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Should Republicans Be Interested in Exploitation?

Alexander Bryan and Ioannis Kouris

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Abstract: Recent work in republican political theory has identified various forms of domination in the structures and relations of capitalist societies. A notable absence in much of this work is the concept of exploitation, which is generally treated as a predictable outcome of certain kinds of domination. This paper argues that the concept of exploitation can instead be conceived as a form of structural domination, understood in republican terms, and that adopting this conception has important implications for republican attempts to theorise modern capitalist societies. Building on existing domination accounts of exploitation, we argue that exploitation is a form of structurally constituted domination that enables a systemic illegitimate extraction of value. However, in contrast to competing accounts, domination is understood here in the republican terms of subjection to arbitrary power. We show that conceiving of domination in these terms not only makes the concept easily accessible from within a republican framework, but has advantages over competing accounts. Our argument also demonstrates why using the concept of exploitation will be useful for republican theorists. We show that a polity based on exploitative relations of production is antithetical to key republican commitments. These asymmetric power relationships undermine the economic and political independence of citizens and, crucially, constrain the political and economic ends that a polity will be effectively able to pursue. As such, exploitation should be a central preoccupation of republican political economy.

Introduction

After a period of relative disinterest in the first decade of this century, questions of political economy have recently been subject to great interest within the republican

literature. Much of this work uses the republican conceptual apparatus and terminology — especially the central concept of domination — to identify instances of economic unfreedom in modern conditions. The development of the concept of structural domination has extended the reach of this radicalism; arguments for workplace democracy, reform of the financial system, universal basic income, the right to strike, and public ownership and control of the means of production have all been made based on an analysis of existing forms of structural domination at play in contemporary capitalist societies.¹ A complementary strand of this literature involves the development of more radical republican genealogies which, in contrast to the dominant genealogies outlined by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit, highlight points of overlap with socialist and plebeian political traditions, and the ways in which the central concepts of those traditions have cross-pollinated.² Concepts such as ideological and class domination have been re-articulated as republicans have become increasingly interested in exploring how far the insights motivating other emancipatory traditions can be integrated into, or used to complement, republican analysis.

In this spirit, this paper argues that exploitation can be conceived as a form of structural domination, and that republicans have good reasons to be concerned about it. The idea that exploitation can be understood as a form of domination is by no means novel; within the exploitation literature, the work of theorists such as Allen Wood and Nicholas Vrousalis in articulating exploitation in these terms has been influential. A republican, though, might be forgiven for being reticent about the compatibility of these accounts with a republican framework, as neither Wood nor Vrousalis conceive of domination as subjection to arbitrary power. We outline a version of exploitation as domination that is accessible to republicans and has distinct advantages over alternative exploitation theories. In doing so, we hope both to advance an attractive independent account of exploitation, and to challenge the lack of interest that republican thinkers have shown in exploitation when articulating the economic conditions of non-domination.

¹ These contributions include: Gourevitch (2018); Casassas and De Wispelaere (2015); O'Shea (2019); O'Shea (2020); Gonzalez-Ricoy (2020); Breen (2015); Claassen and Herzog (2019) and Herzog (2019).

² See Roberts (2017); Gourevitch (2015); Muldoon (2019) and Kohn (2019).

There has been little indication in the predominant neo-republican literature that exploitation might be the kind of phenomenon that can be captured in the terms of subjection to arbitrary power. When exploitation has been discussed, it is usually as a potential *consequence* of domination. For instance, Frank Lovett (2010, p.131) presents exploitation as an extraction of value that will generally be available (and tempting) to dominators, but which has no conceptual connection to the concept of domination as such.³ Some accounts positing a stronger relationship between exploitation and domination have recently been outlined by thinkers departing from the neo-republican framework in various ways. Alex Gourevitch's (2015, pp. 82–85) account of the Labor Republican tradition of 19th century US workers traces the development of a critique of wage labour as a form of exploitation, based on the economic dependence of workers, which emerged from their lack of control over the means of production. Fausto Corvino (2019) has argued against both Pettit and Gourevitch that capitalist structural domination should be viewed as a form of exploitation without interpersonal domination. Yet, there is still no systematic account of exploitation as structural domination that both engages with modern exploitation theory and retains the core features of the neo-republican conception of non-domination. This paper aims to correct that.

