

Republicanism in the Workplace

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Table of Contents

Democracy and Wage Slavery	2
Classical liberalism revisited.....	4
Freedom as Non-Domination	5
Republicanism in the Workplace	7
Solutions on the Horizon.....	8
Small steps towards non-domination in the workplace.....	9
List of References.....	10

Democracy and Wage Slavery

The current Covid-19 pandemic is revealing the fragile and non-resistant nature of our current economic system, with dire consequences for both the private and the work-life of the majority of our society. The latter has been affected through complete shutdowns and a tremendous rise in unemployment, which proved again the importance of a social safety net for *black swan events*¹. This development affected countries across the world and its consequences for unprepared economic systems that neglect the possibility of such events will have a lasting effect for the coming decades.

This crisis has exacerbated certain developments in the workplace and the economy in general. One thing became abundantly clear: The engine of global capitalism is stuttering like never before, revealing the unsolvable developments that find their basis in a neoliberal economic system. In it are interwoven issues like animal-human relations, the utilization of more and more land with a pushback of places of retreat for animals, global conflicts between different nations being carried out in national and supranational organizations, the problems of media in such a system, the rise of conspiracy theories and the pay gap between different sectors and positions. These issues, as well as many unmentioned more, developed for some time and it is in catastrophic events like this that they come to the front again and show their nature.

It is also in this time that neoliberal policy and the scientific foundation behind them show that their solutions are blind bullets. The *conservative nanny state*, as Dean Baker coined the term (see Baker 2011), suddenly becomes the favourite tool for the unsustainable ways of economic activity by the biggest companies again. One after the other they needed the support of the state, meaning that once again costs were socialized while profits remained in the hands of the firms. This became clear by the use of state-subsidized programmes to keep workers employed, they still wanted and did in fact pay out dividends to shareholders, despite the efforts by Non-Profit organizations to stop this. In the case of Austria, the most prominent examples were companies like KTM or the airline AUA, which decided to hold back the bonuses after a public outcry (without clarifying what “holding back” really means).

Here the question arises what makes all of these developments possible if they are well-known by now and solutions to them on the table? Can we not just simply redesign our institutions in a way that they promote policies that work against this? Why should people accept the slow decline in so many areas of their lives due to corporate greed? Do we as a collective not share the intention to bring about change in these areas, or is it rather that we lack the possibility of taking action due to inequality of power distribution within society?

I believe that the latter is the case, that we as individual agents do not possess the capabilities and possibilities to fight against the will of corporate power and institutional misdesign under the current situation. Our democratic tools to participate and engage with matters relevant to our society have been diminished to a mere participatory vote every few years in which the range of ideas has been reduced to a narrow spectrum and in which positions are not met in latter political life.

¹ Situations that are normally not expected, have dire consequences, and were obvious in hindsight. For the prediction of another Sars-type virus see Cheng et al. 2007.

There are high efforts to keep people passive and obedient, to reduce political participation to a minimum with individuals remaining powerless and in the position of an observer. The *Trilateral Commission*², in light of the democratic protests in the West of the 1960s asked the question whether democracies are becoming ungovernable and an “excess of democracy” (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975, 113) in these times, which threatened “the balance between vitality and governability in the democratic system” (ibid.). People became too engaged in the democratic process and measures had to be increased to return them to their passive roles.

Authority has been challenged not only in government, but in trade unions, business enterprises, schools and universities, professional associations, churches, and civic groups. (ibid.: 162)

Those are the institutions responsible for the indoctrination of the young as the authors state and they have failed to keep the “bewildered herd” (Lippman 1997, 24) in line. The importance of obedience and authority in a totalitarian system is clear, but what is their role in a democratic system? The Trilateral Commission thought them to be essential to uphold the fabric of our society. For them, elements of authority, inequality, and division of tasks were necessary for every functioning social organization. Walter Lippman, who wrote in-depth about the role of public opinion in democracies, thought it to be essential to counter the “inertia of the masses” (Lippman 1997, 272) and their mass hysteria.

These elements have to be upheld in all institutions, as the Trilateral Commission noted, which includes the workplace as well. The area of production was an especially hard terrain of battle, which was fought over by management and unions. Whoever controlled the machines, controlled the company to put it simply. Controlling the process of production meant power over the rest of the company. For a long time, management has been reliant on workers – either skilled or “unskilled”³ – which has given them a lot of power within a company to control what was going on. Workers had a more important role within the hierarchy in a company, they could lay down work and stop the production process and make their demands heard. They were essential to the production process, their knowledge about the machinery, and the production quintessential to the success of the firm. Management fought this development of increasing power and demands made by the workforce, knowing that they have to (a) simplify production and (b) reduce their dependency on skilled laborers in order to gain the upper hand again:

These two trends-detailed division of labor and work simplification, on the one hand, and mechanization and automation, on the other-neatly complemented and reinforced each other. The first made tasks simpler and thus easier to mechanize while, at the same time, expanding the ranks of unskilled production workers who increasingly became habituated to routine tasks, and thus ideally suited to operating automated equipment. The second, building more of the “intelligence” of production directly into the machinery, made it possible to reduce further the skill requirements

² A commission was put together with members from Japan, Western Europe and the USA to discuss the current social uprisings, and democratic challenges in each country. Participating members were also directly involved in their respective government apparatus.

