Ethnicizing the Republic: The Strange Career of the Concept of Republican Citizenship in Israel

Dr. Yiftah Elazar, Natan Milikowsky*
Department of Political Science, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Abstract

The scholarship on republicanism has moved away from perfectionist and communitarian to neo-Roman interpretations of the tradition, but the scholarship on citizenship in Israel has taken a different turn: republican citizenship has come to be identified with an unusual, ethnicized conception of it, sometimes described as 'ethnorepublicanism'. This article critically discusses the ethnicization of the concept of republican citizenship in Israel Studies. The first part reconstructs how the concept of ethnorepublican citizenship, originally used to criticize the unequal status of Palestinian citizens in Israel, has morphed into an ideological justification of unequal citizenship. The second part argues that ethnorepublicanism rejects the republican commitment to the equal liberty of citizens and thus constitutes a perverse form of republicanism. The development of Israeli ethnorepublicanism illustrates the worrying potential of republican citizenship to be integrated into agendas of exclusionary nationalism and calls for further work on republicanism in multi-ethnic societies.

Introduction

The inspiration for this article came from the revised high school civics textbook published by the State of Israel’s Ministry of Education in 2016. This official textbook, entitled Being Citizens in Israel: In a Jewish and Democratic State, was widely criticized for giving Jewish nationalism precedence over democratic principles (Avnon 2016; Haaretz Editorial 2016; Kashti 2015; Kremnitzer 2016; Peled and Herman Peled 2019, 109–113; Pinson 2016, 2019). But a particular conceptual issue has not received systematic attention thus far: the ethno-cultural account of republican democracy offered in the textbook.¹

* yiftah.elazar@mail.huji.ac.il; natan.milikowsky@mail.huji.ac.il
According to the textbook, alongside individualist and multicultural models of liberal democracy, there exists a republican model of it, which comes in two versions. A civic version, identified with French republicanism, aims to cultivate a shared civic identity. An ethno-cultural version, identified with Zionism, ‘gives precedence to the shared [ethno-cultural] identity of the dominant majority group’. The textbook adds that according to the ethno-cultural version of republicanism, ‘the minority is different than the ethno-cultural majority and cannot join it’ (Israeli Ministry of Education 2016, 130–132).

For the purposes of this study, we are setting aside the question whether the civics textbook published by the Israeli Ministry of Education offers a fair account of Zionism and the State of Israel. Our interest is in the way in which scholars imagine the idea of republicanism, and particularly, the idea of republican citizenship.

To be clear, we use the term ‘republicanism’ not in its overtly political sense, indicating the politics of a particular party, such as the Republican Party in the United States, but in its historical and academic sense, referring to a tradition or family of political thought with some common ideas and commitments, all of which revolve around the classical idea of the republic, a regime that is the common concern of its people (Cicero 1999, 18, 75; Lovett 2018; Rousselière and Elazar 2019). The historical and academic sense of republicanism is also used in the Israeli civics textbook and in the scholarly literature that has inspired it. But those familiar with the scholarship on republicanism may be surprised by the ethno-cultural version of it found in the civics textbook. Accounts of republicanism published in recent decades have generally not identified it with the cultivation of a shared ethno-cultural identity (Dagger 1997; Haakonsen 2007; Honohan 2002; Laborde 2013; Lovett 2018; Maynor 2003; Pettit 1997; Pocock [1975] 2003; Rousselière and Elazar 2019; Sandel 1996; Skinner 1998; Viroli 2002).
In the academic discipline of Israel Studies, however, scholars have been writing about ‘ethnorepublican citizenship’ since the early 1990s. A search on Google Scholar will show that the term ‘ethnorepublicanism’ has been used in scholarly publications almost exclusively in writing about Israeli society and politics. As argued below, some of the scholarship on Israel does not use the term ‘ethnorepublicanism’, yet interprets the idea of republican citizenship in ethno-cultural terms. Such an ethno-cultural interpretation of republican citizenship was given official currency by the 2016 civics textbook.

This article reconstructs and critically discusses the ethnicization of the concept of republican citizenship in Israel. It asks how scholars of Israel have come to imagine republican citizenship in ethno-cultural terms; whether this is a sound interpretation of the republican tradition; and what scholars interested in republican citizenship can learn from this story.

The argument is in two parts. The first part describes the strange career of the concept of republican citizenship in Israel. We show how the ethnicized interpretation of republican citizenship, which was originally born as part of a critical account of the unequal status of Palestinian citizens in Israel, has morphed over time into an ideological justification of such unequal status. The second part critically discusses this latter interpretation of republicanism. In this part, we argue that ethnorepublicanism, as a conscious ideology, implies a rejection of the republican commitment to the equal liberty of citizens. Since this commitment is central to the tradition, ethnorepublicanism is, at best, a mutilated and perverse form of republicanism.

