

Labor Republicanism: Symposium on Alex Gourevitch's *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2014

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On Republicanism as a Theory of Emancipation

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In *Capital* (I.14.4), Karl Marx mocks the theoretical incoherence plaguing the capitalist discourse that defends economic freedom in society at the same time as it endorses surveillance and coercion of workers in the factory. A century and a half later, the belief that capitalism is an economic system based on freedom has not abated. Critics of capitalism often resort to other norms—be they equality, justice, or dignity—rather than freedom, but in so doing they open themselves to the accusation of trading off freedom with something else. In *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth (FSCC)*, Alex Gourevitch instead suggests: What if freedom, through the simple logic of its universalization, were in fact the appropriate conceptual weapon to criticize capitalism and the many oppressive practices it sustains?

This suggestion, appealing by its simplicity, may still meet the suspicion of American readers, used to seeing their country as the home of unchallenged capitalism. Even if the universalization of freedom could be the basis

of a critical discourse, isn't it the case that capitalism has won over not only America but the world, which means that nothing can be changed? In response, *FSCC* turns to American history to show readers that they should not be so easily discouraged. After all, granted that what once existed could exist again, they should be heartened to learn about the existence of a relatively successful nineteenth-century American labor movement, dubbed labor republicanism, whose strikes and cooperative initiatives challenged the dominating practices of industrial capitalism. It turns out that their discourses were based on a theory of freedom as nondomination, and that, at the peak of their movement, they seriously frightened capitalists. Freedom well-understood is the right weapon against wage-slavery, in theory and in practice.

Gourevitch's book masterfully combines a timely normative project with a revisionist work in the history of political thought. It transforms the scholarly literature of the "neo-republican revival" in important ways that I will discuss. It argues that republicanism, understood mainly as a political theory taking freedom as nondomination as its principle, was a main source of inspiration for a group of American workers and activists that aimed to emancipate themselves from wage-labor. The book traces the historical and conceptual transformations of the republican idiom in the circumstances of an industrializing America struggling with its history of slavery. The abolition of chattel slavery and the emancipatory demands of previously excluded groups (the propertyless, Blacks, women) placed the republican discourse, which had previously been reserved for a select few, under pressure to be universalized. The book analyzes the conceptual modifications of the meaning and value of freedom, the transformation of the republican theory of virtue, and unravels the forms that the process of emancipation took in cooperative ventures. The book is ambitious yet focused, sharp, and tightly argued.

FSCC is methodologically interesting as it bridges the work done by US historians and political theory as a discipline, showing how political theorists and philosophers can learn and use the work from other disciplines for the purpose of thinking normatively about politics. In this sense, this book deprovincializes political theory. Anyone interested in US labor history would have heard about the spectacular rise and fall of the Knights of Labor, the heroes of Gourevitch's book. Yet the diversity and breadth of this movement, the type of documents they produced—pamphlets, discourses, fliers—the dissensions between its leaders and local cooperators make it very difficult to capture their theoretical coherence. Gourevitch must be commended for bringing theoretical sharpness and consistence to this movement but also for showing them in a new light, since their embrace of republican freedom is not the primary angle under which they are traditionally presented.

While *FSCC* is inscribed in the neo-republican revival, it offers a series of criticism toward some of the standard tenets of this school of thought. In his analysis of the “paradox of freedom and slavery” (ch.1), Gourevitch insists that republican thinkers tended not to challenge slavery, precisely because the status of a free man was predicated on both its difference from, and the actual existence of, slaves. In doing so, he criticizes some of the canonical republican thinkers, such as Cicero. In turn, the chapter on “laissez-faire republicanism” (ch.2) shows that the identification of wage-labor with free labor did have republican origins and was supported with republican arguments, which should give pause to anyone tempted to embrace the idea that republican and liberal ideas of freedom are historically clearly demarcated. The book also disputes the understanding of “virtue” in republicanism as well as the supposed republican aversion for commerce and wealth.

Most importantly, in my view, the book criticizes the now widely accepted thesis that republicanism disappears by giving birth to liberalism in the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ This thesis has contributed to the exclusion of large parts of the republican tradition, especially the ones offering more socially oriented or critical theories from Black thinkers like David Walker to continental philosophers such as Emile Durkheim. Criticizing this thesis thus not only revises intellectual history, it also acknowledges that the history of the republican tradition, depending on how it is construed, has an impact on the direction in which we normatively want to take it.

My goal here is not to make objections in order to fault aspects of the book. There is little I disagree with in this excellent and forcefully argued study. I endorse Gourevitch’s idea that freedom cannot be confiscated for the purposes of glorifying the “free” market, and that ultimately such a use of the concept is incoherent. His critique of the neo-republican take on the history of the tradition is equally convincing. The general project of twisting the arc of neo-republicanism in a left-wing direction—emphasizing the importance of collective emancipation, equality, and cooperation—seems to me important and theoretically consistent with (at least part of) the republican tradition. Gourevitch points toward a neo-republican theory in which the full enjoyment of an undominated status necessitates a free society and not only a free polity. I commend him for making this point so clearly.

FSCC leaves the reader wanting to know more on some issues—certainly a quality of the book in my view. Here are three main points on which I am asking Gourevitch to tell us more about the direction of his research.

On the Universalization of Freedom

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that the “Marxist analysis should be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue.”

Indeed, “in the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.”²² Displacing Fanon’s insight to the different context of domination in nineteenth-century industrializing America, I would like first to ask Gourevitch whether labor republicanism ought not to be “slightly stretched” when dealing with both racial and male domination. *FSCC* leaves us with the impression that race and gender can be seamlessly integrated within an emancipatory process based on the organization of labor. But is this really the case? And if not, how should thinking about race and gender transform republicanism as a theory of emancipation?

Gourevitch’s central operating domain in this book is labor, and the domination he is mostly interested in is the one that is associated with wage-labor. Labor republicans, he argues, “developed the conceptual material both for criticizing wage-slavery and for generating a demand for the cooperative commonwealth” (10). Their contribution to the republican tradition is “the attempt to universalize the language of republican liberty and the conceptual innovations that took place in the process” (14). I would like to press Gourevitch on the nature of this universalization process of freedom—that is, on the emancipatory strategy that it involves.

The Knights of Labor (KOL) were exceptionally inclusive for their time—in their discourse, acts, and outcome of their organization. There were a sizeable number of Black workers in the Order, and many women’s cooperatives were created, greatly contributing to what Levine calls “labor feminism.”²³ “No American organization was to be that successful in bringing together such disparate groups [*i.e.*, women, Blacks, unskilled and immigrant workers] for decades” (*FSCC*, 171). Gourevitch shows how the Order participated in key racially charged conflicts. Refusing to be complacent, however, he also hints at what he calls the “limits” of the movement, noting the sexism of many Knights, the “carefully staged” sessions featuring Black knights, or their racist rejection of Chinese immigrants. Yet the book follows the discourse of the White male Knights of Labor—that is, the discourse of the good-willing intent to universalize freedom. It very carefully deploys the conceptual innovations that this strategy involves in terms of the criticism of wage-slavery—embrace of the discourse of the labor theory of value, transformation of the classical republican doctrine of virtue, etc. Strangely, in my view, the book supposes a uniform application of the strategy to the different members of the “dependent classes.” Following the desire of the (White male) Knights to create a sense of “brotherhood” in order to awaken everyone to their “male independence,” Gourevitch does not pause to wonder whether the “limits” of the universalization process are simply due to remnants of sexism or racism, or whether the kinds of dependence encountered

by Blacks, immigrants, and women could be transcended through the strategy of labor republicans.

My point here is not to fault Gourevitch's book for neglecting to talk about race and gender—which would be unfair since it mentions both. Rather it is to wonder whether there are not a few missed opportunities to analyze further the “conceptual innovations” that are necessary for a republican theory of freedom to be universalized once we acknowledge the lack of homogeneity of “dependent classes.” As the reader is not given the opportunity to become acquainted with the way Black or women Knights understood the idea of independence, and whether they dissented with the main leaders, we are left wondering about the way emancipation is supposed to occur. I found the question particularly important for the creation of solidarity, for instance, which is central to Gourevitch's argument about the way republicanism's theory of virtue is reconfigured. Can (and should) Black workers feel solidarity with White Knights just because they partake in the same fight against wage-labor? As Melvin Rogers⁴ shows, several nineteenth-century Black thinkers—David Walker and Martin Delany for instance—argued that the appropriation of the republican idea of freedom under conditions of racial domination should take the form of racial solidarity. How does this square with the KOL's discourses?