Our analysis indicates that exploitation should be a central preoccupation of republican economic thought. Exploitation appears, on this account, not as mere idiosyncratic opportunism, nor maldistribution, but as a structurally constituted form of domination that will undermine the effective functioning of a republican polity. The economic and political constraints that will be features of a society based on exploitation will negatively shape the capacity for that society to furnish its citizens with non-domination. Citizens who do not possess productive assets will not be secure in their political and economic independence or their ability to develop the range of full capabilities associated with republican citizenship.

Note that, following Vrousalis (2013), the focus of this paper is on *economic* exploitation, and we make no claims regarding other forms of exploitation. More

³ See also Taylor (2013, p. 596).

specifically, we only engage in detail with accounts which depict economic exploitation as at least partly a structural phenomenon. It is also important to note that we take exploitation to be conceptually related to capitalism, such that realizing non-exploitation would require rejecting some central components of capitalism.

Our argument proceeds as follows. In Section 1, we set out the account of exploitation as domination, demonstrating how it differs from the pre-eminent account developed by Nicholas Vrousalis. We show that this articulation has significant advantages over alternative approaches. In Section 2, we demonstrate how relations of exploitation constitute relations of arbitrary interference in republican terms, and outline the ways in which they constrain social and political possibilities. In particular, we outline the ways in which exploitation can be said to undermine core conditions of non-domination. Sections 3 and 4 deal with the most prominent objections to our argument.

1. Exploitation and Structural Domination

The aim of this section is to provide an account of exploitation that neo-republicans can subscribe to. Philosophers disagree on what exactly makes a transaction exploitative. One point of agreement is that a transaction is exploitative when A takes unfair advantage of B and benefits at B's expense (Wollner 2019).⁴ Different accounts of exploitation build on this starting point in different ways. For example, the traditional Marxist view of exploitation held that workers were exploited by capitalists because the capitalists unfairly appropriated a portion of the product value that was produced by the workers. This view was based on the idea that value is created by labour alone. G.A. Cohen (1979) convincingly argued that the relationship between exploitation and the labour theory of value was one of mutual irrelevance: the use-value of a product might be zero even though some positive amount of labour was performed on it, or positive when no labour time was expended in making the product. The rejection of the labour theory of value paved the way for alternative views on exploitation.

⁴ We do not use this definition substantively. We merely use it as a placeholder to facilitate the exposition of the different theories that fill in the terms in normatively different ways.

Contemporary theories of exploitation can be roughly divided into two types: distributional and domination accounts.⁵ The distributional view of exploitation has two main versions: fair price and luck egalitarian theories. As stated above we do not engage with Wertheimer's influential fair price view as it conceives exploitation as an interpersonal moral wrong and not as a structural phenomenon.⁶ The luck egalitarian view holds that A exploits B if the transaction in which they are involved occurs against the background of an unjust distribution. On this view, a distribution is usually considered to be unjust when it involves brute luck and involuntary disadvantage. Roemer (1985, p. 65), for example, argued that exploitation is "the distributional consequence of an unjust inequality in the distribution of productive assets and resources". In a similar vein, G.A. Cohen (1988, pp. 233–234) suggested that the "question of exploitation therefore resolves itself into the question of the moral status of capitalist private property" and that "the crucial question for exploitation concerns the justice of the distribution of the means of production".

There are two main complaints against this view. First, it under-identifies cases of exploitation. Imagine that A finds B in a Pit and offers to throw B a rope on the condition that she receives 1 million euros in return.⁷ The luck egalitarian view would not capture this case even though it seems like a typical exploitative transaction where one party takes unfair advantage of another party and benefits at her expense. In the Pit example the transaction does not necessarily occur against the background of an unjust distribution: B might be responsible for falling into the Pit because she made a bad judgement call. Second, the luck egalitarian view leaves open a "clean path" to capitalism.⁸ That is, the luck egalitarian position leaves open the possibility to start

⁵ For a literature review on exploitation see Vrousalis (2018).