The Strange Career of Republican Citizenship in Israel

In contrast to countries like the United States or France, where the idea of the republic is an integral part of collective memory and political culture, Israeli scholars had seldom thought
of Israel as a republic before the 1990s.\textsuperscript{3} The currently prevalent view that Israeli political culture contains a republican element appears to have originated in an influential article published in the \textit{American Political Science Review} in 1992 by Israeli political scientist Yoav Peled. Significantly, this is also the article that coined the term ‘ethnorepublicanism’ and introduced an ethnicized interpretation of republican citizenship into the academic discipline of Israel Studies. This part of the article traces the path of ethnorepublicanism in the scholarship on citizenship in Israel from Peled’s account in 1992 to the civics textbook in 2016.

\textit{The Birth of the Concept of Ethnorepublican Citizenship}

Peled’s seminal article, as well as some of his subsequent work, can be situated in two scholarly contexts. The broader context, which will be discussed in the second part of this article, is that of the republican revival in American and European scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century. The more immediate context is Israeli sociologist Sami Smooha’s definition of Israel as an ethnic democracy, a polity that combines ‘the extension of political and civil rights to individuals and certain collective rights to minorities with institutionalized dominance over the state by one of the ethnic groups’ (Smooha 1990, 391, see also 1997, 2002). Peled intervened in the debate provoked by Smooha’s work by arguing that Smooha’s portrayal of Israeli political culture as a reflection of the tension between two conflicting principles, liberal and ethno-nationalist, cannot adequately account for the status of Israel’s Palestinian Arab citizens. The Palestinian citizens of Israel, he argued, enjoy liberal citizenship, in the sense of possessing equal human and civil rights, but they are excluded from republican citizenship, in the sense of being able to participate in the common good, which is defined in ethnic terms (Peled 1992, see also 2008, 2011, 2014; Peled and Navot 2005; Shafir and Peled 1998, 2002).
Peled traced the republican principle and its ethnicization in Israel back to the Jewish political community in British-mandate Palestine and its ethos of *chalutziyut* (pioneering) – the redemption of the land of Israel and the Jewish people by physical labor, agriculture, settlement and self-defense. According to Peled (1992, 434–435), *chalutziyut* was the Jewish community’s civic virtue or civil religion, and thus had a distinctly republican character, while simultaneously serving the nationalist mission of an ethnically defined community. After the establishment of the State of Israel, the dominant Zionist ethos became that of *mamlakhtiyut*, a term used by the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, to express the need for putting the national interest above party politics. The ethos of *mamlakhtiyut* did not displace that of *chalutziyut* but submerged it within a statist framework: groups and individuals were still evaluated according to their contribution to the Zionist project, now in the form of a Jewish sovereign state. As a result of these historical developments, concluded Peled, ‘the dominant strain in Israel’s political culture may be termed *ethnorepublicanism*’ (435). The stratified citizenship regime governed by the ethnorepublican principle renders Palestinian third-class citizens, after first-class male *ashkenazim* (Jews of European descent) and second-class Jewish women and *mizrahim* (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent) (Shafir and Peled 1998, 2002; Peled and Navot 2005). As a Hebrew version of the original article put it, Palestinian citizens of Israel are ‘Strangers in Utopia’ (Peled 1993).

Peled’s analysis brilliantly exposed the functioning of civic virtue in Israel as a mechanism of ethnic exclusion. Normatively, however, his position about ethnorepublicanism was complex. While acknowledging that the ‘overt use of ethnicity […] to distinguish between different categories of citizenship is offensive to anyone committed to liberal values’, he also argued that ‘in the real world of democracy […] the ethnorepublican arrangement […] may not be the worst possible outcome’ (Peled 1992,
Peled pointed out two advantages of ethnorepublican citizenship. Historically, he argued, it had mediated between the conflicting principles of ethno-nationalism and liberalism in Israel and maintained the stability of its ethnic democracy, which, he claimed, respects the liberal rights of all its citizens (Peled 1992, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2011, 2014; Peled and Navot 2005). He also argued that in a future consociational democracy, one in which power would be shared between two autonomous ethnic communities, the ethnorepublican principle could empower both Jews and Arabs by enabling them to make an equal contribution to the diverging common goods of their respective communities as well as to the determination of policy in matters of shared interest (Peled 1993, 33).

We return to normative questions in the next part of the article, but for now, we note that the premise of Peled’s arguments on this topic was that ethnorepublican citizenship should be criticized or valued insofar as it adversely or favorably contributes to equality between Jewish and Palestinian citizens. Some of the subsequent work on republican citizenship in Israel appears to have abandoned that concern, starting with the important strand of scholarship on *mamlakhtiyut*.