In turn, can women access “manly independence” and “brotherhood” when their subjection to wage-labor appears to be only one aspect of their state of subordination? The issue here is not to question the Knights' sincere interest in the “woman question” and their endorsement of equal pay and universal suffrage. Rather, I would have liked for Gourevitch to develop the emancipatory strategies of republicans beyond the focus of labor and to reflect on the complications that arise from the diverse level and nature of dependence that the dominated encounter. Feeling solidarity for the KOL means “feeling that our brother's weal is our weal and our brother's woe is our woe” (*FSCC* 139). Surely, whether they wanted it or not, women have always felt that their brothers' woe is their woe, as they are the ones caring for their brothers, fathers, husbands, and sons—but will they feel their brother's weal is their weal by participating in women's cooperatives? Can solidarity function in this simple and direct way through cooperation of labor given this asymmetry of care and benefits existing in all other domains of life?

Finally, my worry is connected to the republican idea that freedom can be acquired only by those who are already worthy of this freedom. This is the explanation that Gourevitch gives for the rejection of Chinese workers by the Knights. It is indeed a classical republican view, and the KOL are not original in holding it—one also finds it in the writings of Tocqueville, for instance, who holds that it is not surprising that Black slaves have no desire for

freedom; slavery robbed them of this desire and therefore did not position them to become free at all. It is easy to see how this argument is pernicious; for those who were long held in slavery or subordination—like Blacks and women—there was no entitlement to freedom in the same sense that white male workers could have. On the contrary, there were habits of servility and deference. In my view, the rejection of Chinese immigrants is thus not an outlier in the republican theory of the KOL but rather an intrinsic part of it. How can those who do not feel entirely worthy of freedom, or are not recognized as such, emancipate themselves? Does republicanism give us conceptual tools to think through this issue, which seems crucial for any theory of emancipation?

On Equality and Democracy

Many historians of republicanism understand republicanism and democracy as two overlapping concepts with some, like Urbinati, arguing that they have been historically at odds with one another.⁵ Gourevitch's labor republicanism looks like a reconciliation of these two trends of thought, though he very conspicuously avoids talking about democracy. I am wondering why and would also like to know why he does not describe labor republicans as proponents of republican democracy. One answer proposed in the book is that the KOL did not value participation as such, but they took participation to be instrumental. This is not a strong reason to downplay the democratic vocabulary. After all, participation may be instrumental, but if it is constitutive of freedom, its importance does not vary. While I can see, from a strategic and defensive point of view, why one wants to avoid talking about a debated concept like democracy, it is very surprising that Gourevitch did not develop the idea given that many cooperative practitioners understand themselves as proponents of some form of workplace democracy, and that the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth could be described as republican democracy.

More generally, the book emphasizes the notions of self-control and self-governance but is reluctant to analyze further the relation between "self" governance and the egalitarian (or nonegalitarian) structure of the cooperatives. What kind of equality is at stake in cooperatives? Does nondomination require equal participation in management? Or the equal distribution of profit? "It must be noted," Gourevitch writes, "that the distinction between profit-sharing, in which workers received some of the profits after debts and dividends are paid, and "true" cooperation, which included worker ownership and management was not always clear" (*FSCC* 119). Yet this historical difficulty, or fuzziness, should not come at the price of a lack of conceptual

clarity, if what we want to understand is the relation between nondomination and equality as a resource for our own thinking.

Can we be freed from domination if we are in a cooperative that is not democratically organized? Surely one can be part of a cooperative, a family, or an association that is largely self-governed, yet that does not give an equal share of freedom (or power, or resources, etc.) to all. Summing up the complex ideas held by the KOL on cooperation, Gourevitch writes that “cooperation had multiple meanings as an organizational principle, but it nearly always meant something akin to every worker having access to productive resources through membership in an association of producers” (*FSCC* 120). We should note that equality is not part of this definition, though inclusiveness is. In other parts of the book, Gourevitch refers to an idea of “rough equality.” Yet we do not know entirely of what equality, or what “rough” means, or why “rough equality” is good enough. I understand there is a lot of historical vagueness around this idea, but at the end of the book I was not sure about Gourevitch’s normative take on the relation between democracy and republican freedom.

On Cooperatives

Finally, I was wondering if Gourevitch could be more specific about the contemporary relevance of his study of the Knights of Labor. The book does not provide any analysis of the many contemporary movements of cooperation, which are more successful and widespread—in the United States and in the world—than the book hints. One wonders how to interpret this omission. Does Gourevitch follow Marx here, who claimed in the “Inaugural Address and Provisional Rules of the International Workingmen’s Association” that cooperation, while a formidable victory of the political economy of labor over the political economy of property, was lacking an internal dynamic susceptible to arrest the growth of capitalism? It seems that the book ends up endorsing a Marxist position on cooperation; the voluntarism of cooperators is not “realistic” and “it is hard to imagine how relatively poor workers could acquire enough capital to form cooperatives that could compete in major markets” (*FSCC* 189). Following Marx’s dismissal, the book does not take seriously the central idea of the cooperative commonwealth developed by the Rochdale pioneers and their followers to solve precisely this problem: associating two kinds of cooperatives—consumers and producers. Because *FSCC* presents itself as a book on the “cooperative commonwealth,” this omission is an odd choice both theoretically and historically given the importance of consumers’ cooperatives in the nineteenth century as a strategic instrument of workers’ emancipation.

From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth ends with these words: “Independence is not just an economic status that people possess, it is a political and social experiment that people win for themselves. More often than not, they win this independence as a collective, even if they enjoy it as individuals” (FSCC 190). Gourevitch’s book succeeds admirably in showing that republicanism, properly conceptualized, offers a theory of emancipation. I hope he will offer us a description of this theory of emancipation in further detail.

Theorizing the Cooperative Commonwealth

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From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth is one of those rare books of political theory that both fundamentally revises our understanding of the historical development of a dominant tradition of political thought—in this case, classical republicanism—while also revealing untapped resources within that tradition for addressing political dilemmas of the present—in this case, the interconnection between structural and personal forms of domination that define conditions of work within a capitalist economic order. As such, it is a book that has the additional appeal of demonstrating the poverty of our dominant way of carving up the political theory subfield into the history of political thought, on the one hand, and normative and conceptual approaches, on the other. In doing so, this terrific book lights a path for historically detailed, conceptually rigorous, and politically engaged political theory.

From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth appears against the background of the decades-old republican revival in historiography, constitutional jurisprudence, and normative political philosophy. The widespread diffusion of republican arguments in the work of Gordon Wood and John Pocock, Bruce Ackerman and Cass Sunstein, and Quentin Skinner and Phillip Pettit makes the unexpected extensions and elaborations of those arguments in this book all the more remarkable. While much of the republican revival scholarship was focused on the late eighteenth-century apex of this tradition and on juridical questions of constitutional law—especially in the United States—Gourevitch demonstrates the continuing innovation, and radicalization, of this tradition in the 1820s and 1830s, and then especially in the 1870s, as “labor republicans” came to creatively apply republican principles of nondomination to the new social, economic, and political contexts of the nineteenth century and to the

new forms of power, dependence, and subordination they brought into being, most obviously the forms of domination condensed into that potent labor republican term, “wage slavery.” The book also makes painfully clear the violence that was arrayed by vigilantes, employers, militias, and the police to crush these insurgent movements of labor resistance. If the republican revival was focused primarily on forms of government and questions of law, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* directs its readers’ attention to conditions of employment and political economy. It is not that juridical questions are avoided entirely—Gourevitch’s concise discussion of the laissez-faire republicanism underwriting the *Slaughterhouse Cases* compared with the laissez-faire liberalism of *Lochner v. New York*, for example, is outstanding—but the overall effect of the book is to reveal the narrowness of past histories of civic republican political thought that have too often abstracted from the social conflicts and power struggles animating that tradition.

