide to the social

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world around you or – in at least some cases – to your own best interests. Take your pick for how to describe that process. You might call it ideology or false consciousness or illusion, or subjectification and the formation of desires. If you're a particularly old-school republican, you might talk about the corruption or deformation of character. If you're a very analytic Marxist, you might prefer to try and blame it on adaptive preferences and motivated reasoning. But no matter how it works, it works: not totally or deterministically, or we'd have a different problem. Yet some of our desires and much of our understanding of our world are distorted because of oppression and distorted *in favour* of preserving the oppressive status quo. It's not clear how to reliably distinguish between distorted and non-distorted forms of those things.

There are lots of ways to proceed from this sort of thought, if we accept that it is true. One enduringly popular option is to ignore it. Another way, perhaps worse, is to say something like the following, which is quite close to what's sometimes described as the official republicanism of the French state:

> Members of oppressed groups have a very serious problem. Not only are they oppressed, but that oppression has given them serious epistemic barriers: it's convinced many of them to identify with and consent to their oppression or fail to see anything wrong with it at all. They're stuck in a vicious circle. Without these oppressive social structures (of their families, their religions, the cultural norms they must navigate) they wouldn't have these epistemic barriers, and the oppressive social structures wouldn't survive if they didn't have epistemic barriers to support them. But they can't get rid of those oppressive social structures until they get rid of their epistemic barriers, these distorted forms of consciousness. Thankfully, we can help. From outside that vicious circle we can educate them – as non-coercively as we can, because we don't want to be paternalistic – and nudge them away from the desires and ways of understanding their social world that keep them oppressed. We can thereby help them emancipate themselves.

This rests upon (at least) two assumptions: the first is that only *victims* of some kind of oppression will find epistemic barriers prevent them from reliably thinking about that oppression or trusting their preferences as good guides to their interests. In contrast, dominant groups don't face these barriers. The second assumption is that *we*, the speakers, are members of those latter groups.

We could call this the standard philosophical first person-plural.[1] *They* are

1 Standard, at least, in much mainstream, contemporary political philosophy, and certainly in the vast majority of contemporary republican writing.

oppressed. *We* only want to understand and then to help. *We* are the state, or the framers of an imaginary future constitution, or the advisors to the politicians, laying the groundwork and clarifying the concepts and helping them make good decisions. A commitment to self-emancipation here is a *constraint* on what we can or should do, where *we* are not *them*. To actively coerce members of some oppressed group out of their oppressive socialisation would be paternalistic and so impermissible. Instead, the state education of children, about whom paternalistic worries are taken to have less strength, is the preferred tool. With the right sort of education, the state can give children the tools necessary to free *themselves* from psychological oppression. This process, according to Cécile Laborde's (2008: 121) interpretation of the traditional republican position, 'allows the only emancipation that is worth the name (because it is not brought about through coercive paternalism): *self*-emancipation'. This process is, for republicans, one of self-emancipation because it merely gives children the knowledge with which they can secure their freedom from social forces within which they would otherwise remain trapped.

One of the problems with this approach is that the epistemic disadvantages of oppression do not in fact just accrue to the members of the oppressed group in question. This can be seen clearly in the case of the official French position on education: it wrongly assumes that we can see without illusions, that *our* desires, *our* ways of life, *our* ways of understanding the world are not distorted by oppression or domination. And so, it targets the structure of marginal social groups – currently Muslims and migrant communities, in the French case – as departures from a basically non-dominating status quo of French society. The result is an attempt to enforce that status quo (preserving the dominating aspects of that majority culture and those majority norms) as a means of reducing domination within those marginal groups. This functions a little like a republican *Prevent* duty, the 'anti-radicalisation' framework found in schools and universities across the UK: you give your full emancipatory attention to the children of marginalised social groups, and the cure is to better assimilate them into dominant norms. Bascara and others call this 'cultural imperialism'. This is not unique to France, of course, and at least in terms of education reached perhaps its bluntest and most violent expression in the isolation and abuse of indigenous children in 'residential schools' across settler colonies like Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

So, keep the basic idea of helping people self-emancipate through education. But drop the idea that we can reliably avoid status quo bias ourselves and reliably identify the way of life we ought to educate people *into*. The best-developed alternative within republicanism comes from Laborde, a critic and interpreter

of this French republican approach. She proposes replacing it with a different kind of state education, what she calls a 'content-neutral, culture-neutral' kind of autonomy-promoting education, which tries to inculcate tools that will allow children to assess desires, norms, and ways of life for signs of oppression or domination. Suggested tools include 'practical reason, moral courage, awareness of the burdens of reason, exposure to a diversity of ways of life, understanding of the full range of one's rights, and so forth' (Laborde, 2008: 158).