**The Concept of Mamlakhtiyut as Implicit Ethnorepublicanism**

The modern Hebrew word *mamlakhtiyut*, coined by Zionist leader and founder of Israel David Ben-Gurion, is derived from the Biblical words for king (*melekh*) and kingdom (*mamlakha*), and it can be literally translated as kingdom-likeness or kingdom-orientedness. Peled (1992, 434–435), however, argued that *mamlakhtiyut* is an ethnorepublican ethos designed to legitimize the transition of the Jewish political community to statehood in 1948. Israeli legal historian Nir Kedar (2002, 2007, 2009) expanded on the concept of *mamlakhtiyut* as a civic worldview best understood through the theoretical framework of republicanism. He interpreted Ben-Gurion’s concept of *mamlakhtiyut* as a call for the
development of civic consciousness, which contains the following elements: recognition of
the state, rather than pre-state factions, as the sovereign center of authority; respect for
individual sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law; and a sense of civic affinity (Kedar

In 2011, Kedar and historian Avi Bareli, whose work also called attention to
republican aspects of Zionist thought (Bareli 2007; Bareli and Gorny 2006; Bareli and Katz
2008), published a short book entitled in Hebrew Israeli Mamlakhtiyut, a title translated by
the authors into Israeli Republicanism. This book offers not only a comprehensive review
of the history of mamlakhtiyut in Israel, but also suggestions for reforms aimed at the
rejuvenation of a civic republican consciousness and a democratic republican mode of
politics in the State of Israel (Bareli and Kedar 2011).

Bareli and Kedar’s definition of republicanism is civic rather than ethnic. It lays
emphasis on the republic as the condition for individual liberty for all of its citizens on an
equal and universal basis; on the active citizenship necessary to protect it; and on a sense of
civic affinity that derives primarily ‘from a civic consciousness and sense of citizenship’

But where does the civic ethos of mamlakhtiyut leave non-Jewish citizens in Israel?
Bareli and Kedar have had remarkably little to say in response to Peled’s argument that
Israeli republican citizenship has embodied a collective sense of mission for the Jewish
political community, excluding non-Jewish citizens, most of which are Palestinian.
Referring to Peled’s account, Kedar briefly commented:

Although Ben-Gurion’s civic mamlakhti affinity was in fact based on Jewish national
and cultural bonds, and as such tolerated the Arab citizens of Israel as equal citizens
but did not see them as genuine partners in the Israeli res publica, the universalist
republican language did nonetheless offer a universal type of connectedness that I call
‘civic’ affinity, which enables the formal inclusion of all under the state. (Kedar 2007, 192)

This could be taken to suggest that the language of mamlakhtiyut was articulated in universal terms that might enable in the future the transcendence of its particular origins and the development of an inclusive language of republican citizenship. Indeed, Israeli legal scholar Menachem Mautner (2012, 592–593) has argued that Israelis should rethink their republicanism in post-national and inclusive terms. But Bareli and Kedar (2011, 118-119) argued that civic affinity must be based on deeper affinities of identity and culture – in the case of Israel, a cultural-national Jewish affinity shared by most of the population. The ethos of mamlakhtiyut limits the dangerous impact of such affinities and protects minorities, they said; but they never suggested that it offers a prospect for the unqualified integration of non-Jews into the political community.

While Bareli and Kedar offered an ostensibly civic account of republicanism, their development of it in the Israeli case is de facto ethnicized. The ambiguity of their account and their surprising failure to address the problem of civic equality had facilitated the integration of their account into the overtly ethno-cultural theoretical framework of the 2016 civics textbook. The account of republican democracy in the textbook draws on Bareli and Kedar in presenting Israeli republicanism, citing their definition of ‘Zionist mamlakhtiyut, which is a special case of republicanism’, as including ‘recognition of the importance of the Jewish public sphere… recognition of democratic procedures… recognition of the importance of participation in public life, and the responsibility and affinity of the citizen to his political community and fellow citizens’ (Bareli and Kedar 2011, 33; Ministry of Education 2016, 133).

Still, the account of mamlakhtiyut in the textbook goes one crucial step beyond Bareli and Kedar. It dispenses with the ambiguity of their account and states the ideal of
mamlakhtiyut in explicitly ethno-cultural terms, as the republicanism of an ‘ethnic nation state’ (Israeli Ministry of Education 2016, 132). The Israeli ethno-national republic, according to the textbook, ‘cultivates the culture and values of the Jewish people as “the common good,” but recognizes the right of minorities to preserve their cultural uniqueness, amongst other things by maintaining a separate education system funded by the state’ (132). By offering such an overtly ethnicized account of the ethos of Israeli mamlakhtiyut, the 2016 civics textbook corresponds to Peled’s 1992 account of ethnorepublican citizenship in Israel.