Gourevitch’s book demonstrates that the disappearance of the agricultural conditions that provided the material support to the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal of economic and political independence—that provided the material supports of agricultural conceptions of “free labor”—provoked a remarkable period of conceptual change as labor republicans took the republican conception of freedom as nondomination and combined it with a new “social ontology,” extending its normative critique to the labor market and the practical organization of the American workplace. Labor republicans rejected the laissez-faire conception of the labor contract as a realization of free labor and asserted instead that there was dependence and domination before, during, and after the “free” contractual moment—in the underlying and preexisting social conditions structuring the labor contract, in the moment of making of the contract between employer and employee, and in the consequences of the contract as they structured the hierarchical relations of the workplace itself. While other scholars of republicanism have rightly criticized the aristocratic elitism and legal formalism of much of the republican revival in political theory—for example, John McCormick’s efforts to elevate the “ferocious populism” of Machiavellian republicanism against its more elitist Guicciardinian and Madisonian variants—Gourevitch goes beyond this critique to demonstrate how principles of nondomination combined productively with nineteenth-century social theory to deepen the republican critique of dependence and domination into the very organization of social and economic life, culminating in the Knights of Labor’s bold programs for “the cooperative commonwealth,” the cooperative organization of economic production and consumption that

would mean nothing less than the radical reorganization of the socioeconomic order.⁶

The radicalism of the Knights of Labor's claim was that such fundamental reorganization was the only way to fully resolve what Gourevitch calls the modern republican paradox of slavery and freedom; in the context of industrialism, it was the only way of universalizing the economic independence that served as the material basis for free republican citizenship. If premodern republicanism coupled free and independent citizenship with the existence of slave labor, modern requirements of universalizability converted this tension into an outright contradiction. For the Knights of Labor, the only way to universalize the principle of nondomination and assure conditions of free labor was to abolish the system of wage-labor itself and the more insidious forms of domination and dependence, the "voluntary slavery," that it brought into existence (81). The Knights clearly understood how a "false idea of liberty" was being used by the governing classes to enforce and sustain the ongoing exploitation and emiseration of the working classes (101).

In all of these ways and more, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* will have a welcome and lasting impact on the way historians of political thought engage with questions of social conflict and economic change. My primary response to the book, aside from admiring its general approach to the history of political thought and learning a great deal from its primary findings, was the urge to think further about the unanswered questions and provocations that it posed. I will raise three of these questions here. My first question is addressed to the "social ontology" elaborated by the labor republicans; my second engages the Knights of Labor's particular vision of "the cooperative commonwealth" and the continuities and discontinuities between that vision and the contemporaneous one articulated by American populists; and my third takes up the deflationary account of political action and the public realm Gourevitch associates with the labor republicans and the relevance of competing visions of the cooperative commonwealth for traditions of radical democratic theory and practice.

From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth elaborates on an illuminating contrast between laissez-faire republicans—as represented especially by such prominent abolitionists as William Lloyd Garrison—and labor republicans. At the center of the debates between these antagonistic orientations was the legitimacy of the concept of "wage slavery" and whether or not the abolition of chattel slavery was sufficient to universalizing republicanism and overcoming the modern paradox of slavery and freedom. What separated these very different inheritors of the republican tradition, Gourevitch argues, was not the normative principles animating their political positions so much as a different social ontology and an evolving sense of "the force of

necessitous circumstances,” which led them to fundamentally different understandings of the compulsion or the freedom of the labor market and the social structure in which the moment of free contracting occurred (77). Labor republicans like Thomas Skidmore and Langdon Byllesby drew much more careful attention to the sociologically embedded conditions under which the contract was made, conditions of material necessity and compulsion that exposed the implausibility of abstract, if not phantasmatic, claims of voluntary choice. The more expansive labor republican conception of slavery and dependence, Gourevitch writes, “was not a departure from republican thinking so much as a deepening of the analytics of compulsion, dependence, and law” (79).

What marked the most distinctive innovation and radicalization of the civic republican tradition was, in other words, the way labor republicans married the republican conception of freedom as nondomination to a social theory that asserted a much more sociologically embedded and practically nuanced conception of freedom and agency than the high voluntarist contractualism of the *laissez-faire* republicans. The question that is never adequately explored in this persuasive analysis, however, is where, if anywhere, these early labor republicans derived this essential social theory to extend and elaborate the republican principles of freedom that they inherited with their *laissez faire* opponents. Building on the substantial historiography of civic republicanism, the book provides a clear and compelling outline of these developing traditions in the nineteenth-century United States, but we get little sense of the historical background of the simultaneous developments in nineteenth-century social theory that they were entangled with, where they came from, how they evolved. I would invite Gourevitch to offer further reflections on these important but relatively unexplored dimensions of the book’s larger argument, which might also involve more clearly situating the book’s core argument about labor republicanism in the United States within a transatlantic context of social and political inquiry into the “social question.”

When the labor republican argument was revived and developed in the decade after the Civil War it did not simply return to the argument that had been developed in the 1820s and 1830s. The primary conceptual innovations of the Knights of Labor, as Gourevitch tells it, were focused on their programs to overcome the structural dependency of the market economy through a vision of the cooperative commonwealth and the solidaristic virtues required to bring this new socioeconomic order into being. This innovation required that they break once and for all from the “heroic independence of the small farmer” intrinsic to the yeoman ideal of the agricultural freeholder and develop a conception of free labor that was compatible with the realities of the industrial organization of the economy (95). “Cooperation” was the conceptual key

to this break with “intransigent agrarianism” and its radical vision of social and economic transformation. Gourevitch does a terrific job showing just how much theoretical complexity was condensed in this single concept for the Knights and showing its derivation from the influential work of Robert Owen and others. I wondered, however, how the Knights’ explicitly industrial conception of the cooperative commonwealth interacted with, contradicted, or developed the perhaps even more widespread vision of the cooperative commonwealth advocated by the American populists during the same period.

The idea of the cooperative commonwealth was invoked by radicals during the period to articulate a vision of a more egalitarian and just socioeconomic order than the regnant capitalist centralization of the Gilded Age. There is little sense of the broader resonance of this central idea in *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, and I was particularly interested in how the industrial vision of the Knights related to populist politics and political economy. Both the Knights and the populists invoked the language of cooperation to contrast with the feral libertarianism of the Social Darwinists’ “survival of the fittest” and with the “combination” and “consolidation” associated with growing monopolies of industrial capitalism, but the populist vision remained wedded to a vision of independent property holding that was better suited to their agricultural context and retained an aversion to the forms of collectivization that they associated with the collective ownership of communism. Much has been written, of course, on the uneasy and complicated alliance between labor republicans and agricultural radicals during the 1870s and 1880s—albeit not usually by historians of political thought.⁷ Gourevitch’s focus on the cooperative commonwealth suggests a productive conceptual frame for examining the continuities and discontinuities in their political thought. The suggestion, if not the developed argument, of the book is that the populist remained captive to the nostalgic dreams of the yeoman republic, which I think significantly overstates or oversimplifies the case. Liberal exceptionalism in the United States, and its vision of social equality based in agrarian independence, underwent a profound crisis in the rapidly accelerating industrialization and corporatization of the 1870s and 1880s, leading to the emergence of popular radical movements of social and political transformation and to evolving visions of cooperative emancipation that pushed against the inherited conceptual frameworks of liberal individualism and republicanism. This applies to the political discourses of both the Knights of Labor and the populists.

As Gourevitch develops his account of the labor republican conception of the cooperative commonwealth, he emphasizes that they held an admirably low-sighted, realist, and narrowly instrumental vision of politics. In contrast to contemporary advocates of a heightened civic republican commitment to

the distinctive virtues of public life, Gourevitch argues the labor republicans he admires gave no “pride of place to public life.” “What mattered [to them],” he writes, “was not the glory of the republic, the virtues of political participation, nor the priority of any particular domain of life [like the political] but the opportunity for self-cultivation” (104). Gourevitch follows Skinner and Pettit, whose emphasis on the legal status of Roman republicanism forwards a conception of political freedom decoupled from the ongoing political participation associated with an older Greek model. In fact, Gourevitch deepens the turn away from overly heroic conceptions of political self-determination to focus on the everyday conditions of employment. “Cooperation,” he writes, “introduced popular sovereignty into the workplace itself” (126). But in reorienting attention to the Knights’ focus on cooperative self-determination in economic production, the still-relevant background of meaningful political self-determination—let’s just call it the radical democratic aspect of the cooperative commonwealth—almost drops out of the analysis entirely. Is this deflation of the political wholly true to the political thinking of these advocates of “the workingmen’s democracy,” to quote the title of Leon Fink’s study of the politics of the Knights of Labor?⁸ Here, too, the comparison with the populist vision of the cooperative commonwealth could be instructive, as would their conception of democratic education through cooperative praxis with the Knights of Labor’s revaluation of republican virtue. Populists, Lawrence Goodwyn writes, “experimented in democratic forms in an effort to address the causes of the poverty of their lives. Gradually, they learned the strength of what they called ‘cooperation and organization.’ With growing confidence, they learned a way to address their condition, and they also learned how to explain their way to others. It was a new democratic language, fashioned out of the old heritage, but straining to break free so as to give definition to liberating new conceptions about the social relations of man.”⁹ The political dimension of these radically egalitarian experiments in cooperation are summed up in the Omaha Platform’s claim that the goal of the movement was “to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with which class it originated.”