³ I use the differentiation in the historical sense, meaning that unskilled labour in opposition to skilled labour did not require any training. The meaning of this differentiation has shifted, as by now work that is deemed to be unskilled labour does in fact require a lot of skill, but the differentiation is being upheld to justify hard working conditions more easily.

and to rely more heavily upon an unskilled work force. The second trend presupposed and extended the first, carrying it to its logical conclusion. (Noble 2011, 36)

Workers should become cogs in a machine, ridden of all their individuality, and thus easily replaceable, with a limited range of tasks and marginalized in the workplace. “Men behaving like machines paved the way for machines without men” (ibid.).

Classical liberalism revisited

The importance of a nurturing work environment for the individual was already well known by liberal thinkers in the 18th century. For them, work was not a separate issue from our private, but an interconnected state that was crucial in the development of an individual. They were criticising not just the hierarchical relationship between workers and employers, which in their view is analogous to the master-slave relationship regarding slavery, but also the loss of control over their own work by subordinating themselves. Classical liberalists held up the ideal of self-employed artists who became their own masters over time, without any authority above them controlling them.

Working for somebody else was only meant as a momentarily state, instrumental for the apprentice in getting the necessary skills to become an independent master himself. Otherwise, people were meant to reach a state of self-employment, like a farmer, artisan, etc... Here Wilhelm von Humboldt writes the following:

In view of this consideration, it seems as if all peasants and craftsmen might be elevated into artists; that is, men who love their labour for its own sake, improve it by their own plastic genius and inventive skill, and thereby cultivate their intellect, ennoble their character, and exalt and refine their pleasures. (von Humboldt and Burrow 1969, 27).

Work that is being done in another way might be beautifully done, but we despise it for being the work of an unfree man, who did not do it for its own sake, because his inner nature called for its creation, but because his master ordered him to do so. Classical liberalists' views on work encompass a certain picture of human nature. For people like Wilhelm von Humboldt it was clear that:

Whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness. (ibid.: 28)

John Stuart Mill similarly writes:

A person whose desires and impulses are his own - are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture - is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character. (Mill 2003, 125)

The transformation to wage labour was therefore heavily criticized by workers, scholars and politicians in the debates in the late 18th and early 19th century. Comparisons between living conditions of slaves in the South and wage laborers in the North of the US were drawn (see Gourevitch 2015; Fogel 1994), with prominent figures like Henry David Thoreau commenting on it:

[...] there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south. It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself. (Thoreau 1985, 9)

When both situations were compared, the differences weren't that clear in all areas of life. A latter investigation of the living conditions of slaves in the South and wage labourers in the North revealed that according to the available evidence, slaves in the South were even healthier (see Steckel and Margo 1997) and exceeded the northern wage labourers in other standards of living as well. Actual slaves were the property that needed to be taken care of, while wage slaves could be easily replaced in a time in which migration to the US was high and social security non-existent. Incoming migrants needed to find jobs:

What is this apparent liberty which you have bestowed on them reduced to for them? *They live only by hiring out their arms. They must therefore find someone to hire them, or die of hunger. Is that to be free?* (Linguet cited by Marx 1863, 242)

The resemblance argument between real slavery and wage slavery is based on the treatment of people as mere means to an end by someone. Their work is not regarded as done for themselves, but for their master's will, for his own reasons. It therefore always remains external to the person doing it.

But the transformation had other political implications as well. Democratic participation depends on education, social activism, intellectual nurturing and the feeling of people that they can actively influence their environment. It is therefore damaging for a truly democratic system that citizens do work that is not under their control, in an environment in which they have no influence or real responsibility and in which they cannot realize their individual potential. Adam Smith warned against such a development in his part about the division of labour:

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. (Smith and Cannan 1994, 1040)

The problems that wage slavery cause for ideas of self-development in the eyes of a classical liberal are apparent. But the topic also found critics from other traditions, schools, and political positions such as Emma Goldman, Abraham Lincoln, Friedrich Engels, or Leo Tolstoy. In addition to this, it became an issue for the republican party in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Freedom as Non-Domination

While classical liberalism provides us with a picture of human nature and the relationship to work, they focused on cases in which freedom gets in fact reduced, meaning the way in which a person actually interfered with the choices of another individual. The state was in the centre of attention in their case. Republicans further expanded this thought and included not just the

actual interference, but also the possibility of it, even if the master never made use of that opportunity. That means that for republicans the sheer potential of interference in choices of another individual was already a state of unfreedom, as long as it was possible to do it in an arbitrary way. Being dependent on another person's will is therefore a great evil in this tradition.