⁶ See Wertheimer's (1996) discussion of "transaction-specific fairness".

⁷ This example is offered by Vrousalis (2013).

⁸ This is an especially influential critique among Marxists. That said, this critique remains important for all theorists that hold that capitalist production necessarily involves exploitative relations. For a defence of the luck egalitarian view see Warren (2017).

from a just distribution and through acceptable normative steps reach a morally acceptable form of capitalism.⁹

By contrast, the domination account of exploitation is based on the way exploiters and exploited are related to each other. This paradigm locates the wrong of exploitation in asymmetrical power relations. The broader idea supporting this position is that exploitative transactions are unfair because they entail the instrumentalization of a vulnerability for self-enrichment.¹⁰ A exploits B if A benefits from a transaction in which A dominates B. Exploitation, in other words, is the dividend A extracts from B's servitude (Vrousalis 2013).

The disadvantage of this view is that it seems to suggest that doctors who benefit from a patient's poor health necessarily exploit their patients (Arneson 2016). In response, Vrousalis (2018) argues that the instrumentalization of vulnerability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for domination: exploitation only occurs when the relationship between A and B enunciates a kind of subordination. As Vrousalis (2018, p. 10) puts it "whether such dominating treatment supervenes will depend, in part, on whether A helps B act for reasons independent of A's power over B". Doctors do not unavoidably exploit patients because even though they have power over their patients they do not necessarily get their patients to act for reasons that are dependent on this power.¹¹ Doctors might get their patients to engage in a transaction that promotes their own

⁹ For example, Vrousalis (2013, p.150) offers the following example in support of this point: 'Grasshopper spends the summer months singing, whereas Ant spends all his time working. When the winter comes, Grasshopper needs shelter, which she presently lacks. Ant has three options: she can do nothing to help Grasshopper, she can offer her costless shelter, or she can provide the same shelter on the condition that she signs a sweatshop contract.'

¹⁰ See Goodin (1985) and Wood (1995).

¹¹ This example is problematic as it seems to allow that any time a person can be said to act for a reason other than "because they told me to," we might have to say they're not dominated in the relevant sense. Our exploitation theory avoids this problem because it is based on a republican account of domination. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this point.

health for example. This is what Vrousalis calls the neo-Aristotelian view on domination.¹²

We argue that republicans can accept a version of the domination view of exploitation. In particular, we claim that most republican thinkers can see exploitation as a structural form of domination. Our account differs from Vrousalis's account in two important ways. First, our articulation of exploitation employs the conceptual apparatus of domination as developed in the republican literature.¹³ We employ the standard republican understanding of domination as subjection to arbitrary power (with arbitrary power itself conceived as power that is not forced to track the interests of those over whom it is exercised).¹⁴ Second, we build on recent innovations from the critical republican literature in thinking of the wrong of exploitation as located *only in structurally constituted* asymmetrical power relations of domination that enable A to extract benefits from B.¹⁵ On this account, exploitation is a form of structurally constituted domination that enables a systemic illegitimate extraction of value. In contrast to Vrousalis's view our account claims that only structurally constituted forms of power underwrite the wrong of exploitation. An exploitative transaction can thus be understood as the dividend that emerges from *a structural relationship of servitude*.

¹² Vrousalis (2020) describes the neo-Aristotelian account of domination as follows: "Neo-Aristotelians object not to the existence of arbitrary power, as such, but rather to the nature of the action that power facilitates. Suppose A has power over B and is disposed to use it. These are two power facts. Most social relations involve power facts: a doctor has power over her patient, a teacher over the student, a coach over an athlete, and so on. When things go well, the motivations of the patient (in taking the medicine), of the student (in reading the book), and of the athlete (in running the marathon) do not reflect the power facts. That is, these actions are performed for the sake of values independent of the respective dispositions of powerful doctors, teachers, and coaches."

