

Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

Panel 5.3 Abstracts

Republicanism, Free Labour, and Precarious Work

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In the nineteenth century a group of American thinkers were engaged in a debate about the meaning of free labour. This debate, as well as the unique political philosophy offered by these so-called 'labor republicans' has recently been excavated by Alex Gourevitch (2015). In this paper, I will reassess the value of Gourevitch's labor republicanism, and its potential role in contemporary political philosophy, with specific reference to the phenomenon of precarity within the twenty-first century labour market. Sova Näsström and Sara Kalm deVne such precarity as a term that describes the various forms of "material and psychological vulnerability" arising from the increasing pressure, insecurity, and eexibility of employment conditions in the contemporary labour market (2015, pp.556-557). Here I will argue that, whilst both the traditional liberal notion of freedom as non-interference and Philip Pettit's influential neo-republican definition of freedom as non-domination contain insufficient resources for conceptualising precarious forms of work as unfree labour, the labor republican conception revived by Gourevitch is much more successful. I will show this is because of a crucial conceptual shift between the labor republican understanding of domination and that offered by mainstream contemporary republican political philosophers such as Pettit. Whilst Pettit describes domination as a strictly interpersonal phenomenon that can be enabled by particular social structures (e.g. 2012, p.63), the multi-layered labor republican conception of domination also focuses on the way agents can contribute to dominating forms of structural constraint (Gourevitch, 2013, p.602; 2015, p.108). This difference suggests that labor republicanism contains important, and unique, conceptual resources that can allow republican political philosophers to recognise the often impersonal or anonymous forms of unfreedom that individuals face within the precarious labour market. This paper therefore concludes by encouraging contemporary republicans to both contribute loudly and critically to the debate about the meaning of free labour in the contemporary labour market, as well as to explore the concept of structural domination yet further. Gourevitch, A. 2013. 'Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work', *Political Theory* 41, no. 4, pp. 591-617. Gourevitch, A. 2015. *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge Pettit, P. 2012. *On the People's Terms*. Cambridge

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Chains and Invisible Threads: Marx on Republican Liberty and Domination

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In *Capital* volume I, Karl Marx writes that while the 'Roman slave was held in chains; the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads.' This is one of countless examples where Marx uses ideas and language that we associate with the neo-roman republican tradition; including domination, dependency, slavery and servitude. The fact that Marx does this has been noted in passing by several scholars of republicanism, but has (until very recently) received very little sustained examination. This paper attempts to address that gap and will make three broad arguments: (1) that Marx does indeed display and invoke many classic tropes of the neo-Roman republican tradition in his criticism of how the capitalist personally dominated the worker, (2) that Marx was not the first to do this and that republican language is sometimes even more prominent in the criticisms of several of his 19th century socialist and republican contemporaries, and (3) that Marx's real originality in comparison to these contemporaries lies in his account of the impersonal domination of capitalism. I end with some tentative suggestions for how this final feature should be incorporated into contemporary republican discussions of domination.

Marx's account of the personal domination of the worker by the capitalist is demonstrated most clearly in two of his early works: the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) and the *Notes on James Mill* (1844). Here Marx describes a variety of ways in which the worker is forced to 'carry out slave-labour, completely losing all their freedom, in the service of greed.' He notes for example, how the power of the banker to grant and withhold credit puts the poor man at the 'arbitrary discretion of the rich man'; how the unequal ownership of the means of production means that the worker is forced to 'submit to every demand of this capitalist'; and that the alienation of the worker from their product means that it 'exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him.'

In these ways Marx can be seen to extend the republican concern with domination from the traditional realm of politics to the new forms of dependency created by capitalism. However, it would be a mistake to think that Marx was unique in doing so, and in fact such descriptions were widespread in radical 19th century thought. For instance, in his *De l'esclavage moderne* (*Modern Slavery*) (1839), the Abbe de Lamennais argued that though the proletariat has a 'vast advantage over the ancient slave' the fact remained that 'between the capitalist and the proletariat, then, the same actual relations subsist as were between the master and the slave of old.' Moreover, other thinkers tied themselves even more explicitly to the republican tradition. William James Linton, for instance, in 'Slavery and Freedom' (1854) published in his journal *The English Republic*, utilised Algernon Sidney's famous definition of servitude to argue that the worker-capitalist relation was a 'manifestation of Slavery' regardless of whether the capitalist happened to treat the worker well or not.

What however sets Marx apart from these contemporary republican writings is the way in which he revealed and analysed the impersonal domination capitalism imposes on the worker (and indeed even on the capitalist). What Marx showed, and which none of his republican contemporaries were able to properly capture, was how it was the inherent working of the capitalist economy as a whole and not just the actions or attitude of the individual capitalist that mattered. It is because of these novel features of the capitalist economy that Marx argues that the worker is bound to her master not by chains but by invisible threads.

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Neorepublicanism and Wage Slavery

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This paper argues that there is a class of presumptively objectionable capitalist acts between consenting adults that neorepublicans are constitutively unable to criticize. This class includes mutually consensual and beneficial transactions that are tainted in virtue of the nature of the power relation that supervenes on them. I begin by presenting some cases that seem intuitively objectionable on grounds of domination. These cases furnish presumptive counterexamples to the republican view that subjection to arbitrary power is a necessary condition for domination. I then show that the full panoply of arguments mobilized by Pettit (1997, 2012) and Skinner (1997) cannot account for these cases. Crucially, this inability does not issue from neorepublican insensitivity to the phenomena described; quite the contrary. Rather, it issues from conceptual constraints immanent to the republican philosophical scheme, having to do with the normative emphases on ‘arbitrariness’, ‘control’ and their cognates. The examples show that domination does not presuppose arbitrariness, or the absence of (‘modally robust’) control, or similar stratagems. I then argue that the presumptive counterexamples are not irrelevant concoctions, but rather structural analogies that pick out central features of capitalist markets. That is, if capitalist markets are competitive---and therefore function as they should---they are likely to engender mutually consensual and beneficial transactions that are morally objectionable on grounds of domination. The wage contract, I argue, is a paradigmatic example. If I am right about neorepublicanism’s constitutive inability to account for this class of cases, then neorepublicanism cannot criticize quintessential features of modernity, such as the factory, or, more generally, the domination of labour by capital. This suffices to undermine the relevance of the whole neorepublican project. Pettit, P. 1997. *Republicanism*. Oxford Pettit, P. 2012. *On the People’s Terms*. Cambridge Skinner, Q. 1997. *Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge.