Review of The Liberty of Servants: Berlusconi's Italy

It is possible to be free and yet a slave in a liberal democratic society [2] Maurizio Viroli in The Liberty of Servants argues that the Roman republican tradition permits us to see that some sense of servitude is a real danger in contemporary democracies -- as, for instance, when a person of exuberant wealth and influence dominates the social and political order. He observes that people who are not in any legal kind of constraint – the kind of man whom Viroli calls a signore. Here, Berlusconi has seized political offices and dominion over laws that constrain him through a private, corrupt, or curia, that in turn depends on him for honours, luxuries, and access to other influential political offices – perhaps called “couriers” (used at times with a certain comic tone). With his resources and power, Berlusconi – the Signore – stands outside the reach of select laws; given this dominance, citizens censor themselves, as slaves do under masters. I find the reformers who write only about their own corruption but not only criticizing – I have some interesting defenses of the moral requirement for securing the autonomy political action required of citizens.

Viroli’s argument relies on two Roman republican concepts: domination and servitude. The concept of domination refers to the Signore’s capacity to side-step, as Viroli writes, “the sanctions of law or do with them as [he] please.” the Signore’s ability, if he wishes to arbitrate or stultify any law or legislation to protect his sovereignty. Dominus thus relies strictly to the Signore’s capacity to control his own and his courtiers. The argument, however, is that the presence of the Signore is play but that he can command servitude by limiting the possibility of citizen resources. This in turn makes citizens dependent on the Signore and his interests, which he can impose and protect with his influences, and which slaves cannot resist or access to.

This argument is convincing only if we further distinguish two forms of servitude. The first is what I call a "slave in name," which refers to the sort of servitude we might find in Cicero’s political speeches against Anthony. Here, one counts as a slave if the master dominates to such an extent that he steps outside the public reach of the laws and, for example, has mastery over the legal, the interaction, between his slave.

In this case, slavery stems from the Signore’s mastery over the retributive and punitive aspects of the laws that would otherwise be intended to keep him in check. All slaves are under the domination of a signore, even those who possess their moral reasoning and disdain for corruption, are of this kind. In addition to this slavery-in-name, there is what I call “strong servitude,” referring to the loss of one’s moral autonomy and the institution of the will to please the Signore, anticipating his desires, and thereby make the most of living under him. In this form of servitude, the Signore has the capacity to invite citizens to give up their uncompromised liberty in exchange. By creating a theory of action that could perhaps be associated with the Italian humanism found in Quentin Skinner’s The Foundations of Modern Political Thought (1978), this latter ambiguity emphatically detracts from the moral and political insights Viroli offers concerning Berlusconi and the liberal concept of liberty: they beg further questions about the relationship between the moral claims of liberalism, Italian social mores, and the social place the concept of liberty: they beg further questions about the relationship between the moral claims of liberalism, Italian social mores, and the social place

Viroli describes this self- and moral-abnegation -- the exchange of autonomy for favor and security -- as the moral weakness of Italians. In censoring the corruption ambition in social and political life, liberty must be conceived as a civic action that keeps ambition and corruption at bay. For Viroli, only moral reasoning can ground a civil political freedom because, unlike empirical or instrumental reasoning, moral reasoning is a civic action that keeps ambition and corruption at bay. For Viroli, only moral reasoning can ground a civil political freedom because, unlike empirical or instrumental reasoning, moral reasoning is a civic action that keeps ambition and corruption at bay.

When the people lose any recourse to law or any other means to limit the Signore’s action, they come to possess, as Aristotle claims in the Politics, the form of instrumental reasoning appropriate for slaves for calculating the means to economic ends – as if, of the household. Right and just action come to be based not on moral conscience, but on identification with the will of that person upon whom the people are dependent (23): the slave masters who use the power of the state to control his desires and will. He must learn to think, speak, and act like his master. (23-24) Viroli describes this self- and moral-abnegation -- the exchange of autonomy for favor and security -- as the moral weakness of Italians. In censoring the corruption ambition in social and political life, liberty must be conceived as a civic action that keeps ambition and corruption at bay.

Viroli argues that the Roman republican theory includes both the omnipresence of the ambition that always threatens a free way of life and the danger that the domination of a signore invites us to forego our moral duties in exchange for short-term gains. The danger, in other words, that once moral reasoning is self-centered (although never lost), we tend to relinquish our capacity to defend our freedoms. Under the fear of and dependency on a signore, an instrumental form of empirical reasoning becomes useful. This is, writes Viroli, a servile mentality in which the people are subject [censor/censor] with all the retinue of qualities and actions such as adulation, vicious gossip, inability to judge clearly, identification with the words and actions of the (master), for the genius of the great hearted, cynicism, indifference, simulation, abuse of the weak and bullying of one’s adversaries, lack of an inner life and obsession with appearances. (9)