¹³ One might argue that this is not an important difference as the account will work in the same way regardless of which domination theory one uses. We do not have the space to argue in length for a republican account of domination. Yet, as the doctor example illustrates, the republican theory of domination that deals with tracked interests rather than power facts and reasons for acting avoids the problems associated with neo-Aristotelean account of domination.

¹⁴ Pettit (1997, pp. 52–3).

¹⁵ See Gädeke (2020a); Gädeke (2020b) and Jugov (2020)

In addition to operating as a standalone account of exploitation, the structural domination account provides some advantages over alternative accounts. First, the structural domination account is superior in capturing cases of exploitation. Whether a doctor exploits her patient or not will be determined by the structurally constituted relations of power that pertain between healthcare professionals and patients. Social structures consist of institutionally established rules, social norms and practices. In contemporary capitalist societies social structures systematically empower some groups of people while disempowering other groups of people. Consider the example of healthcare again. In a case characterised by a scarcity of public health services and an insurance system that systematically disempowers certain social groups, doctors will wield structurally constituted arbitrary power over their patients and will be able to illegitimately benefit at their expense at will. In other words, when there is a lack of institutional safeguards that delimit the power of certain social groups or agents, social structures engender exploitation. Conversely, a healthcare system within which professionals are subject to institutional and normative mechanisms and patients have the power to contest or resist their decisions — that is, a system which forces healthcare professionals to track the interests of their patients — will not.

Of course, one may argue that Vrousalis's account would also deem a healthcare system of this sort as exploitative, even though it operates with a different underlying account of domination. This is true. However, Vrousalis account would take the doctor to exploit the patient *even if* their power over the patient was not structural but episodic. In other words, as we argue below, Vrousalis's account would mischaracterize some interpersonal moral wrongs as instances of exploitation.

Second, the structural domination view accounts for the specific wrongness of exploitation. Most contemporary accounts of exploitation focus solely on interpersonal interactions. This has resulted in calls for complementing existing accounts with the structural and “anonymous” characteristics of exploitation.¹⁶ Our analysis takes this critique a step further. We claim that *only structurally constituted forms of power*

¹⁶ See Wollner (2019) and Zwolinski (2011).

underwrite the wrong of exploitation. Interpersonal exploitation resembles what we term “state of nature blackmail”, which is a form of unfairness rather than unfreedom. State of nature blackmail involves an episodic empowerment of individuals who find themselves in a position to wield arbitrary power and engage in *exploitative transactions* only in particular instances. In contrast, structurally constituted relations of power can bring about entrenched domination which, as we outline in further detail below, can be expected to shape the standing of relevant agents within social and economic practices more generally, and therefore taking on a greater social and normative significance.

Social structures delineate the rules grounding everyday transactions. Exploitation occurs when institutionally established rules and social norms make it rational for some to exploit and rational for others to subject themselves to exploitation. Consider the pit example. Without the presumption of the private ownership of productive assets and the prevalence of norms that value profit-seeking behaviour it is not rational to demand an extraneous price for helping the vulnerable party to exit the pit. This is also reflected in the moral psychology of the parties involved. The exploited experience a constant feeling of helplessness and alienation that stems from the fact that rationality dictates that they subject themselves to exploitation.¹⁷ They live at the mercy of their exploiters. Exploiters also perceive their actions as necessary due to the framework of rules that governs market transactions. This is not the case for victims of what we call state of nature blackmail. Victims of this sort of blackmail do not experience this constant sense of acute vulnerability. Similarly, state of nature blackmailers do not have their actions constrained by social structures and act on their individually held moral principles.

Third, the proposed account can better identify policies to reduce exploitation. Pinpointing the structural dimension that grounds the wrong of exploitation indicates that the corresponding remedies must also be institutional in nature. No individual alone can alter the structurally constituted forms of power that empower exploiters. So,

¹⁷ Note the similarity to the standard psychological components of domination often highlighted by Pettit (1997, p. 5).

the need for collective political action and collective forms of counter power, such as unionizing, is highlighted by this analysis.

