

If You Can Keep the Spirit

Sorrentino's film *Il Divo* starts with a walk of shame. Aldo Moro, creaking his way along a dingy Roman street with an armed entourage, stops to inspect a piece of graffiti. Moro is focus-grouping. Sprayed street slogans are all that remains of Italian civic life during the Years of Lead. His predecessor having been assassinated, it pays to keep a handle on the national mood.

Later accounts of the Years of Lead are at pains to make mawkish reference to a silent majority, as though beneath the noise of car bombs there were calm and decent people waiting to reassert themselves. This public did, of course, exist. But their invocation was more palliative than descriptive – one must imagine a hidden decency as a salve to the collapse of civic life.

Italy recovered, in the end. Perhaps that alone vindicates blind faith in the quiet majority. But suppose that it had not? Liberal providentialism is incapable of supplying an answer. It isn't patience, quite. Nor is it a well-founded faith in self-correction. It is the automatic operating mode of a liberalism that takes itself for granted, that cannot reconstruct itself from first principles, contrary to the spirit of nation-building republicanism that we have depended upon for 200 years or more.

I've always felt the American republican narrative emphasising anti-monarchism to be vastly overstated. The closest analogue to the political culture of the founding fathers is, in point of fact, the “royal republic” of England. The spirit of American checks and balances, as well as governance by laws rather than men, is inherited from England's 1000 year constitutional tug-of-war between the popular liberties, the law, the King and, later, Parliament. England's legal universalism, in other words, is the oldest of its kind. Where Parliament, or the administration of the State, was at odds with their respectable function, a layperson could invoke their individual rights since at least 1640, if not earlier. Later scholarship attributes what became known as prerogative writs – relating to prerogative power of the monarchy – to petitions made by subjects, rather than the Crown, as the first instance of their invocation.

By comparison, in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 from which Benjamin Franklin emerged declaring a “republic, if you can keep it”, the means of tyranny had already been written into the American constitution. As Franklin was well aware, given his reservations about the newly revised function of executive power, the significant (but vague) authority vested in the office of the President offered a salutary framework for a future republican despotism. American maximalism, it seems, puts even Divine Right to shame.

But that despotism was not, by any means, a foregone conclusion. As the good doctor himself points out, the post-convention constitution “can only end in despotism [...] when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government.” All this is to say that the “republic” is a misnomer for the matter really being discussed: the proliferation of popular freedoms, including the freedom from arbitrary authority and the access to legal recourse, guaranteed by state design or practice. The nominal structure – King or President, three representative chambers or one, the constitutional federal republic or the constitutional monarchy – matters far less.

Republics, by this definition, exist in different forms the world over. “If you can keep it” is not quite a remark on slavish deference to institutions, a plea to set the American project in amber, but a remark on the slightly less self-evident *stuff* that undergirds republicanism. Liberia, after all, was directly modelled on the constitutional structure of the United States to very different ends. Liberia is not a republic one would want to keep. What the United States shared with England but not Liberia is a civic *temperament* which makes those constitutional structures work towards republican ideals.

For the Founding Fathers, theirs was a civic attitude which, having been formed against idealised interpretations of ancient civilisations and the essays of Montesquieu, assumed a citizenship which was as demanding as it was rewarding. The republic, in Franklin’s reasoning, was functionally a national form of the Oxford Union; collegiate, well-ordered, with a high degree of buy-in. Political life was not *inherited*, but *earned*. One was expected to have a considered sense of the common good. One was expected, too, to change one’s mind.

What kind of person must I be for this polity to endure? Mary Wollstonecraft understood it instinctively. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a kind of performance – a display of her participation in civic reason that, even ignoring the content, made a mockery of women’s exclusion from civic life. But to do so she needed a backdrop of civic life, a sense of what it looks like, so as to argue by force of example.

It is hard to overstate just how alien this attitude to politics really is. I once delivered a lecture in Sweden on democratic disenfranchisement where I entreated the audience to forgo their right to vote, in favour of actual civic engagement in the form of attending functions, speaking to your representatives, becoming involved with the media class, or even just blogging. Ten young Swedes came up after the event to complain about my irresponsible disregard for voting. The vote is, of course, important. But it is more important to political parties than to political life. And, often, it is actively damaging

for the voter, who believes – and certainly is told to believe – that their civic obligations start and end at the ballot box.

Within the corrosion of public spirit is the assumption, whether known or not, that democracy is something done *for you* rather than *by you*. Nowhere is this more obvious than the grandees of The Economist in discussion with Steve Bannon, on the palpable threat of a third Trump term. Zanny Minton-Beddoes regards Bannon's insistence on a third Trump term as almost blasphemous. But liberals ought to consider that before the Civil Rights Act or the 19th Amendment, they were the Bannonites against a constitutional framework designed to stonewall them out. Had liberals developed this conservative, fetishising temperament back then, a love of Church rather than God, the American republic would still have racialised nationality laws and rights by demographic lottery.

Besides, are term limits really the preeminent form of republican balancing? The 22nd amendment was introduced in 1944, following FDR's fourth reelection, in an America that was 168 years old. Perhaps Roosevelt would have seen a fifth. Perhaps that would've been bad. But note the confession therein: the grand republic seems to rely on political gerrymandering, by the forced exchange of power along party lines by fiat. Liberals place their faith in structures and rituals – constitutions, term limits, voting, checks and balances – and end up missing the wood for the trees.

Other systems are discovering this belatedly. Singapore, having perfected technocratic government, is now searching for the 'spirit' of citizenship. Ministers are appearing on podcasts to encourage public debate and recover civic contribution. Singapore has exhausted the Straits Chinese's long affliction with political animalism. The ostensible non-democracy used to enclose lively, if informal, discussion about the state of the nation – in part inspired by the inherent optimism of a growth miracle – to which the state was reasonably sensitive. New Singaporeans, the subject of *Crazy Rich Asians*, are not quite so active a population to manage.

"Singaporeans love complaining" older Singaporeans tell me but I'm not so sure: it seems some Singaporeans much prefer the comfort of a quiet life. Over my long holiday there, younger Singaporeans seemed about as political as an American High School drama, and concomitantly split between boastfulness and bookishness. The most I wrested out of them were some callow remarks about drug laws. If there is a generational divide in Singapore, it is in the endless concerns of older citizens about the future, and the endless attempts of younger citizens to prove them right. Ministers are very aware that medium-to-long term viability of the Singaporean project is

threatened by the slow upward tick in the age of political participants. Even technocracy, it turns out, relies on healthy civic life.

If I close on anything at all, it would be to say that civic life, in spite of its importance, ought to be social and enjoyable. As any Lewes publican will tell you, Thomas Paine often found the common good at the end of his third ale. Franklin's challenge – can you keep it? – was never about mere endurance, slavish deference to the republic of forms. It was about *deserving* it: exhibiting those attitudes, behaviours, habits of mind that justify your liberal inheritance. Lose that, and a republic becomes an exhibition, not a lived practice. Aldo Moro keeps walking. I guess “vaffanculo” on the wall didn't give him much to ponder.