**Ethnorepublicanism as a Conscious Ideology**

The shift from an implicitly ethnicized account of republican citizenship in the literature on mamlakhtiyut toward the explicit embrace of an ethnicized conception of republican citizenship in the 2016 civics textbook is far from a minor development. It repays attention and requires explanation. To understand this shift, we need to look beyond the scholarship on mamlakhtiyut to the neo-Zionist political discourse of the Jewish settlement movement in the West Bank and its supporters in Israel (Ram 1999, 2011).

As scholars of civic education in Israel have argued, the revised edition of the 2016 textbook was the product of a shifting education policy that had increasingly emphasized Jewish nationalist and religious values over liberal democratic values (Avnon 2016; Cohen 2019; Peled and Herman Peled 2019, 104–113; Pinson 2016, 2019). The first edition of the civics textbook, published in 2000, was the product of a different era in Israeli politics: that of the Oslo Accords and of the 1992 Basic Laws that established a liberal Bill of Rights. It was published following a report issued in 1996 by an official committee, headed by law professor Mordechai Kremnitzer, which recommended a revision of the civic education program to emphasize commitment to liberal democratic values (Kremnitzer 1996; Israeli
Ministry of Education 2000). The 2016 revised edition was the product of an era of disillusionment with the peace process following the Second Intifada in 2000-2005 and of a concurrent backlash against the so-called ‘constitutional revolution’ of the 1990s (on the latter, see Barak 1997; Hofnung 1996).

A key moment in the inception of the revised edition was an unofficial report that Yizhak Geiger, a civics teacher in educational institutions in Jewish settlements in the West Bank, wrote in 2009 for an influential neo-Zionist think tank, The Institute for Zionist Strategies. The Geiger Report criticized the first edition of the civics textbook for failing to inculcate commitment to the Jewish nation state and for failing to expose students to ‘republican or communitarian democracy or “thinner” models of democracy’ as alternatives to the liberal-individualist model of democracy (Geiger 2009, 50–52). Under two right-wing education ministers, and with the academic supervision of Aviad Bakshi, head of the legal department at the Kohelet Policy Forum, a think tank that promotes Jewish nationalism and free market principles, the Ministry of Education revised its civics textbook in the spirit of the Geiger Report, emphasizing the ethno-cultural identity of the Jewish majority as the organizing principle of citizenship in Israel (Avnon 2016; Cohen 2019, 288–290; Peled and Herman Peled 2019, 109–113; Pinson 2019).

The Geiger Report proposed exposing students to ‘republican or communitarian’ models of democracy because its author believed such models to be more compatible with the justification of the Jewish nation state than the ‘liberal-individualist’ model of democracy (2009, 50–53). The discussion of the republican model of democracy in the 2016 civics textbook should be understood in this context: as part of a conceptual framework serving the maintenance and justification of Israel as an ethno-cultural nation state of the Jewish people (on the latter, see Israeli Ministry of Education 2016, 36–56).
This line of argument, treating republicanism as providing justification for Israel as the ethno-cultural nation state of the Jewish people, was developed by Assaf Malach, chairman of the Ministry of Education’s Committee for Citizenship Studies and founder of The Jewish Statesmanship Center, established in the Jewish settlement of Kedumim in the West Bank and moved to Jerusalem since then. Malach’s scholarship has focused on the legitimacy of the Jewish nation state, defending, on the one hand, the historical right of the Jewish people for national self-determination in Israel (2009, 2016, 2017a, 2017b), and questioning, on the other hand, the existence of a similar right for Palestinians (2011).

Malach identifies republicanism with the neo-Aristotelian view that human beings are social and political animals and require a community of shared social and moral values in order to flourish and fully realize their human potential. The republican argument for the nation state, as he describes it, is that identifying with the nation state is the most effective means of motivating citizens to practice political virtue and to identify with the common good as the ideal way of life. Replying to arguments for an inclusive republicanism in Israel (Fischer 2006; Mautner 2012), Malach acknowledges that republicanism is separable from ethno-cultural nationalism, and that republicans could seek to develop a civic patriotism rather than one based on ethno-cultural identity. But he argues that such a strategy would be ineffective in the case of countries such as Israel, where for most citizens, identification with the state is intimately tied to an ethno-cultural identity, and thus, the relevant political community is the ethno-cultural community (2017b, forthcoming).