Fourth, the structural domination account resonates with real social phenomena. When oppressed social groups demand justice they usually call for a systemic institutional change that will permanently rectify the longstanding power asymmetries and the matching illegitimate extractions of value. These types of demands are not grounded in a desire to abolish all exploitative transactions and block a future “clean” path to capitalism. On the contrary, popular emancipatory movements protest against the institutional rules that push ordinary people to rationally engage in exploitative transactions regardless of their personal beliefs.

It should also be noted that the structural domination account we outline here fits in with the emerging critical and radical strands of republican theory.¹⁸ For radical and critical republicans, it is important to distinguish between episodic and structural forms of power. As Dorothea Gädeke (2020b, p. 20) puts it “losing sight of this difference means that a theory of domination is not able to speak to systematic injustices like racism or sexism”. Without this distinction the particular wrong of exploitation might be conflated with mere manipulation or coercion. This approach would neglect the overlapping structural privileges that place certain groups in a position of power in contemporary capitalist societies. But understanding the structurally constituted character of exploitation in these societies need not lead us to, following Corvino, ignore the interpersonal domination that is a key component of the architecture of that exploitation. While we distinguish our structural account of exploitation from the purely interactional cases of unfairness we term “state of nature blackmail”, this does not lead to a broader neglect of the interpersonal element of structural cases of domination. Exploitation is structurally constituted, but will operate and be experienced through relations between agents. To view these interpersonal relations as structurally

¹⁸ Contributions to critical republicanism include Gädeke (2020a; 2020b); Jugov (2020); and Laborde (2008). Contributions to the radical republican literature include Bryan (2021a); Cicherchia (2019); Gourevitch (2011;2013; 2015); Muldoon (2019); O’Shea (2019; 2020) White (2011).

constituted is to view the options of each agent as powerfully constrained by their respective positions within a structure of power.

2. Republicanism and Exploitation

In this section we develop the claim that relations of exploitation can be understood as relations of arbitrary power in republican terms, demonstrating how these relations fail to track the common avowable interests of workers. In contrast to the domination accounts of exploitation developed by Vrousalis and Wood, our account articulates relations of exploitation as structurally constituted relations of arbitrary power. As well as elucidating this component of our argument, in this section we also show that, if understood as we suggest, exploitation will appear as a form of domination that demands special normative and political attention due to the role it plays in constraining economic and social possibilities more broadly.

Before doing so, it is important to address a *prima facie* difficulty with conceiving of exploitation in the terms of subjection to arbitrary power. A signature feature of the concept of domination articulated by republicans is that one can be dominated without suffering interference (Pettit 1997, pp. 63–4). Domination is rather characterised by exposure to arbitrary power, which may or may not be exercised. Such an understanding of unfreedom has been shown to usefully draw out what is wrong with various kinds of social relations that might fall through the net, or be dealt with uncomfortably, in competing accounts. Exploitation, though, is classically understood as a kind of transaction — that is, as a form of interference. But although domination is commonly contrasted to interference as a way of indicating the difference between republican and liberal conceptions of freedom, we can still understand forms of domination that are characterised by systematic interference. The private ownership of the means of production brings about conditions within which workers are subject to the arbitrary power of capitalists. This arbitrary power is manifested in the process of exploitation, which reproduces this broad relation of domination through many individual relations and instances of interference. But these interferences neither

exhaust the relation between workers and capitalists (which extends beyond the boundaries of the contracting parties) nor form the basis of the character of that relation.

With this point in hand, we can now explain in more depth why relations of exploitation can be conceived as relations of arbitrary power. The arbitrary power to which exploited citizens are subjected is rooted in the structurally constituted relations of subordination through which value is extracted, which are in turn a function of the monopolistic private ownership of the means of production by capitalists. Workers must be able to access the means of production in order to meet their basic needs; only by engaging in production can they gain the income needed to purchase these goods. When the means of production are monopolistically owned by capitalists, workers have no reasonable alternative to selling their labour to some capitalist to gain this access (Gourevitch 2013; O'Shea 2019).