This is an improvement, in that it's an attempt to use only the economic, coercive, and coordinative advantages of the state – its power to force all children into classrooms and pay people to teach them – instead of a presumed ability to discriminate between oppressive and non-oppressive ways of life. Unlike the official French republicans, Laborde steps back from providing a thick account of free, non-dominating ways of living, a set of *good* norms and *good* values. Like some critical theorists or realists, Laborde takes it to be easier to provide a truly neutral, essentially epistemic set of tools with which to assess one's social context than it is to break through the haze of ideology to provide a truly neutral recommendation of some social system in particular. If I want to help you design a bridge while considering it very important, for some reason, that your final design isn't tainted by my own preconceptions, I'll do better to give you drawing tools and principles of engineering and physics than to take you on a tour of my five favourite bridges. It also has the distinct advantage, at least for Laborde's proposal, of applying equally to all children, rather than singling out a presumed at-risk minority population.

But it's also clearly not the end of the story. For one, it's hard to imagine that these tools *are* content-neutral any sort of deep sense: a full understanding of one's rights, for instance, is not going to be neutral between ideals of societies structured by private ownership of the means of production and societies structured in different ways. It's also an optimistic approach to something like ideology to suppose that our idea of what autonomy-promoting tools might be is not itself likely to be distorted by an oppressive status quo.

Moreover, it is still written in the philosophical first person-plural. It's still about what the state can do to help people emancipate themselves without resorting to too much coercion or, ideally, any cultural imperialism. That's an odd departure, both compared to elements of republicanism in the 19th century, and to more recent political thought on self-emancipation. Talking about self-emancipation doesn't have to, and doesn't historically, look much like this. Bascara's thesis incorporates parts of different and radical calls for self-emancipation, starting most importantly with this perspectival shift away

from the standard philosophical 'we': we are not the ones in power, although we might collectively have power. We are not the people who typically write constitutions, and we are not the people who advise well-meaning politicians in need of a little conceptual clarification. Those people, in fact, aren't usually in the emancipation business.

So, she writes that she needs to 'develop an alternative perspective…from the point of view of the oppressed that does not rely on the goodwill of the privileged and does not rely on paternalistic emancipation' (Bascara, 2020: 219). I want to go through some of the aspects of the call for self-emancipation conspicuously absent from much recent republican writing on the subject, but present in Bascara's work, from this kind of perspective.

One example is a strong negative motivational-epistemic case for self-emancipation. The case sometimes boils down to the idea that nobody *else* is going to do it. Sometimes this is just historical induction - Emma Goldman (2005: 30) writes the following, for instance: 'History tells us that every oppressed group gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts'. Sometimes it's fleshed out a little more as a theory of material interests trumping even sincere efforts to emancipate from above. Stokely Carmichael, (2008: 181–182) for instance, writes that 'for the most part, man's politics is determined by his evaluation of material good and evil. Politics results from a conflict of interests, not of consciences'.

This is a negative case for self-emancipation, then. And it's one that doesn't rely upon us trying benevolently to avoid paternalism while helpfully educating the oppressed. In fact, this sort of case for self-emancipation does have a history within republicanism, but it's not the history that shaped the contemporary mainstream. Back in the 19th century we can see this sentiment expressed in Frederick Douglass's distinctively republican writing on oppression – power concedes nothing without a demand, as the line goes – or in the activities of the labour republicans later in the century. Breaking with (among other things) an elite republicanism of benevolently uplifting the masses, those working-class labour republicans set up and maintained for a while a kind of self-education, involving reading rooms, libraries, labour newspapers with exchanges of letters, and so on, coupled with the demand for a shorter working day to give them the time to build those working-class educational institutions.[2]

In a sense, this is just a universalisation of the negative case made by the official French republicans. Perhaps the oppressed *are* faced with serious

2 For a good overview, see Gourevitch (2014).

epistemic barriers by virtue of their oppression, but then so are their oppressors, who have a distorting interest in the status quo. Perhaps I do not fall within the target group I'm interested in – perhaps I'm a British colonial official concerned with the oppression of Indian women by Indian men – but I'm still within a *relevant* system of oppression (at least colonial, gender, and class oppression, in this case), and so can't expect to escape any sufficiently general account of oppression-based epistemic disadvantage. *Nobody* is in an obviously good position to see things clearly.