During the 1930s W. E. B. Du Bois resurrected the idea of the cooperative commonwealth as “the only effective defense that the segregated and despised group has against complete spiritual and physical disaster.”¹⁰ As Gary Wilder argues, Du Bois envisioned a racially independent vision of the cooperative commonwealth as a “far-reaching strategy through which to abolish the color bar, transform economic relations, and reconstruct American democracy. . . . [The cooperative commonwealth] would help to fundamentally transform American economic, social, and political arrangements. It would produce alternative institutions and subjects, with new habits and values, around

which a post-capitalist multi-racial democracy could be organized.”¹¹ DuBois’s powerful redeployment of the cooperative commonwealth in the 1930s demonstrates the continued power of the idea among radicals into the twentieth century, as well as the very different ways in which this protean vision of cooperative radicalism could be taken up as key component of insurgent egalitarian politics. *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* offers an important chapter in the development of this idea and a first step in a more complete genealogy of an essential component of developing traditions of political thought, not just of civic republicanism but also of radical democracy.

An American Tradition of Political Liberty, Economic Equality, and Collective Self- Government

John P. McCormick

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Alex Gourevitch’s book on labor republicanism is everything a political theory monograph should be: conceptually sharp, historically rich, and exceptionally well written. Moreover, it advances an original and important normative argument concerning the necessity of cooperative economic arrangements for the full realization of freedom as nondomination under conditions of modern capitalism. *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* fills an enormous hole in the history of political thought left open by liberal-egalitarian, neo-republican, and even Marxist scholars; it enables readers to comprehend in an entirely new way the colossal and irreversible impact of capitalist economics and industrial social relations on ideas such as liberty, equality, virtue, servitude, and solidarity in mid- to late-nineteenth century America. At the book’s core, Gourevitch traces the valiant efforts of radical, racially integrated labor organizations, such as the Knights of Labor, to combat economic exploitation, or “wage slavery,” in the post-Civil War era, and he extrapolates from this example a model for the collectively organized attainment of liberty as socioeconomic equality within contemporary capitalism.

Gourevitch’s book makes patently clear certain inconvenient facts concerning both nineteenth-century political thought and how political theorists usually teach it; as a result of Gourevitch’s work, Alexis de Tocqueville’s reflections on liberty and equality in the American context now appear to be outdated by the time of the Civil War, and J. S. Mill’s and Karl Marx’s engagement with social servitude and solidarity now seem provincially

Eurocentric. More programmatically, Gourevitch's account of the intellectual and political conflict between laissez-faire republicans, who promoted formal freedom of contract, and labor republicans, who championed substantive economic freedom, can and should serve as an invaluable resource for scholars and activists engaged in contemporary struggles for social justice.¹² The merits of *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* will be obvious to anyone who reads it. Out of respect and admiration for its author, however, the balance of my remarks will be devoted to critique. In particular, my criticisms revolve around Gourevitch's wholesale rejection of conceptions of republican liberty drawn from ancient Athenian and Roman sources and his steadfast adherence to the notion that modern republicanism is founded upon a genuine universalism, with which contemporary practice merely needs to be brought into harmony.

Firstly, Gourevitch relies much too heavily on Quentin Skinner's and Philip Pettit's neo-republicanism throughout the book, especially since his arguments and research so seriously undermine their scholarship, both conceptually and historically. Gourevitch argues rather convincingly that Skinner and Pettit, contrary to their claims, never successfully demonstrate how their renderings of republicanism "transcend" that tradition's original entwinement with slavery (12, 41). For instance, as Gourevitch suggests, Skinner and Pettit write at length about the *liber*, the free citizen of a republic, but little, if at all, about the figure of the *servus*, the slave who made the free citizen possible—both conceptually and sociologically—within the writings of their favorite authors and within the political cultures of their preferred historical cases (14, 27, 31).¹³ Moreover, Gourevitch rather forcefully insists that Skinner and Pettit never historically validate their claim that republicanism offered a notion of freedom that fully distinguished itself from freedom as noninterference, which Skinner and Pettit associate exclusively with liberalism. This is made abundantly clear by Gourevitch's meticulous and fascinating recounting of debates over liberty in which self-avowed republicans, who advocated for laissez-faire sociopolitical arrangements, articulated liberty precisely in terms of formal noninterference (48, 64).

Gourevitch explains in the book that he initially set out to write a critique of neo-republicanism for failing to engage "the social question" (8), but that, over the course of his research and writing, he changed his mind in substantial ways. However, it does not appear as though Gourevitch really has changed his mind regarding Skinner's and Pettit's shortcomings in this regard, and the book often appears to rely on (and to affirm) their theoretical framework—criticisms notwithstanding—much more than it actually does. Especially devastating is Gourevitch's rejection of one of the primary means proposed by Pettit to minimize domination in contemporary societies

(although he does not identify it as Pettit's)—appeal by aggrieved parties to ombudsman and judicial bodies. As Gourevitch argues: “costly . . . interminable court or administrative battles” do little to eliminate “the many small-scale, petty abuses,” constituting workplace domination, “that never rise to the level of being worthy of a court or arbitration battle” (180). Indeed, Gourevitch could have dissociated his conceptual and pragmatic framework from Pettit's and Skinner's more decisively; he could have used a conception of republican liberty less compromised by slavery's repugnant legacy or the ineffectual practices of contemporary liberalism—perhaps that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Niccolò Machiavelli (about whom I will say more below) as a foundational theoretical resource.¹⁴

Secondly, Gourevitch neglects an important form of subordination that was central to both Roman and Florentine republican theory and practice—clientalism, a form of subordination that is increasingly prevalent within contemporary “capitalist democracies” as a result of proliferating privatization. Attention to clientalism, ancient and contemporary, would have buttressed Gourevitch's account of social domination in traditional republican contexts and also provided him with greater purchase on nefarious forms of social dependence today. As an increasing number of scholars are presently demonstrating, wealthy individuals, foundations, corporations (and foreign entities) no longer merely donate to cultural, artistic, and charitable causes; rather, more alarmingly, they increasingly extend their “philanthropy”—with ever more demanding strings attached—into the public realm, particularly in the areas of education and vocational training.¹⁵ In so doing, such private actors are effectively making dependent *clients* out of instructors and administrators, and more perniciously, large numbers of students and workers. Gourevitch invokes the “deference” (8, 13) that characterized Ciceronian republicanism in ancient Rome, but he fails to analyze it in any depth, and he never comments at any length on the ever-growing problem of paternalism resulting from publicly directed private philanthropy today.

The central place of patron–client relations within ancient/early modern and contemporary “republican” practice also prompts one to wonder whether Gourevitch accepts too uncritically Marxian characterizations of nineteenth-century capitalist social relations as “abstract” and “anonymous.” Gourevitch speaks of “abstract interdependence” and the elimination of “personal dependence” under capitalism (17), and he understands capitalist domination to entail “not just subjection to an employer but to a particular kind of *process* that threatened the self-directed character of free labor” (51, emphasis added). Consequently, Gourevitch misses the opportunity to theoretically investigate the extent to which the kind of social domination that the Knights of Labor opposed was also personal, direct, and concrete (except in an aside on 179).

Gourevitch's eye-opening historical account provides ample evidence of what seem to be patterns of concrete domination exercised by capitalists over workers—albeit often mediated by local, state, and private law enforcement agents (5, 7, 10, 99). Indeed, Gourevitch's own discussion of despicable institutions, such as company stores and, especially, "scrip" (56), suggests that nineteenth-century workers were social clients and not merely economic tools of their capitalist patrons. Yet Gourevitch fails to substantively incorporate these examples into his conceptual cum normative analysis. To be sure, Gourevitch's typology of forms of domination—namely, the trichotomy of ancient slavery, chattel slavery, and wage slavery—is effective and neat. But it is perhaps too neat given Gourevitch's aspiration to establish a standard of republican liberty that may be applied as widely as possible in contemporary circumstances.