Even in these conditions of constrained voluntariness, relations of exploitation might consistently be defended as non-arbitrary on the grounds that they promote the interests of the worker as well as the capitalist. Even if the capitalist gains *more* from the exchange, the interests of the worker might still be tracked by virtue of providing them with a wage. Market-oriented republican thinkers – most prominently Robert Taylor – have made arguments to this effect, appealing to the voluntaristic consent of workers in agreeing to work for capitalists. This voluntaristic consent, even in highly constrained circumstances, presumably still signifies *something* (Taylor 2013, p. 598).

This argument fails to take into account either the extractive nature of exploitation or the interest that workers have in having certain options available to them which are blocked in exploitative labour markets. As we have argued above, the extraction of value that is characteristic of exploitation is rooted in structurally constituted relations of subordination; it is only by virtue of this subordination that capitalists are able to extract value from workers at all. The above account fails to recognise either this subordination, or the extraction which it enables and which reproduce the conditions of that subordination.

A worker's interests might be promoted by contracting with a specific capitalist in a capitalist society, but only in a limited sense; they also have an interest in having the option of *not* doing so, which is denied to them by virtue of living in a society based on relations of exploitation (Gourevitch 2013, p. 602). As Dorothea Gädeke (2020a) has argued, conceiving of relations of power and domination as structurally constituted illuminates the reproduction and conditions of the disempowerment of dominated agents; in the case of exploitation, the weak position of workers in the labour market and within firms can only be understood through a consideration of the reproduction of those vulnerabilities on which such weakness is based. The extraction of value at play in capitalist relations of production, and the broader social implications of this extraction (of which more below) mean that workers have an interest in being able to produce without having to sell their labour to a capitalist. A society structured around relations of exploitation fails to track the interests of workers adequately by forcing them to contract with capitalists.¹⁹ This relation of exploitation is therefore a relation of domination.

There are two further things to note here. The first is that our account contrasts with standard neo-republican accounts in identifying domination in terms of subjection to arbitrary power rather than subjection to an arbitrary will. The paradigmatic cases of domination involve subjection to the unconstrained will of an individual or a group, and descriptions of being subject to arbitrary power have often focussed on the insecurity of being dependent on an unpredictable will over which one has no control. But there are many forms of arbitrary power which are not characterised by a discretionary will, but should still be viewed as cases of domination. This is because the arbitrariness with which republicans are concerned is not a property of wills but of power, and this power can constrain the choices of individuals through structural restrictions on one's choices or actions as well as direct interfering action. As Gädeke (2020b, p. 210–11) has argued, “both are forms of domination in that they refer to the experience of being placed in a

¹⁹ Note that the interest that workers hold in being able to produce without selling their labour to a capitalist is a ‘common avowable interest’ of the kind which institutions should aim to promote. In contrast, the interest that capitalists have in being able to exploit workers is not a ‘common’ interest as it is not one which can be held by all citizens by virtue of their joint membership of a political community (Pettit, 1997, pp. 198–9).

position of disempowerment that denies the equal status of a normative authority, or, as Pettit puts it, the ability to command respect as “a voice worth hearing and an ear worth addressing”. Crucially, in cases of domination which involve disempowerment in relation to a system of rules or a restriction of voluntariness we can still identify some agents as dominators based on their ability to exercise power over others by virtue of their position within that system. It is a relation of this kind which radical and critical republicans identify between workers and capitalists in capitalist labour markets and between women and men in sexist societies.

Second, exploitation will be of particular significance for republican thinking about political economy due to the role it plays in constraining economic and political possibilities within a society, and in constructing the conditions for other relations of domination. A central element of exploitation is the extraction of value from workers by capitalists. This extraction recreates the conditions of exploitation by reproducing the vulnerability of workers – which is based on their lack of productive assets and independent access to capital – and the comparative power of capitalists.

