

Title: “Republicanism in the workplace”

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Abstract

The trend of increasing economic inequality, paired with a decrease in political diversity, is uninterruptedly continuing. Astounding election polls for populist leaders, who deny the greatest threats of our time, while they are still favored by most citizens, creates a conundrum for political philosophy. The many safeguards and freedoms in a republic should not yield such perplexing results, but guarantee the safety of individuals and the species as such. Considering the threat of climate change, the interest of individuals in that matter should be clear. But where can we locate the problem that leads this apparent contradiction?

Democratic participation seems to be where we could find an answer. Political participation can take many forms, from voting in an election down to engaging in political discussions wherever one can. But what ideals should a republic follow to make sure that all citizens can take part in the democratic apparatus? And where should we look to increase the possibilities of political participation? One way to locate such potential is to look at the area where it is most absent: the workplace.

One almost forgotten view concerning the workplace and its inherent relationships between employers and workers is the critic of wage slavery. Widely recognized as a major problem in the 19th century, the concept of working under the control and directions of someone, as mere tool for someone else, has become the norm today with accompanying ideological beliefs and justifications. Criticized by famous figures like the republican Abraham Lincoln, or Emma Goldman, it has vanished over the centuries as being even a matter for discussion. Recently, the topic has found new popularity through works such as *Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber, or *Die neue ArbeiterInnenklasse – Menschen in prekären Verhältnissen* by Veronika Born Mena, which revealed the unfreedom and vulnerability of workers in their jobs today.

The concept of wage slavery reveals major conflicts regarding the ideas of classical liberalism, as well as republicanism. Key elements, such as human dignity and individual sovereignty are infringed by the institutional structure of the workplace in our capitalist system. Creating under your own initiative, on your own terms, without external commands or pressure, was a central idea for classical liberals like Wilhelm von Humboldt. And the problem of wage slavery, while not being debated in those terms, has led to the development of concepts like the universal basic income, which aims at freeing people from the domination in the workplace, to enable them to become artisans on their own (according to the classic liberalist ideal).

Wage slavery enabled a form of domination, that has been neglected in the debate about political participation. Philip Pettit has argued in his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* for a form of republicanism that aims at the elimination of all possible forms of domination. Domination, as understood by Pettit, describes a state of vulnerability of an individual in which it has to rely on the mercy and grace of a dominator. A classic example is the master-slave relationship, where the slave can be ordered around or hurt at the will of the

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master, without any consequences for such an arbitrary interference in the life of a slave. His concept of freedom entailed the absence of the possibility for arbitrary interference. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that people live in a state of constant unfreedom, where their liberty is restricted at a maximum. The freedom of citizens is only restrained by a fair system of law.

Pettit himself took on the case of wage slavery, stating that wage slaves are dependent on the grace and mercy of their employer. But while he focused on the economic dependency of this relationship, we must apply this concept of freedom as non-domination to the production process as well. A normal worker faces domination in the workplace in a myriad of ways. She or he is told what to produce, which standards are to be met and the framework of participation in the firm. This all happens under the idiosyncratic judgement by the employee, without much say for the worker.

It therefore doesn't come as a surprise that firms can and have been described as totalitarian structures, with a high concentration of power at the top and few possibilities for participation at the bottom. A normal worker does not enjoy the freedom of creating on his own, becoming an artisan on his own terms in the ideal of classical liberalism. Producing goods that meet his own standards, his own set of values and which ultimately make it his own creation. Nor does the worker enjoy the freedom to participate in deciding the next steps in the production of a good, or the long-term strategic decisions of the company.

Here is where the potential for democratic engagement lies. Workers should have more control over the means of production. In order to ensure freedom as non-domination, sources of arbitrary interference must be eliminated. This starts at the bottom concerning the production of a good and the control over it and goes up to the decision-making process regarding long-term decisions in a company.

To sum up what I have said here: A true republic needs freedom as non-domination in the workplace. This strand of republican idea aims at creating a system of collective artisans, working together on their own terms, rather than working in a hierarchical system of power which exploits vulnerability at the workplace. This vulnerability has increased rapidly in the *Gig-Economy*, and is a source for unfreedom in our society. Without a reduction of workplace unfreedom, firms will remain to be institutional structures characterized by high concentration of power at some levels, which enable arbitrary interference and reduce participation in company matters, but also in daily life. It also leads to an inability to maximize the potential of each individual to create and to share, to learn and to be engaged. This in return is a necessary feature of a well-working republic, which relies on the democratic process to determine what its society should look like and what it should strive for. This source of unfreedom should be eliminated if we want other, commonly shared values to come to the front, which will make it easier to deal with the greatest problems of our time, which so far have been made harder to combat by private interests of said institutions.