Thirdly, one may accuse Gourevitch of resorting to what Michel Foucault calls "enlightenment blackmail"¹⁶ when he sometimes too triumphantly claims that post-eighteenth-century republicans successfully "universalized the language of republican liberty" (14, 32, 40–41, 91, 118, 132–35; qualified somewhat on 143). According to Gourevitch, each side of the republican wage-labor debate agreed that "independence must be universal" (48). Both laissez-faire republicans and labor republicans, on this reading, espoused universalist, egalitarian standards (even if the laissez-faire republicans violated these standards in more obvious and egregious ways at the level of practice). Again, Gourevitch shows rather persuasively how pre-eighteenth-century republicans were often conceptually entangled in an ideological relationship with slavery (and also were conceptually constrained by a narrow focus on monarchical oppression); but he insists, on perhaps shakier grounds, that post-eighteenth-century republicans, tout court, formulated—at least at the level of theory—genuinely thoroughgoing egalitarian principles.

Gourevitch does not engage critical race and gender theorists who argue (in much the same way as *he* does against traditional republicanism) that universal-egalitarian theories generated during the Enlightenment—and therefore also those employed by nineteenth-century republicans—were *fully constituted by and deeply complicit* in the proliferation of inherently exclusionist categories, in particular, racial categories that facilitated race slavery and imperial conquest of non-White populations. The Knights of Labor were remarkably inclusive of Blacks, as Gourevitch shows so well. However, some would no doubt argue that the Knights were the antiracist exception that proves the racist rule of American labor history. Gourevitch is admirably honest about the racism that the Knights exhibited toward Chinese workers

(169), even if he is ambivalent, indeed a bit defensive, regarding their treatment of women (133–35).

Put simply, it may not be so easy to assert, as Gourevitch unequivocally does, that, on the one hand, the egalitarianism of traditional republicanism is structurally compromised by positing or assuming the necessity of slavery, but that, on the other hand, modern republicanism is more fully egalitarian because it is not structurally constituted by categories of exclusion and subordination, especially those associated with race and gender. Moreover, the hard line that Gourevitch draws between pre- and post-eighteenth-century republicanism inhibits him from generously and perhaps constructively engaging conceptual resources inhering within earlier forms of republicanism.

On that note, fourthly, Gourevitch concludes chapter 4 with a coda that references plebeian politics in the ancient Roman Republic and Niccolò Machiavelli's appropriation of it in the *Discourses* (136–37). It is not entirely clear what service this coda is meant to provide—there is nothing like it anywhere else in the book. It seems intended to celebrate the assertively egalitarian character of modern labor republicanism at the expense of the, supposedly, merely defensive aspirations of the Roman plebs and the retrograde inegalitarian quality of Machiavelli's political thought, which purportedly was wedded to a now irrelevant “society of orders.”¹⁷ We can bracket this, shall we say, rather unsatisfying rendering of both republican Rome and Machiavelli's *Discourses*.

The more pertinent question is: why would Gourevitch so cursorily dismiss Machiavelli, the most prominent intellectual figure associated with republicanism who actually analyzed and criticized the political and *economic* subordination of urban, manual laborers in early modern Florence? Machiavelli's account of the 1378 woolworker's insurrection (the Ciompi Revolt) in the *Florentine Histories* catalogues the failures of republican theory and practice in the Florentine secretary's native city; especially, the inherent injustice (and sheer stupidity) of Florence's disenfranchisement and exploitation of the republic's majority of able-bodied citizens.¹⁸ Machiavelli effectively delineates the origins of what Gourevitch's labor republicans would call “wage slavery” in Florence, its pernicious political consequences, and the promises and failures of the Ciompi's insurrection—facets of which intriguingly echo Gourevitch's compelling account of the Thibodaux massacre (1, 4–7, 56, 122).

Florence's conditions, as discussed by Machiavelli, conform very closely to those that most concern Gourevitch; they apply neither to the “society of orders” that Gourevitch attributes in a much too undifferentiated manner to ancient Rome, nor to agrarian republicanism, whose intellectual and sociological attributes Gourevitch so painstakingly describes and criticizes in

preindustrial America. Machiavelli's account of the Ciompi Revolt in the *Histories*, which again prefigures "labor republicanism" in important respects, constitutes much more than "offhand, throwaway comments, extraneous footnotes, and casual historical inferences," which is how Gourevitch characterizes premodern republican engagements with the social question (49). In particular, Machiavelli's account of the cleavages within and among the city's richest citizens, its middling guildsmen, and the woolworkers themselves might have proven tremendously helpful for Gourevitch's analysis of the problem of "virtue and solidarity" that confronted the Knights of Labor in the nineteenth century. In short, Gourevitch himself provides readers with ample justification to expect the author to treat Machiavelli at least as generously as he treats Skinner and Pettit, whose theoretical frameworks, he charges, are entwined with the theory and practice of ancient slavery. It would perhaps be a slight exaggeration, but only a slight one, to insist that Machiavelli's interest in ancient slaves fixated upon the possibility of emancipating them as citizen-soldiers.¹⁹

The preceding four criticisms may constitute little more than minor quibbles with what is, in total, a superb book. If one is disheartened by the apparent fact that, outside of debates raging within Rawlsian philosophy since 1971, substantive egalitarianism is entirely foreign to the American political tradition, then Gourevitch's *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* serves to give such a reader cause for qualified cheer. Gourevitch introduces to contemporary political philosophy and democratic theory a historically real, inherently American endeavor aimed at achieving genuine political equality through the elimination of economic inequality generally and domination in the workplace particularly. The book is as good a place as any, and a better one than most, to begin the necessary conversation over principle and practice in our dire but not unprecedented moment of political and economic injustice.

When Freedom Was Radical: A Reply to Rousselière, Frank, and McCormick

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The Civil War ended slavery but it left open the meaning of free labor. On the one hand, all kinds of servitude remained permitted, so long as they weren't named "slavery." Chain gangs, peonage, scrip wages, sharecropping, tenant-farming, and sweatshops were regular features of many labor arrangements,

not to mention the vigilante violence, blacklisting, yellow-dog contracts, and regular use of police and federal troops to suppress labor organizing. This went hand-in-hand with attempts to restrict any new meaning of free labor to eliminating one institution for one race. The Civil War, it was said, had been fought to end chattel slavery.

On the other hand, former slaves often understood the freedom they deserved in wider terms as did millions of White (and other non-Black) workers. Many thought the Thirteenth Amendment's abolition of "slavery *and* involuntary servitude" pointed to a more thoroughgoing ideal of free labor. A free laborer's freedom should consist in complete self-government. That meant control over one's own daily, laboring activities. The most famous postwar formula for this was "forty acres and a mule," or a kind of independent, petty proprietorship. Over time, another interpretation emerged that sought to fit itself to the realities of cooperative production in an industrial age. Real freedom required replacing wage-labor with interlocking producer cooperatives, in which workers were their own bosses. That vision found its widest expression in the Knights of Labor, who called it the cooperative commonwealth.

The Knights were a political organization of workers that at its peak could brag of nearly a million members, and, more than any group of its time, reached across race and gender lines in its appeal. Their ideology was what is best called labor republicanism. As I reconstruct it in my book, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, this labor republicanism was organized around a long-standing republican view of freedom. On that view, a free person was independent rather than subject to the arbitrary will of another. Historically republicans had said little about wage-labor. In fact, they were often committed to the proposition that the independence of some presupposed the servitude of others. This developed into a paradox of slavery and freedom once it became widely accepted that political ideals must be universal. Republicans overcame this paradox either by embracing slavery, as the slaveholders did, or by arguing that slavery should be abolished so that republican freedom could be universalized.