Malach’s republican argument for the Jewish nation state is effectively an argument for an ethnorepublican citizenship regime, one where citizenship in its fullest sense requires civic virtue, and civic virtue is understood as contribution to the common good of an ethnically defined community. Such a regime excludes the non-Jewish citizens of Israel from being citizens in the fullest sense. Malach (2017b, 135–136, 138) acknowledges such
worries, though in distinction from Peled, his concern appears to be with the ability of citizens to identify with ‘the collective aspect of the state’ rather than with equality per se. In response to such worries, he suggests the cultivation of civic patriotism for Arabs alongside the Jewish nation state, as well as giving them cultural autonomy and thus allowing them to ‘express their communitarian dimension’.

Malach’s work is aligned with the vision of the ethnic republic found in the 2016 civics textbook, a vision that ‘gives precedence to the shared [ethno-cultural] identity of the dominant majority group’ and accepts that ‘the minority is different than the ethno-cultural majority and cannot join it’ (Israeli Ministry of Education 2016, 130–132). In embracing this vision, Malach and the textbook come back full circle to Peled’s account of ethnorepublicanism. The implicit mechanism of civic exclusion that Peled sought to expose in the 1990s has become an explicit and officially sanctioned ethnorepublican ideology.

**Republican Citizenship and Ethnorepublican Citizenship**

The scholarship on republican citizenship in Israel presents an interesting case study for scholars of republican citizenship in general. Since the publication of Philip Pettit’s (1997) paradigmatic account of republican freedom as non-domination, the neo-Roman reading of the tradition has become predominant in the scholarly literature on republicanism (Laborde 2013; Lovett 2018; Rousselière and Elazar 2019). The scholarship on republicanism in Israel, however, has taken a different turn: republican citizenship has come to be identified with the ethnicized conception of republican citizenship sometimes described as ‘ethnorepublicanism’.

The question considered in this section is whether this ethnicized conception of republican citizenship is a plausible interpretation of republicanism. In what follows, we situate ethnorepublicanism within the context of the republican revival, consider its relation
to the republican ideal of political liberty, and explain why it constitutes a perverse form of republicanism.

**Ethnorepublican Citizenship and the Republican Revival**

We start by situating ethnorepublicanism within the context of the republican tradition in general and the recent republican revival in particular. Since the mid-twentieth century, there has been a revival of interest in republican ideas, and particularly in the ideas of the so-called classical republicans, the Renaissance and early modern political writers who reflected on classical models of the republic (Fink 1945). The republican revival came in two waves. The first, civic wave tended to read the republican tradition as continuous with Athenian political thought or with Renaissance civic humanism and focused on the importance of civic participation in realizing an individual and communal ideal of freedom as self-government (Arendt 1958; Bailyn 1967; Dagger 1997; Oldfield 1990; Pocock [1975] 2003; Sandel 1996; Sunstein 1988; Wood 1969; on civic humanism, see Nederman 2019). Some of the influential works of the first wave described civic participation in perfectionist terms, as an intrinsically desirable realization of an ideal of human excellence (Arendt 1958; Pocock [1975] 2003; Sandel 1996).

The second, neo-Roman wave has read the tradition as continuous with Roman legal and political thought and has focused on the idea of individual freedom from domination and on the associated idea of the free state as the constitutive condition of individual freedom (Laborde 2008; Laborde and Maynor 2008; Lovett 2010, 2016; Maynor 2003; Pettit 1997, 2012; Skinner 1978, 1998; Viroli 2002). Writers of the second wave have shifted toward describing civic participation as an instrumental condition for the maintenance of the free state (Lovett 2018; Pettit 1997; Skinner 1984).
Of particular importance to the development of ethnorepublicanism is what we would describe as the communitarian interpretation of republican citizenship, which was part of the first, civic wave of the republican revival. Initially, the first wave was civic without being distinctly communitarian. Hannah Arendt, its foremost political theorist, described the political as the site of plurality and individuality, the sphere where citizens could exercise their miracle-working faculty of beginning anew and reveal their unpredictable selves in the competition for excellence with their equals. Her ideal of republican citizenship was shaped against what she saw as both the nationalist and the Marxist drive for homogeneity ([1951] 1962, Ch. 9, 1958). John Pocock, the foremost historian of the first wave, who said that he borrowed his terms for understanding republicanism from Arendt (Pocock [1975] 2003, 550, 573), sought, like her, to revive an ideal of human excellence manifested in political action against the modern ‘triumph of the commercial, cultural, and social over the political’ (Pocock 1981, 70).