When the people lose any recourse to law or any other means to limit the Signore’s action, they come to possess, as Aristotle claims in the Politics, the form of instrumental reasoning appropriate for slaves for calculating the means to economic ends – as if, of the household. Right and just action come to be based not on moral conscience, but on identification with the will of that person upon whom the people are dependent (23): the slave masters who use the power of the state to control his desires and will. He must learn to think, speak, and act like his master. (23-24) Viroli describes this self- and moral-abnegation -- the exchange of autonomy for favor and security -- as the moral weakness of Italians. In censoring the corruption ambition in social and political life, liberty must be conceived as a civic action that keeps ambition and corruption at bay. The danger, in other words, that once moral reasoning is self-centered (although never lost), we tend to relinquish our capacity to defend our freedoms. Under the fear of and dependency on a signore, an instrumental form of empirical reasoning becomes useful. This is, writes Viroli, is a servile mentality in which the people are subject [censor/censor] with all the retinue of qualities and actions such as adulation, vicious gossip, inability to judge clearly, identification with the words and actions of the (master), for the genius of the great hearted, cynicism, indifference, simulation, abuse of the weak and bullying of one’s adversaries, lack of an inner life and obsession with appearances. (9)

When the people lose any recourse to law or any other means to limit the Signore’s action, they come to possess, as Aristotle claims in the Politics, the form of instrumental reasoning appropriate for slaves for calculating the means to economic ends – as if, of the household. Right and just action come to be based not on moral conscience, but on identification with the will of that person upon whom the people are dependent (23): the slave masters who use the power of the state to control his desires and will. He must learn to think, speak, and act like his master. (23-24) Viroli describes this self- and moral-abnegation -- the exchange of autonomy for favor and security -- as the moral weakness of Italians. In censoring the corruption ambition in social and political life, liberty must be conceived as a civic action that keeps ambition and corruption at bay. The danger, in other words, that once moral reasoning is self-centered (although never lost), we tend to relinquish our capacity to defend our freedoms. Under the fear of and dependency on a signore, an instrumental form of empirical reasoning becomes useful. This is, writes Viroli, a servile mentality in which the people are subject [censor/censor] with all the retinue of qualities and actions such as adulation, vicious gossip, inability to judge clearly, identification with the words and actions of the (master), for the genius of the great hearted, cynicism, indifference, simulation, abuse of the weak and bullying of one’s adversaries, lack of an inner life and obsession with appearances. (9)
The republican critique of the liberty of servants and its liberal heritage calls for further clarification. It is unclear whether Viroli believes that the liberal heritage simply fails to live up to a republican ideal against non-domination or whether it has its own competing moral claims that need to be challenged or are in essence compatible. As I have suggested, there is something deeper than a moral abyss with the kind of servitude that Viroli describes in *The Liberty of Servants. At times, he seems to suggest that the Lockean heritage of negative freedom prove to be fertile grounds for thinking about the theoretical compatibility between liberal rights and the republican defense of liberty. This returns me to my previous criticism of fully recognizing the liberal view of moral agency. Should we approach the liberal heritage as having its own competing moral claims or are these claims a weaker form of republicanism? At times, Viroli suggests there is a possibility that the liberal view of rights can make the jump to a republican point of view of civic duties. He notes this possibility when he writes that "this concept [of being born free] has been defended both by liberal political authors and by their republican counterparts." In the first chapter and elsewhere, Viroli briefly surveys passages from Locke and Rousseau that both address this idea of freedom from servitude (9-10, 44).

This ambiguity encourages more normative, dialogical and contrasting studies on the ethos of current theories of liberty and of Roman republicanism. Furthermore, in this context, the defense of inner moral freedom required for republican citizenship itself seems to offer an interesting humanist view of civic and moral agency that also begs further questions about an agent's moral self-sufficiency, civic duties, and conditions of dependency. The works of Quentin Skinner especially The Foundations of Modern Political Thought and Paul O. Kristeller (including Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy, Volume 3: Humanism and The Disciplines (1988)) address these aspects of republican thought more specifically. For its part, The Liberty of Servants clarifies a number of important distinctions between liberal and republicanism in the context of the domination and servitude in the politics of the Signore. It is for us to further develop these distinctions.

**Notes**


Read the full-text online edition of The Liberty of Servants: Berlusconi's Italy (2012). Italy is a country of free political institutions, yet it has become a nation of servile courtesans, with Silvio Berlusconi as their prince. This is the controversial argument that Italian political philosopher and noted Machiavellian biographer Maurizio Viroli puts forward in *The Liberty of Servants. Drawing upon the classical republican conception of liberty, Viroli shows that a people can be unfree even though they are not oppressed byd by liberal political authorities and their republic counterparts. In the first chapter and elsewhere, Viroli briefly surveys passages from Locke and Rousseau that both address this idea of freedom from servitude (9-10, 44).