So what can a true republic do to increase the possibility for all people to become masters themselves, to enable them to create out of an innate urge, to develop skills proper to their individual self and engage in intellectual activity while doing challenging and satisfactory work and to reduce the range of possibilities by which masters can exploit the powerless and "unskilled"?

One possibility is to increase what the neo-republican scholar Philip Pettit calls *Freedom as Non-Domination*. He describes different ways of exploitation and sources of unfreedom in his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. He differentiates *Freedom as Non-Domination* from *Freedom as Non-Interference*, the classical liberal value which promotes no interference at all in the lives of other individuals. Domination in his understanding occurs when an individual has the potential to arbitrarily interfere with the life of another person (see Pettit 1997, 22f.). Here he specifies that he means interference with the range of choices a person has, and the goal is to maximize the extent of undominated choice, e.g. giving the person as much freedom to choose his preferred option as possible. The difference between non-interference and non-domination is a substantial one. The classical slave/master example helps when we try to understand this difference. A slave that consents to his status and lives a happy life is a slave that is interfered with, but he is not a slave that is not dominated. The range of choices a slave that is not being interfered with has is still dependent on the good-will of his master. At any moment he still has the power to interfere with his set of choices, therefore reducing his range of choices and subsequently his freedom. The possibility alone is sufficient enough to categorize the relationship between them as dominating. Non-domination requires a relationship to be free of any possible interferences on an arbitrary basis. Arbitrary interference is defined by him as interference which does not track the interests of those affected by it, while in the liberal tradition only actual interference is seen negatively. So, in a perfectly liberal society, a person might decide to become a happy slave that is not being interfered with, but that person would still be dominated because, at any given moment, the master could change his mind and do something that is not in the interest of that person.

Pettit further distinguishes in his book between two forms of domination, *Imperium* and *Dominium* (ibid.: 36). They differ in regard to what the source of the dominating force is and whose interests are being kept track of. *Imperium* is concerned with how a state excesses its power over individuals and how it tracks the interests of its citizens. These must be "common avowable interests" (Pettit 2001, 156), which might differ in how much each individual values those, but they are overall in the interest of the population to be kept track of. The second type is *Dominium*, which describes the domination of one individual over another. Domination in this sense is of a non-domination nature when the dominating individual is keeping track of the interests of the other individual.

Another important element in Pettit's work is the power of democracy. Contestability is a central element in society to ensure that individuals have a safeguard mechanism against a government that rules arbitrarily. Democratic institutions are there to track the interests of the people and in the case of a contestable law, make sure that people have the ability to do that. Nonetheless, democracy is not the ultimate value, but rather an instrument "necessary for promoting the enjoyment of freedom as non-domination, not because of its independent attractions" (Pettit 1997, 8). Given the negative effects that wage slavery has on a democratic system, we can see how institutions that are dependent on a strong democracy could suffer from a weakening of active democratic participation.

Philip Pettit also deals with the issue of wage slavery in a chapter about socialism in his book. It is worth quoting in full length to see that he is concerned about only one aspect of wage slavery and neglecting the problems:

The image of workers as wage slaves casts them as dependent on the grace and mercy of their employer, and as required to court paths of caution and deference in dealing, individually or collectively, with their bosses. If that image is to serve as a way of showing what is objectionable in the condition of workers, then it is premised on the appeal of its opposite: on the appeal of the idea that workers should not be exposed to the possibility of arbitrary interference, that they should enjoy freedom as non-domination. (Pettit 1997, 141)

Pettit focuses only on the economic aspect and social aspects of this relationship. The worker can be constantly interfered within an arbitrary in this concept of wage slavery, just like in the relationship between master and slave. A worker is being dominated insofar as he is dependent on his job, or rather his income from this job, and therefore has to obey his boss just like he would have to obey a master. The republic, as quoted above, would have a mechanism to deal with the problems of masters, but does it also deal with another important aspect about the relationship, that of orders against the employee's better judgement and will in regard to the production process and the finished product?

Republicanism in the Workplace

The realm of possible arbitrary interference is missing one important factor until now, the creation of a product. While neo-republican scholars have primarily focused on work as a source of unfreedom, the role of work in regard to the liberal tradition has been neglected. Work is much more than just a way to secure basic necessities of survival as shown above. It is a source for the development of oneself, the source of an identity, a way to educate oneself and to realize one's true unique individuality.