This paradox took on a different register after abolition. The Civil War and then Reconstruction announced the dream that all could enjoy a universal condition of independence, free from the arbitrary commands of others. Yet from the former slave plantations of the South to the industries of the North to the mines in the West and on the railroads connecting these regions, workers began to feel that wage-labor was a new insult to an old, unrealized demand for universal freedom. The modern wage-labor system was not slavery, since workers could not be bought or sold. But, as one labor republican put it, "something of slavery still remains." Workers had no choice but to work, on

unfavorable terms, for a boss who enjoyed a wide range of arbitrary power over workers. As one of these labor republicans put it, “The land, the tools and materials of labor are still the exclusive property of the privileged few, and the worker cannot produce without giving himself a boss or master. It must not be supposed that the proclamation of emancipation liberated mankind from slavery. The most odious, because the most subtle form of slavery—wages slavery—remains to be abolished.”²⁰ It was not just the inequalities of wealth but the daily subjection of many to the commands of the few, on terms that kept them in that condition of dependence, that gave life to the idea that wage-labor was “wage-slavery.” The typical complaint linked the contract to employer domination: “This purchase of labor gives control over the laborer—his physical intellectual, social and moral existence. The conditions of the contract determine the degree of this rulership.”²¹ The Knights’ response, written in to their Preamble and Declaration of Principles, was “to abolish as rapidly as possible, the wage system, substituting co-operation therefore.”²² Replacing the wage-labor system, based on poverty, property, and contract, with producers cooperatives, in which workers managed themselves, was the key to “a republicanization of labor, as well as a republicanization of government.”²³

While the Civil War, and especially the abolition of slavery, gave special ideological significance to the debate over free labor, the labor republicans were engaged in a transcontinental debate about the wider meaning of republicanism itself. All across Europe there were analogous calls for a “republic of labor” or “social republicanism.”²⁴ These were not mere philosophical ideals drawn up by a few starry-eyed reformers. They were the political commitments for large new social movements of the working poor. As I show in my book, one of the striking features of the American labor republicans is that they married the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth to an argument for why it was up to the workers to organize themselves and transform society. This “political theory of the dependent classes,” as I call it in the book, was an argument for self-emancipation. As I discuss further below, I believe it to be one of the most important features of the political theory they developed.

But how universal and emancipatory was labor republicanism? In their attentive reviews of my book, Geneviève Rousselière, John McCormick, and Jason Frank voice some doubts. Their doubts fall into roughly four different areas. First, they worry I am too casual with my claim that labor republicanism was a universal ideal. Second, they think I might overlook certain kinds of unfreedom because of the implicit social ontology that I attribute to the labor republicans. Third, I might be claiming too much for the labor republicans because I separate them too much from other important historical sources, especially populist and plebeian ones. Fourth, and

most important to me, is the concern that this all amounts to a watered-down conception of republican politics that cannot give full weight to the distinctiveness of politics.

Universalism

Let us begin with the question of labor republicanism's universalism. Rousselière writes that I give "the impression that race and gender can be seamlessly integrated within an emancipatory process based on the organization of labor. But is this really the case?" She goes on to worry that "the book supposes a uniform application of the strategy to the different members of the 'dependent classes.'" Isn't there something distinctive about the struggles of women and non-Whites that cannot be subsumed under the labor question? "Gourevitch does not pause to wonder whether the 'limits' of the universalization process are simply due to remnants of sexism or racism," writes Rousselière, "or whether the kinds of dependence encountered by Blacks, immigrants, and women could be transcended through the strategy of labor republicans."

McCormick is more severe. I fall into "what Michel Foucault calls 'enlightenment blackmail,'" especially when I, "sometimes too triumphantly claims that post-eighteenth-century republicans successfully 'universalized the language of republican liberty.'" Here again, the complaint is the failure adequately to engage the problems of other kinds of subjection. "Gourevitch does not engage critical race and gender theorists," writes McCormick, "who argue . . . that universal-egalitarian theories generated during the Enlightenment—and therefore also those employed by nineteenth-century republicans—were *fully constituted by and deeply complicit* in the proliferation of inherently exclusionist categories."

Both reviewers acknowledge the unusual accomplishments of labor republicans. The Knights of Labor were extraordinarily inclusive for their time—organizing hundreds of thousands of men, women, and non-White workers on a basis unparalleled in the nineteenth century. To take just one example, the Knights' 1886 annual meeting was held in Richmond *specifically* to promote their drive to organize Black workers in the South. They hoped to carry out the promise of free labor and equal rights that the end of Reconstruction recently betrayed. Of course, as I also mention in the book, many Knights, including important segments of their leadership, held some atrocious racial views about the Chinese, Blacks, and some Southern/Eastern Europeans and were less than egalitarian about women members.²⁵

But how to interpret these failures? Rousselière and McCormick are right that I do not cover every potential struggle in which we could see an attempt

to universalize republican liberty. We know that the struggles across questions of class, race, and gender were not separate. That is in part because the labor question had broad appeal. For instance, the formation of women's labor and housework cooperatives and the increasing role of women in leadership positions within the Knights was prompted by their participation in labor struggles. Many women Knights called for their political and social equality as a natural extension of the demand for universal republican liberty. This repeated a story, told brilliantly by Manish Sinha, about how the campaign for equal rights for women developed naturally out of the participation of women in abolition.²⁶ But, likewise, most Knights rejected full equality as a threat to differentiated gender roles.

These complex experiences leave open the degree to which women had to organize themselves self-consciously as women and whether this organization should be seen as part of labor republicanism or as a distinct phenomenon. So, too, for non-Whites. I see no way in this response to settle that question and the book attempts no answers. What we can say, though, is that given the labor republicans' unusually broad appeal and the way their message inspired such a wide range of groups to take matters into their own hands, there is little reason to think, as McCormick says, that their universalism was "fully constituted by and deeply complicit in . . . exclusionist categories." To my mind, this is far too idealist. It blames the logic of universalism itself for real political failures. In fact, as I mention at the end of this response, my readers, in retailing familiar arguments about the limits of (labor-centered) universalism, have missed what I take to be one of the most original arguments of the book.

Social Ontology

Perhaps, though, the problem lies in labor republicans' ambiguous "social ontology." As Jason Frank puts it, without knowing more about where their thinking fits "within a transatlantic context of social and political inquiry into the 'social question,'" it is hard to evaluate whether the labor republican solution to industrial society is adequate or distinctive. I do mention that one of the greatest ambiguities of labor republicanism is its relationship to the state and the necessity of coercion to realize their vision of the cooperative commonwealth. Labor republicans waffled between anarchist and socialist poles. Sometimes they held that the state was an irredeemably coercive apparatus, inconsistent with a truly voluntarist conception of an emancipated social order. At other times, they endorsed the view that the state could be used to promote the interests of workers. Indeed, they endorsed public ownership of utilities and other vital industries.

It is further true that the labor republican conception of structural domination was not pitched directly against the market itself. As Will Roberts has shown in his excellent *Marx's Inferno*, a crucial innovation of Marx's own thought was to extend the analysis of domination to the nature of market exchange itself.²⁷ The labor republicans mostly rejected this step. Their cooperative commonwealth was based on producer cooperatives making commodities for sale on the market at "fair" prices. It has to be said that their vision of this was under-specified and less starkly opposed to democratic management of the economy than one might suppose. As I show in the book, the reason for these ambiguities is not that labor republicans had nothing to say about them but because they were a subject of unresolved internal debate. Here they reflected some of their sources, in particular the way they borrowed and adapted ideas about wage-labor and cooperation from political economy and from mid-century socialism.

In contrast to Frank, McCormick believes the book's error with respect to social ontology is not the absence of global intellectual context or clarity about what counts as "structural domination" but rather that I accept "too uncritically Marxian characterizations of nineteenth-century capitalist social relations as 'abstract' and 'anonymous.'" I therefore miss the importance of "personal, direct, and concrete" domination in republican thinking, especially the problem of clientelistic power and its corrupting effect on politics. But there is less distance between McCormick and my position than he thinks.

That is because McCormick misreads the arguments of chapter 4, especially those regarding the problem of "personal, direct, and concrete" control by bosses. This was in part a concern about corruption. The wealthy bought legislators and judges, and employers controlled the votes and political activities of dependent workers. However, as I further note, the concern with corruption and clientelism, on its own, was not particular to the labor republicans. Many social reformers worried about the corrupting effects of wealth in politics. What was distinctive about the labor republican critique of modern domination was how they thought it was *not* merely abstract and structural but the prevailing feature of the workplace itself. "Labor is activity of the various mental and physical powers which are inseparably connected with the person who sells it," wrote one. Yet "a sale of labor is a transfer of the use of this bodily and mental activity during the hours of labor, and consequently a dominion over it during that time."²⁸ The boss's personal "control over the laborer—his physical intellectual, social and moral existence" translated into the expectation that workers "execute his commands and submit to his caprice."²⁹ An anonymous "Nobody" wrote,

Thus is sycophancy deified in our workshops by the workmen; thus is abject servility ennobled, as it were, by bosses and foremen. . . . He who is a thorough,

quiet, firm and independent, the boss looks on as his most dangerous enemy . . . but he who is the most sychophantic, pandering to all the whims of his boss, the boss looks upon as his ideal workman.³⁰

Note the classic republican complaints: “servility,” “caprice,” “dependence,” “dominion,” “independence.” They are all attributes of specific, personal relations of domination in the workplace.