Exploitation will also create social and economic conditions within which we might reasonably expect other relations of domination to develop. When exploitation is part of the basic economic fabric of a society, those who are exploited will have little opportunity to cement their economic and political independence, which will in most cases remain sensitive to the interests of individual capitalists, and the capitalist class as a whole. All forms of domination have structural dimensions, and the most entrenched and wide-ranging forms of domination are constituted through a complex array of structural and systemic elements. In these cases, individuals may be subjected to arbitrary power through a variety of institutional mechanisms and processes which together function to disadvantage some actors, or which may force them into interpersonal relations of domination based on a lack of control over resources or social marginalisation.²⁰ Exploitation has a global character within capitalist societies, radically constraining social possibilities and the distribution of wealth and opportunity. It is neither reducible to the set of individual contractual agreements that make up an economic relationship, nor to the mere distribution of resources, involving essential

²⁰ See Gourevitch (2013) and Gädeke (2020a).

reference to the extraction of value and the subordination which the exploited party suffers at the hands of an employer.

In addition to the direct dominating effects of the relation of exploitation on workers, there are three dimensions of non-domination which are likely to be imperilled by the broader social impact of constructing an economic system on these exploitative relations.

Economic Independence

If the argument we present above holds, it should be clear that exploitation is a relation of economic domination. By definition, then, it undermines the economic conditions of non-domination. Exploitation also undermines these conditions in other ways that go beyond the subjection of workers to economic institutions which do not track their interests and which prevent them from being able to engage in production without submitting to arbitrary power. The category of economic independence can be used to indicate those material conditions that must be satisfied for individuals to be able to participate in a society on equal terms, and (although it does not entail that individuals must be furnished with the resources to live in autarky, or must be able to refuse any offers at all) to indicate when a citizen is protected from having to enter into relations of economic dependence or extraction (Pettit 1997, pp. 158–159). On top of this direct domination, the particular dynamics and consequences of widespread exploitation generate a wider range of tendencies which threaten the conditions of economic independence

We can understand the condition of economic independence as the set of material conditions that must be satisfied for a citizen to have access to the range of capabilities and opportunities required for republican citizenship; that is, a threshold of the full range of resources, capabilities, and opportunities which together constitute the economic basis of non-domination. A citizen who achieves economic independence is one who is able to participate in civic life as an equal, and to access the resources associated with that condition without subjecting herself to arbitrary power (Bryan 2021b). As well as indicating the material condition of any given individual, the

condition of economic independence is also sensitive to economic inequality and incorporates institutional and systemic dimensions. Individuals must have access, on fair terms, to institutions and practices that are necessary for economic independence (such as ability to enforce property claims through the legal system, or access housing markets without being subject to discrimination), or which are crucial to the development of central economic capabilities (such as the ability to open a bank account or access basic financial education).

Note that even the establishment of a reasonably robust welfare state does not prevent these relations from undermining the condition of economic independence. Allied with a stringent employment law regime and constraints on the power of financial power to influence politics, this might seem to maintain the economic independence of workers, if not their conditions for flourishing. Yet, it fails to do so because that economic independence requires, on top of the assurance of these resources and institutional safeguards, that individuals are able to access the economic resources necessary for equal participation in society without becoming subject to arbitrary power. The relation between worker and capitalist can be deemed arbitrary if the worker has no reasonable alternative but to enter into an agreement with some capitalist in order to access these resources; restrictions on the discretionary power of capitalists in the workplace only reduce the severity of that domination. In such circumstances, workers are denied the conditions of economic independence by virtue of their exploitation.

The extractive nature of exploitation also generates conditions which are hostile to the realisation of economic independence for all. The extractive transfer of value from the poor to the wealthy generates a distributive tendency which, if unchecked, will produce widespread economic domination. Workers will become increasingly reliant on wage labour to make ends meet, while capitalists will gain ever more power to dictate the terms of the labour contract, and to impose increasingly unfavourable terms on the worker.