Establishing control over workers to secure obedience in the workplace and power for the management does not justify the interference with worker's choices. Work under the guidance of someone else only served one goal in the classical liberalist mindset, to acquire the necessary skills and training to become a master oneself, an artisan that works on his own terms, free from the unfreedom that keeps him from realizing his or her full potential. To create on his own products of his imagination, skill, and talent. The republican ideal of freedom as non-domination therefore calls for a different way of the production process. How such a production process could look like is hard to imagine, albeit there is a myriad of different theoretical suggestions (see Nozick 2013), and practical examples for collaborative

work process between true artisans who create on their own according to their individual skills, and knowledge.

Furthermore, to discipline workers into obedience and a state of powerlessness has huge implications for their political participation. At the end of a day, an obedient worker who has no control over his product, the work process, or other things related to the institution in which he works and has to fear severe repercussions if she or he speaks out at work, won't go home and suddenly transform into an insubordinate activist, demanding his rights and taking part in democratic activities. The institutions of indoctrination, as the Trilateral Commission called them, have failed their duty if that is the case. Authority and control in the workplace are in the end responsible for the upholding of the fabrics of our society as they put it.

Solutions on the Horizon

The historic development of property distribution, the battle between management and workers over control of production, and the simplification of the production process have increased the amount of unfreedom in our current economic system. The last few years have brought us especially worrisome developments in the booming gig economy⁴. How dependent workers are, became apparent as the Corona crisis left us with the highest unemployment numbers since the end of the second world war.

Are there current alternatives which could increase the freedom as non-domination in the workplace in the near future? The idea of a universal basic income incorporates (UBI) the idea of freeing people from the need to work in the current sense of the word. People would receive a monthly income which would cover basic necessities as well as leisure activities. Different models of the idea vary in how much they cover, but the general idea behind all is the same: to secure the necessary means to a livelihood while enabling people to choose the work they want to do in order to increase their income even further.

Other current and prominent ideas go into the direction of making people less dependent on work by giving them a certain amount of money in order to reduce inequality of capital and opportunities. French scholar Thomas Piketty proposes a cash payment of 120.000 € to every person at the age of 25 (Piketty 2020, 966-1034). While this measure is not aimed at reducing unfreedom in the workplace directly, it does reduce the dependency of young adults to take any job just to survive and provide them with an opportunity to either invest into their education or to reduce economic dependency on low-paying jobs, therefore potentially improving the working conditions for people in this sector.

The main problem with these solutions would still continue to exist: workers not having control over their work process. A look at examples that aim at handing over control back to workers reveals some problems regarding their potential for change.

Are there ways of providing workers with more power in our current work sector that would fit the liberal ideal, transferring power from totalitarian structures back to the workers? Besides many models of workplace democracy with actual implementations of them like the

⁴ a labour market which is characterized by the prevalence of more and more short-term contracts and work based on current demand paired with a high amount of job insecurity.

*Mondragon Cooperative Corporation*⁵, there is a model of organization called *Holocracy* which tries to level out the decision process and reduce power inequality within an organization. This model of organization works without management, although there are elements of hierarchy still in place (see Brinsa 2020).

The question remains whether such models work under the current restrictive institutional setting? In an economy that is doomed to follow neoliberal principles or to fail it is unlikely that elements that work in a different way, with deviating goals and strategies, could succeed in the long run (see Nozick 2013, 233-235). Companies that tried the organizational form of a *Holocracy* seemed to fail in their mission (see Brinsa 2020). The return from the path of obedience and powerlessness must also be supported by an institutional change of the indoctrination systems of people. To become an artisan, one must not be formed into a cog in a machine but trained to develop oneself and here it seems that change on a much bigger scale is needed than just in some small companies.)

Small steps towards non-domination in the workplace

Ultimately, we have to look for a solution in the root causes of wage slavery, which is control over the productive property. Economic dependence in a system of unequal ownership results in the need to work for someone, to create not for oneself, but for someone in order to survive. The reduction of inequality, the strengthening of social security nets, and a reversal of the developments concerning control over work machines are all steps towards improvement of workers by increasing freedom as non-domination in the workplace. A true republic must be free of domination in the workplace and elsewhere. Yet, as classical liberal thinkers have shown, the workplace is an important vehicle for change in other areas of life as well.

Although these ideas do not eliminate the core issue underlying the division of capital, inequality of opportunity, they do represent small steps in the right direction, guaranteeing more freedom as non-domination and individual self-development, even while “something of slavery still remains ... something of freedom is yet to come” (Ira Steward cited by Gourevitch 2015, 4).

⁵ The Mondragon Cooperative Corporation is a corporation consisting of worker cooperatives in Spain. As one of the biggest companies in Spain and annual sales of over 12 billion EUR its one of the most successful workers cooperatives worldwide (see MacLeod 2000).

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