In the 1980s, however, there came to brief prominence the communitarian critique of liberalism, whose proponents questioned what they understood as the individualist presuppositions and universal pretensions of liberal theorists, stressing instead the extent to which the identity and moral values of individuals are constituted by their membership in a particular community (MacIntyre 1981; Sandel 1982, 1984; Taylor 1979; See also Bell 2016; Caney 1992). Part of this episode was ‘the warm embrace of republican ideas by communitarianism’ (Haakonssen 2007, 732). While the classical republicans were concerned with the cultivation of civic virtues, communitarian writers on republicanism tended to conflate the limited concern of the tradition with civic norms with a more ambitious account of moral community and identity (Oldfield 1990; Sandel 1996; Taylor 1989; for critical discussion, see Dagger 2004; Haakonssen 2007; Pettit 1998).
Peled’s understanding of republican citizenship was informed by the communitarian interpretation of the first, civic wave of the republican revival. Drawing on the communitarian accounts of Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, Peled (1992, 433–434) associated republican citizenship with membership in a ‘moral community’, one that possesses a ‘shared moral purpose’. He distinguished between a weak conception of republican community, constituted by deliberation, where membership is voluntary and potentially inclusive, and a strong, historically constituted conception of republican community, where membership is ascriptive and exclusive. Peled’s strong, communitarian interpretation of republican community made it plausible to describe as republican a citizenship regime in which Jewish ethnicity is a necessary condition for participation in the common good.

The work of Kedar (2007), written in the midst of the second wave of the republican revival, offers a more historically sensitive account of republicanism, which makes distinctions between republicanism and communitarianism and between civic republicanism and civic humanism. It is the attempt to employ this theoretical framework to Zionism that created tensions and ambiguities, offering no clear formula for reconciling the civic account of republicanism with the ethno-cultural nature of the common good under consideration.

Malach (2017b, 125n6) distinguishes, in a footnote, between two recent groups of writers who have shown interest in the republican tradition: neo-republicans such as Pocock, Skinner, and Pettit, and communitarians such as Sandel, Taylor, MacIntyre, and Amitai Etzioni. He also notes that communitarianism is not necessarily associated with nationalism. But his primary account of republicanism tends to conflate it with both communitarianism and ethnic nationalism. A similar conflation informs the account of republican democracy in the 2016 civics textbook.6
To summarize, the concept of ethnorepublican citizenship can be situated within the communitarian interpretation of the civic wave of the republican revival. Notwithstanding Bareli and Kedar’s attempt to combine the insights of both waves of the republican revival with the Zionist ethos of *mamlakhtiyut*, their influential and ambivalent account of Israeli republicanism has been integrated into the ideological ethnorepublicanism that frames Malach’s work, and more importantly, the official 2016 civics textbook.

**A Republican Perspective on Ethnorepublican Citizenship**

Should the ethnicized conception of republican citizenship simply be seen as a possible variant of republicanism, or is there something wrong with it from a republican perspective? This depends, of course, on one’s understanding of republicanism. We have adopted an ecumenical definition of republicanism as a tradition or family of political thought revolving around the classical idea of the republic. But there are also common ideas and commitments that give republican political thought its distinctive character, and one can stray from them only so far without having stepped outside the tradition or created a perverse form of it. In what follows, we focus on the republican commitment to the equal liberty of citizens and explain why ethnorepublicanism entails an implicit or explicit rejection of this commitment, thus constituting, at best, a perverse form of republicanism.  

There is a broad consensus in the scholarship on republicanism that the ideal of liberty is central to the tradition: the liberty of the republic and the equal liberty of its citizens. As Scipio puts it in Cicero’s ([54-51 BC] 1999, 1.47, 20) *De re publica*: ‘liberty, than which nothing can be sweeter, and which, if it is not equal, is not even liberty’. In the scholarship on the republican tradition, there are two salient ways of interpreting republican liberty: in perfectionist terms, as participating in shaping the common good and thus realizing one’s human potential as a political being (Arendt 1958; Pocock [1975] 2003;
Sandel 1996); or in neo-Roman terms, as enjoying a life free from domination (Pettit 1997; Skinner 1998). From a perfectionist perspective, it is clear enough why an ethnorepublican citizenship regime is unacceptable. If some citizens are barred from participating in shaping the common good, they are barred from realizing their potential as political beings and barred from being politically free.

The greater part of the recent literature on republican liberty, however, argues that historical republicans did not, in fact, understand freedom in perfectionist terms. Quentin Skinner (1978, 1984, 1998) has led the paradigm shift in understanding republican liberty. Skinner reconstructed the understanding of liberty in early modern political thought as a neo-Roman ideal of enjoying the status of a free person by virtue of being a member of a free civil association or state. Philip Pettit (1997) has formulated a paradigmatic philosophical account of republican liberty in terms of non-domination. The primary concern of the republic, according to Pettit (2012, 5-8), is the equal freedom of its citizens from the evil of domination, the condition of being subjected to the arbitrary or uncontrolled power of others. Such freedom is to be constituted both by constitutional mechanisms and by the presence of citizens who stand ready to influence or to contest decision-making in order to protect their freedom.