If anything, the power of this argument was to show how the clientelism complaint does not go deep enough. Lobbying, campaign contributions, and private and public patronage networks do create clients and control political outcomes. But those are expressions of an intimate dynamic of domination happening off-stage, out of the public eye. The problem begins in the basic organization of power and authority in the daily lives of citizens, where they spend most of their waking hours, developing and exercising their talents and abilities.

Even today there is enormous power to this condemnation of personal domination.³¹ Who truly thinks it is consistent with the freedom and independence of a person to control how they work, when they use the bathroom, what hours they will work, and a million other personal activities? The culture and the law of a republican society are deeply intertwined. In the United States, it is legal for employers to fire employees for swearing at them, since that challenges an employer’s authority, but there is nothing wrong, apparently, with employers swearing at their employees.³² In our republic, *lèse-majesté* lives in a million little workplace monarchies.

Sources

All three of my critics wonder about my use of sources. At one level, my response to all three is exigency; it was already beyond my limited capabilities to do justice to the sources I did include. I also wanted a book short enough that people would read it and with enough internal coherence to be persuasive. So I limited myself to a body of ideas that emerged over the course of the nineteenth century in the United States among groups of workers who sought to educate themselves and use ideas about freedom and virtue for their own purposes. I nonetheless agree with Rousselière in particular that, with more time, I should have made more efforts to look at how non-Whites and women in the labor republican ambit spoke about other forms of subjection.

On at least two accounts, however, I can say a bit more. Frank wonders why I don’t say more about populists since they too invoked republican ideal and overlapped with the Knights in organization and membership. Perhaps I am too dismissive of the populists as backwards-looking agrarians—an

image promoted by their enemies. But my charge is not that they were backwards-looking per se so much as that their largely agrarian basis meant that their ideas about what an industrial republic might look like were far less developed and therefore less distinctive than the Knights'. I must reiterate here a claim in the book. Until the nineteenth century, those working in the republican tradition had very little to say about wage-labor except simply to assume that it was servile. Being a wage-laborer was never taken to be the permanent condition for most people, and industrial production had never been seen on such a scale. The labor republicans made some of the most thoroughgoing efforts, within republican theory, both to theorize the domination found in modern workplaces and to conceive of how to make free labor consistent with industrial society. That was why I focused on the Knights/labor republicanism rather than the populists.

McCormick is unsurprisingly troubled by my cursory invocation of Machiavelli. He cites the coda to chapter 4 as an implausible attempt to separate labor republicanism from its lower-class precursors. Not only do I fail to take advantage of other work on plebeian republicanism,³³ but I overstate the degree to which previous republicanism was primarily defensive compared with the full-throated, positive vision of the cooperative commonwealth that labor republicans developed. Others have also taken issue with my attempt to distinguish labor republicans from earlier republicans.³⁴ In response, I can only reiterate central claims of the book. First, republicanism historically faced a deep paradox about whether freedom for some presupposed the slavery of others. It is only in the nineteenth century that we get not just popular resistance to upper class rule, but well worked out ideas about the ways institutions can be reimagined to allow all to enjoy a condition of economic independence. Second, whatever offensive, even violent, forms of resistance that plebeian precursors like the Ciompi rebels presented, they afford nothing like the theoretical complexity and richness of labor republican ideas as they developed in the nineteenth century. They most certainly did not address these ideas to the modern problems of wage-labor and industrial production.³⁵ I have taken a great deal of inspiration from McCormick's neo-plebeian "Machiavellian" republicanism, especially from the space it opened to challenge Skinner and Pettit's antipopulistic neo-republicanism. But I nonetheless find in these neo-plebeian approaches a tendency to collapse the problems of freedom and self-emancipation in a modern, industrial capitalist society into older, vaguer concerns with extreme wealth, corruption, and institutional design. Sources and precursors can be helps, but they can also direct the eye away from what is most pressing and distinctive about the moment at which one is looking.

Politics

The most important case made against me is that my reconstruction of republicanism is oddly deflationary. Frank is the most pointed. He thinks the emphasis on labor as well as my account of virtue means that “meaningful political self-determination . . . almost drops out of the analysis entirely.” Other readers are similarly concerned that either labor republicans lack an adequate conception of politics or that I have rubbed it out. Rousselière says I “downplay the democratic vocabulary,” which saps my study of “contemporary relevance.” McCormick thinks my failure to attend to clientelism effaces the specifically political dimension of labor republicanism. In emphasizing workers’ cooperatives, labor, and economic domination, have I, as Frank says, committed a “deflation of the political”? Here is where I think my reviewers, both in this symposium and in other settings, have missed one of the most important features of labor republicanism.

In chapter 5, I argue that labor republicanism was a theory of why the dependent must emancipate themselves through their own activity. This view pressed against the classical republican view, repeated by neo-republicans, that “for the republican writers . . . the deepest question of statecraft” is “how can naturally self-interested citizens be persuaded to act virtuously.”³⁶ Republicans, says Quentin Skinner, have placed “their faith in the coercive powers of the law,” which can “force us out of our habitual patterns of self-interested behavior” and “into discharging the full range of civic duties.”³⁷ In contrast, labor republicans saw the state as the coercive arm of a ruling class, whose aim was not real virtue but the preservation of class dominance. Inverting the traditional formula, labor republicans thought the propertyless most likely to act with virtue, because the latter had an interest in universalizing the liberty of which they were deprived.

But labor republicans had to organize themselves. They had to do so in the face of enormous public hostility, systematic legal repression, and extraordinary public and private violence. Labor republicanism therefore made inordinate demands of the oppressed. It was up to the dependent classes to emancipate themselves despite the predictable, well-organized, life-threatening response this would generate.

This kind of politics was predictably risky, difficult, and required heroic acts of cooperation and self-sacrifice by its participants. “Workers become the arbiters of their own fate,” wrote one leading labor republican, *only if they* “learn and obey the laws of association.” Those included making a “covenant with himself and with his fellows to exert self-denial, patience, determination, endurance, and all the virtue which go to make up a vigorous and virtuous character.”³⁸ This was not the ordinary subordination of self-interest to public interest but a willingness to take sometimes extreme risks for the sake

of one's fellow workers and the common good of the organization. As one Knight put it, "he must be a being of higher morality than the average man."³⁹

There was a kind of paradox to this. Labor republicans argued it was rational, even morally required, for workers to do what it was unreasonable to do—resist. In what way could it be expected of the oppressed to emancipate themselves? And yet, they did. The Knights' founder, Uriah Stevens, wrote, "If we neglect or refuse to do it, let things remain as they are, we shall *justly* be the prey of monopolists, the serfs of lords of land, slaves of lords of labor, and victims of lords of law."⁴⁰ It was not "just" in the sense of "fair" that they were "slaves of lords of labor," but justice required *of them* that they act.

Expecting the extraordinary, at once unreasonable yet necessary, was an inextricable feature of their politics. I can see nothing deflationary or antipolitical about this. What I do find, and mention in the book, is a distinctive kind of risk in relation to which virtue acquired meaning. If the true politics of the universal is when the dependent demand of each other that they rise up and claim that freedom for themselves, it is almost guaranteed that not everyone will participate. Some will refuse, some will betray, others will wait passively to see how the scales tip. This is inevitable. Systems of oppression reproduce themselves by making resistance costly. Those who do exercise the virtues required of this politics of self-emancipation will, often justifiably, criticize those who do not exercise the same virtues. They will call them traitors, scabs, cowards, and much worse.

Above all, resisters might come to suspect that those who do not act lack the proper desire for freedom. It is not a far step from that thought to wondering whether certain groups fail to participate because, as a group, they lack the same virtuous love of freedom, the same willingness and capacity for self-sacrifice. This is the moment when a universal politics can collapse back in on itself. Not because it is "fully constituted by and deeply complicit in" the exclusions of the society in which it originally emerged. But, rather, because of the central dilemma of the politics of self-emancipation itself. The unfree demand more of each other than can reasonably be demanded, yet they are right to demand it. As I wrote in the book,

It is hard to imagine how one could announce and inspire the agency of a class of people without generating the expectation that they act in certain ways. In the case of labor republicanism . . . these expectations were not drawn from any theory of the naturally political character of man, or idealized conception of citizenship, but from an analysis of what it would take to transform society. To criticize it for being too demanding, therefore, may also be to call into question the very possibility of a dependent group being able to transform conditions they consider radically unjust.⁴¹

There is no way to purify a political theory of the risk that agents who adopt it might fail, and fail in the worst, self-betraying way. *That* is a universal lesson.