On top of this negative case is a complex set of positive cases for self-emancipation that run through Bascara's work. As well as shooting down the idea that dominant social groups might be in a particularly good epistemic position, along with feminist standpoint theorists Bascara argues that membership of an oppressed social group can come with opportunities to develop a perspective with a kind of epistemic privilege relative to that oppression, a way to break out of the vicious circle from within. None of this is simple, and it presupposes a process of deliberation and action, the epistemic value of which the thesis returns to again and again. Forms of this idea can be found across Marxist, anti-colonial and anti-racist thought, but perhaps the most useful body of work on the idea is developed from feminist consciousness-raising in the late 20th century.

Consciousness-raising is a kind of collective self-education that relies upon the use of the first-personal experiences of oppression and resistance to oppression as raw materials. This is different from the kind of state education Laborde was talking about in several ways, most obviously because it's non-coercive and non-state-based. But also because it is *collective*, rather than individual. The goal isn't just an individually better understanding of your own social world, but a collective understanding, and a collective willingness and ability to change that world together. At least potentially (the claim goes), members of oppressed groups can come to 'the discovery that these apparently unchangeable dictates of the natural order are powerful social conventions' (MacKinnon, 1989: 91), can 'denaturalize [oppressive] forms of social life that have up to now seemed natural and necessary' (Allen, 2008: 167), and so on.

The basic mechanism was dialogue between individual women at group meetings. By sharing personal testimony, these groups aimed to 'unpack the concrete moment-to-moment meaning of being a woman in a society that men dominate, by looking at how women see their everyday experience in it' (Mackinnon, 1989: 86). First-personal experiences were the raw material of this process: not just instances of obvious violence or unequal or oppressive

treatment, but preferences, perceived expectations, attitudes, self-image, and so on. By sharing these experiences with other women, common themes emerged, and what might previously have been perceived as individual failings or problems could be seen to be systematic. Through this politicising of personal experience – so the idea goes – members of an oppressed group can 'come to understand the social sources of their powerlessness and see the possibility of acting collectively to change their social environment' (Young, 1997 in Allen, 2008: 167). The collective nature of this process is crucial. Fricker (2007: 148), for instance, talks about how the 'sharing of scantly understood, barely articulate experiences' of sexist oppression could lead to a greater understanding then was available to the isolated individual. When these experiences were *shared* they could be compared, contrasted, and seen to fit into a broader pattern of disempowerment and oppression. From there, naturalised aspects of oppression could be denaturalised, and the possibility of change could be grasped.

Consciousness-raising and its close relatives were never intended to get rid of oppression on their own. But they provide a way to overcome some of the epistemic barriers standing in the way of further action: identifying a system of oppression from a collection of individual experiences of individual pain and frustration, overcoming the idea that oppression or some particular oppressive social structure is natural and so immutable, or overcoming the idea that we (where we are members of some oppressed group) are powerless or innately passive. And the resulting action was taken to have epistemic benefits of its own. You can come to learn that a social structure is not immutable by changing it, and you can come to learn that we are not passive or powerless by acting and gaining some power.

So, when this kind of self-education works, it's not quite self-emancipation, but it is a self-transformation of the participants, creating new forms of consciousness in the process of trying to act collectively. These are the building blocks of an account of self-emancipation without and against cultural imperialism or benevolent education from above. Republicans who talk about self-emancipation do not typically think about these issues, about the kind of self-transformation required to identify and resist oppression. Bascara (2020: 224) writes the following:

> Part of being oppressed involves having your capacities undermined and being unable to self-determine. Consequently, part of the project of an oppressed group's emancipation is the collective exercise of the capacity to self-determine the terms of emancipation.

This isn't really the sort of thing that can emerge from the standard

philosophical first person-plural. It doesn't emerge from asking what we'd like those in power to do, or from asking what we would do if we were in charge. It relies upon asking how we can build collective power, which is a very different kind of question.

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