From the perspective of liberty as non-domination, the problem with ethnorepublicanism is that it furthers domination by means of ascriptive exclusion from equal participation in the republic. Why does ascriptive exclusion from full participation constitute domination? First, when the members of a group are excluded from full participation in shaping the form of the state under which they are living, the excluded experience the power of the state as alien to them and as arbitrary and uncontrolled in relation to them. Second, as Cécile Laborde (2008, 16-25) has argued, domination can be imposed not only by the institutions of the state, but also, more generally, by
institutionalized patterns of cultural value that prevent individuals from participating as equals in social life. In particular, pervasive ethnocentric attitudes reduce members of minorities to ascriptive and imposed identities, humiliate them, marginalize them, and deprive them of democratic voice.

As a political reality, then, an ethnorepublican citizenship regime entails, at the very least, an implicit rejection of the republican commitment to the equal liberty of citizens. But as an ideology, ethnorepublicanism is far more worrying, because it implies an explicit rejection of this commitment, thus consciously devising a mutilated and perverse form of republicanism.

Two Defenses of Ethnorepublicanism

In what follows, we would like to respond to two possible defenses of ethnorepublicanism against the critique of it outlined above. The two defenses may be described as the historical exclusion defense and the social solidarity defense.

The historical exclusion defense relies on the widely acknowledged historical fact that strategies of ascriptive exclusion were built into the republican tradition, often limiting even the possibility of participation in shaping the common good to an elite of white propertied males (Maddox 2002; McCormick 2003; Pettit 1997, 6, 95–96; Urbinati 2012). Hence, it may be argued that exclusion on the basis of ethnicity is not a perversion of republicanism but is rather consistent with other ascriptive mechanisms historically used to determine the boundaries of republican citizenship.8

The difficulty with this defense is that the world has changed since the days in which it was considered normatively acceptable to dominate by ascriptive exclusion members of other classes, nations, genders, and races. From the perspective of the present, it would seem more convincing to argue that speaking the language of republicanism while excluding
some citizens from its benefits is a perversion of the republican ideal of equal liberty rather than to argue that we should learn from past exclusions.

Indeed, republicanism has historically functioned as an emancipatory ideology precisely because it offers a political language for contesting domination by ascriptive exclusion. Since the early modern period, it has served the common people and the colonised in articulating their complaints against the ruling elites that excluded them from participation in government, women against the fathers and husbands who excluded them from free and equal citizenship, laborers against capitalists who excluded them from sharing in the products of their labor, and slaves against the slaveholders who excluded them from common human dignity.

It is true that advocates of freedom from some forms of domination were oftentimes blind to other forms of domination. For instance, the American revolutionaries and founders famously advocated for freedom from political enslavement while simultaneously developing a system of slave labor (Morgan 1972). But surely, as the abolitionist and escaped slave Frederick Douglass ([1845] 1979, 80-81) had argued, it was ‘a bastard republicanism that enslaved one-sixth of the population’; an illegitimate republicanism because its endorsement of slavery was inconsistent with its own ‘hypocritical vaunts of freedom’.

Setting aside for a moment the more acute problem of Palestinian non-citizens living under direct or indirect Israeli military rule in the Occupied Territories, the non-Jewish citizens of Israel within the 1967 borders, most of which are Palestinian, are neither slaves nor disenfranchised. Yet it would still be a bastard republicanism that excluded the non-Jewish one-fourth of Israeli citizenry from equal participation in shaping the common good, because it would be inconsistent with its own vaunts of freedom and democracy. Trying to legitimize such a contemporary instance of perverse republicanism by appealing to
historical analogies would be ironic and erroneous; it would be an inversion of the emancipatory function of republican political language and its transformation, instead, into a tool of exclusion and domination. Such an inversion is part of the warped logic of ethnorepublicanism as a conscious ideology.

The second defense of ethnorepublicanism that we would like to discuss, the social solidarity defense, relies on the widely accepted premise that the commitment of citizens to maintaining a free and just republic requires a sense of civic solidarity (Dagger 1997; Habermas 1996; Laborde 2008; MacIntyre 1984 2012; Müller 2007; Sandel 1996; Taylor 1989; Viroli 1995). While some writers on constitutional patriotism have outlined the possibility of fostering civic solidarity on the basis of universal principles embodied in a particular political culture (Habermas 1996; Müller 2007), others have pointed out that, at least in some cases, republican solidarity would be served by being based on common ethnocultural roots (Taylor 1989, 181–82; Viroli 1995, 173–75). It may be argued, then, that an ethnorepublican citizenship regime is justified as a principle of social solidarity. Indeed, Malach (2017b, forthcoming) argues that, historically and logically, identifying with ethno-cultural identity serves as the most appropriate basis for cultivating civic virtue among the members of an ethno-cultural majority group in a multi-ethnic state.