But nor is every failure to fully realize a promise of emancipation a true failure or sign of deep, theoretical errors. It might just be unfinished work.

Notes

1. For a development of this thesis, see, for instance, Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings. Making a Republic for the Moderns* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 5.
3. Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of labor," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (Sept. 1983): 323–39.
4. Melvin Rogers, "Race, Domination, and Republicanism," in *Difference without Domination: On Justice and Democracy in Conditions of Diversity*, eds. Danielle Allen and Rohini Somanathan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).
5. Nadia Urbinati, "Competing for Liberty: The Republican Critique of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (August 2012): 607–621; Gary Wilder, "Reading Du Bois's Revelation: Radical Humanism and Black Atlantic Criticism," in Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder, eds. *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present* (Fordham University Press, 2018), 95–125, 110.
6. John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (New York: Cambridge, 2011).
7. See, for example, Elizabeth Sanders, *The Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
8. Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
9. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xi.
10. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Separation and Self-Respect," *The Crisis* (March 1934), in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Holt, 1995), 559–63, 559.
11. Gary Wilder, "Reading Du Bois's Revelation: Radical Humanism and the Black Atlantic Criticism," in Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder, eds. *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) 95–125, 110.
12. In particular, Gourevitch's work is an exemplary example of a recent wave of scholarship focused on the socioeconomic dimensions of "republicanism." On the historical background of this issue, see Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a more contemporary perspective, see Gordon Arlen, "Aristotle and the Problem of Oligarchic Harm: Insights for Democracy," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 18, no. 3 (2019): 393–414; Steven Klein, "Fictitious Freedom: A Polanyian Critique of the Republican Revival," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 4 (2017): 852–863; Robert Jubb, "Whose Republicanism, Which Liberty?" (unpublished ms, Reading University); Camila Vergara, "Corruption

- as Systemic Political Decay,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (August 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719868265>; and John P. McCormick, “The New Ochlophobia? Populism, Majority Rule and Prospects for Democratic Republicanism,” in Yiftah Elazar and Geneviève Rousselière, eds., *Republican Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 130–51.
13. To whatever extent the “servus” played a conceptual or sociological role in the context where “republicanism” most definitively became an “ism,” Renaissance Florence, it has now been firmly established that Florentine republicanism was articulated, in no small degree, to justify the inegalitarian sociopolitical arrangements associated with the Albizzi Oligarchy and the Medici Principate within the Arno Republic. See Mark Jurdjevic, “Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999), 994–1020; Jurdjevic, “The Guicciardinian Moment: The *Discorsi Paleschi*, Humanism, and Aristocratic Republicanism in Sixteenth-Century Florence,” in *Humanism and Creativity in the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honor of Ronald G. Witt*, ed. Christopher Celenza & Kenneth Gouwens (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 111–37; Mikael Hörnqvist, “The Two Myths of Civic Humanism,” John Najemy, “Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics,” and James Hankins, “Rhetoric, History, and Ideology: the Civic Panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni,” in James Hankins, ed., *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 105–178; Amanda Maher, “The Power of ‘Wealth, Nobility and Men’: Inequality and Corruption in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885117730673>; and Danielle Charette, “Catilinarian Cadences in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*: Ciceronian Humanism, Corrupting Consensus and the Demise of Contentious Liberty,” *History of Political Thought* 39, no. 3 (2018): 439–464.
 14. Although I harbor severe doubts concerning Rousseau in this regard, see McCormick, “Rousseau’s Rome and the Repudiation of Democratic Republicanism,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (March 2007): 3–27.
 15. Impressive representatives of this burgeoning literature include: Ryan Pevnick, “Democratizing the Nonprofit Sector,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (September 2013): 260–282; Rob Reich, Chiara Cordelli, and Lucy Bernholz, eds., *Philanthropy in Democratic Societies: History, Institutions, Values* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2016); Amanda Moure Maher, “The Corrupt Republic: The Contemporary Relevance of Machiavelli’s Critique of Wealth Inequality and Social Dependence” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017); and Emma Saunders-Hastings, “Plutocratic Philanthropy,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 149–161.
 16. See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.
 17. Gourevitch seems too indebted to the wholesale disparagement of ancient Rome and any democratic appropriation of it, exercised by Nadia Urbinati. See Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). More generous and promising engagements with the democratic potential

- of the principles and practices of republican Rome are: Martin Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Lawrence Hamilton, *Freedom is Power: Liberty Through Political Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jeffrey E. Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Camila Vergara, “Assembling the Plebeian Republic: Popular Institutions against Systemic Corruption & Oligarchic Domination” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018).
18. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, L.C. Banfield and H.C. Mansfield, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 105–30. On the significance of the Ciompi Revolt and Machiavelli’s analysis of it for democratic theory, see Yves Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (November 2012): 736–66; Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and John P. McCormick, “On the Myth of a Conservative Turn in the Florentine Histories,” in McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 69–108.
 19. In this regard, see Machiavelli’s treatment of the following figures: Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus (*Discorsi* II.26, III.13, III.38), Agathocles (*Il Principe*, chap. 8), Nabis (*Il Principe*, chap. 9). Machiavelli explicitly extols the first for converting slaves into citizen-soldiers; he implicitly praises the second and third for doing so by directing readers to his historical sources.
 20. Anonymous, “Industrial Ideas Chapter II,” *Journal of United Labor* VII, no. 4 (June 25, 1886): 2098.
 21. Anonymous, “Labor’s Disadvantages,” *Journal of United Labor* VIII, no. 27 (January 7, 1888): 2554.
 22. Symmes Jelley, *The Voice of Labor* (Chicago: A.G. Gehman & Co., 1887), 203.
 23. Ira Steward, “Poverty,” in *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor*, ed. Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor (Boston: Wright & Potter, State Printers, 1873), 434.
 24. For a discussion of these strands of radical republicanism, see the forthcoming volume *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition’s Popular Heritage*, eds. Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
 25. Problems also discussed in Susan Levine, *Labor’s True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Melton A. McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1978).
 26. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), chapter 9.
 27. William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), chapter 2.
 28. Anonymous, “Review of Cherouney,” *John Swinton’s Paper* 2, no. 87 (June 7, 1885).
 29. Anonymous, “Industrial Ideas VI,” *Journal of United Labor* VII, no. 10 (October 25, 1886): 2170.
 30. Anonymous, “Hard Words of ‘Nobody,’” *John Swinton’s Paper* 2, no. 71 (February 15, 1885).

31. I have developed some of the implications of this for contemporary thinking in the following articles: "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," *Political Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013): 591–617; "Quitting Work But Not The Job: Liberty and the Right to Strike," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 2 (June 2016): 307–23. See also Chris Bertram, Corey Robin, and Alex Gourevitch, "Let It Bleed: Libertarianism and the Workplace," *Crooked Timber*, July 1, 2012.
32. James Atleson, "Obscenities in the Workplace: A Comment on Fair and Foul Expressions and Status Relationships," *Buffalo Law Review* 34, 693–723.
33. Alongside McCormick's own work, there is also notably Martin Breagh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
34. Frank Lovett, "The labour republicans and the classical republican tradition: Alex Gourevitch's From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth," *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (2018): 244–53.
35. Yves Winter's fantastic essay on the Ciompi revolt and Machiavelli stands as the closest we get to an account of what proto-labor republicanism might have looked like. Notably he calls it "plebeian." Yves Winter, "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising," *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 736–66.
36. Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty," 304–5.
37. *Ibid.* See also my reconstruction of their view in "Solidarity and Civic Virtue: Republicanism and the Politics of Emancipation in Nineteenth Century America," *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage*, eds. Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
38. Henry E. Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* IV, no. 7 (November 1883): 597.
39. Henry E. Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* IV, no. 6 (October 15, 1883): 581.
40. Uriah S. Stevens, "Ideal Organization I," I, no. 2 (June 15, 1880): 24.
41. Gourevitch, *Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 173.

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