We agree that the cultivation of the distinction and antagonism between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and more specifically, between the homogenous ethnic nation and its heterogeneous others or even enemies that must be removed or repressed, is a most effective source of social solidarity (Schmitt 1932 2007). This, however, should be weighed against the republican commitment to the equal liberty of citizens. For ethnorepublicans, the balance would be in favor of solidarity, because this is what ideological ethnorepublicanism is really about: it selectively appropriates aspects of the republican tradition in order to justify ethnic nationalism. From a republican perspective, however, the solidarity-fostering institutions
and norms that should be cultivated are those that are consistent with the commitment to the equal liberty of citizens.

**Conclusion**

The story of how scholars of citizenship in Israel have imagined republican citizenship is fascinating in its own right. Peled’s conceptualization of ‘ethnorepublican citizenship’ as part of his analysis of the unequal status of Palestinian citizens in Israel has known one of the ironic reversals occasionally seen in the history of concepts. The scholars of *mamlakhtiyut* developed the idea of a Zionist-Israeli republicanism, without seriously considering the ethno-cultural dimensions that Peled emphasized. Jewish nationalists have completed the transformation by turning the ethnicized concept of republican citizenship into a justification of the definition of Israel as a nation state of the Jewish majority rather than as a state of its citizens. This newly fashioned ethnorepublican ideology has become the official line advanced in the 2016 Israeli civics textbook.

The development of ethnorepublicanism in the Israeli context raises challenging questions for scholars of republicanism, one of which is whether ethnorepublicanism is a sound version of republicanism. Three conclusions are suggested by the discussion in this article. First, we have argued that ethnorepublicanism is, at best, a perverse form of republicanism, because it implies an implicit or explicit rejection of the republican commitment to the equal liberty of citizens. Second, we have seen that ethnorepublicanism more easily follows from some of the communitarian interpretations of the tradition, and we would argue that this slippery slope, which has led, in the case of Israeli ethnorepublicanism, to justifying ethnic inequality on supposedly republican grounds, vindicates the turn in the scholarship away from communitarian interpretations of the republican tradition. Third, this study calls attention to the worrying potential of truncated
and distorted ideas of republican citizenship to be integrated into agendas of exclusionary nationalism and to be used to justify domination by ascriptive exclusion. It calls for further research on the dangers and the prospects of republicanism in multi-ethnic societies.

Given our criticism of ethnorepublicanism, it would be fair to ask what is the citizenship discourse that we propose for multi-ethnic states such as Israel. We leave a detailed answer to future work. We will say, however, that we agree with Cécile Laborde (2008, 24) that ‘only a radical strategy of de-ethnicization of the republic can fairly integrate members of minorities as equal citizens’. The development of Israeli ethnorepublicanism serves as a timely reminder that reimagining the State of Israel as a de-ethnicized state of all its citizens is one of the crucial challenges facing its society.

Notes

1 Peled and Herman Peled briefly mention that in the textbook, ‘an ethno-national conception of citizenship is presented as a republican one’ (2019, 112–13).
4 There is disagreement in this literature on whether Ultra-orthodox Jews are marginalized (Yonah 2005, 31) or privileged (Shafir and Peled 1998, 413, 416).
5 The account of the republican revival offered here draws on Rousselière and Elazar (2019).
6 The use of an ethnic and exclusionist account of republicanism in a civics textbook contrasts with recent scholarship on the radical implications of the neo-Roman ideal of freedom as non-domination for educational theory and policy (Macleod 2015; Snir and Eylon 2016, 2017; Suissa 2019). The implications of the neo-Roman approach for civic education in particular can be taken beyond the treatment in Peterson (2011) and deserve a separate discussion.
7 We also believe that ethnicizing the republic is wrong and that it is acategorical mistake, because the logic of the republic is fundamentally civil. We leave the development of this
argument to another occasion.

\(^8\) We are focusing on ascriptive exclusion and setting aside the problem that members of the republic may exclude themselves from full status by shying away from active participation in politics (Oldfield 1990, 160–61; Peled 1992, 433).

**Acknowledgments**

Research for this paper was supported by grant 1970/16 from the Israel Science Foundation (ISF). The authors are grateful to Dan Avnon, Nir Kedar, Asaf Malach, Yoav Peled, Geneviève Rousselière, and the anonymous referees for this journal for helpful suggestions and constructive criticism, which have contributed to the improvement of the article.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