Political Independence

Relations of economic dependence have direct and obvious implications for the political status of the relevant parties. When the material conditions of non-domination are disrupted, the political and social dimensions of republican citizenship will consequently be undermined. The legitimacy of the state, for republicans, is based on the equal capacity of all citizens to control its actions and to contest government policies — a condition that depends on the political equality of citizens (Pettit 1997, p. 185). This political equality is a function both of the distribution of formal political rights and freedoms and the ability to advance one's interests freely and independently. Workers will find their freedom to do so curtailed as a result of their exploitation, which leaves them vulnerable to the arbitrary interference of both the individual capitalist to whom they are contracted and the class of capitalists as a whole. Capitalists gain power to influence the political behaviour of employees from their power over their future economic prospects and continued employment and, as Elizabeth Anderson (2017) and Alex Gourevitch (2015) have both demonstrated, have often exercised that power eagerly. Not only are workers required to form relations of domination with capitalists, but the specific dynamics of exploitation — i.e. the illegitimate extraction of value— militates against the development of independent political standing for individual workers as their economic precarity is re-enforced.

Of course, the comparative lack of influence held by workers (as well as other subordinated groups) in societies characterised by exploitation does not mean that those citizens are silenced or excluded from the political realm entirely; the formation of political parties or movements to promote neglected interests or expose injustice can force individual policies, as well as institutional structures — to change. But agents who are exploited will face significant obstacles to effective political action either within or outside existing standards of political acceptability. As Lillian Cicerchia (2019) has argued, there are a number of “structural imperatives” against collective action, such as the incentive for employers to retain monopolistic control over the workplace. The reproduction of the essential conditions of capitalist exploitation — that is, the economic vulnerability of a working class and the monopolisation of the means of production among a propertied class — as well as the second-order threats to political independence, such as concentration of wealth and political influence in the hands of the latter, militate against political transformation. For our purposes, though, this point

is secondary to that of the failure of a political system based on economic relations of exploitation to meet the demanding republican threshold of legitimacy.

Civic Virtues

Finally, exploitation disrupts the development of those capabilities and dispositions that republicans associate with the practice of citizenship. In addition to freedom from domination, republican citizenship requires the development of capacities necessary for the reproduction and support of the institutions and norms of the republic (Pettit 1997, p. 245). For instance, a republican political system not only relies on popular participation — in voting, contesting public decisions, keeping abreast of political events — but also on action such as abiding by conditions of public reasoning and engaging in political life with due consideration for the common good. Similar capacities and dispositions are also central to the reproduction of the social, political and intersubjective conditions of non-domination. If these “virtues” are absent, non-domination will remain precarious and vulnerable to institutional decay and prejudice, while state action may violate the rights or protections of some social groups.

Conditions of exploitation are infertile ground for the development of such dispositions and capabilities. By virtue of their lack of economic and political independence, those subject to exploitation will lack the opportunities to develop and exercise those virtues associated with political discourse or those associated with financial independence. (And although they may gain these capabilities in other ways, these are unlikely to be regarded as legitimate or an adequate basis for civic participation). Notably, those who exploit workers will also develop traits and dispositions not in keeping with these virtues, including a failure to engage with others as equals or to abide by impartial institutional principles.²¹ By virtue of their economic position, it is rational for them to exploit others in spite of their civic obligations to treat compatriots as equals and not to subject others to domination (Wollner 2019, p. 157).

²¹ For a historical discussion of this facet of domination with specific focus on patriarchal domination, see Coffee (2012).

Looking across these three dimensions of non-domination, we can appreciate the full significance of exploitation as a threat to republican freedom and the need for republican theorists to treat it as a core case of economic domination. A society based on exploitative relations of production will be antithetical to republican values and incompatible with the conditions of equal non-domination. Civic relationships that involve an illegitimate extraction of value would not only undermine the economic and political independence of citizens, but they would also hinder the development of the necessary capabilities that are associated with republican citizenship. In addition to being a relation of domination itself, exploitation subverts the promotion of non-domination by constraining the political and economic ends that a society will effectively be able to pursue. As such, republican theorists should not only be concerned with exploitation as an instance of domination, but should view it as a core element of the broader structural domination exhibited in modern capitalist societies.

3. Impersonal Exploitation Objection

One objection against our view is that it cannot account for the impersonal nature of capitalist exploitation. This Marxist critique holds that domination is based on the impersonal laws of production and thus republicanism is ill-suited to criticize capitalism as it focuses on agential interpersonal domination. As Marx puts it, workers are subject to “the inherent laws of capitalist production, in the shape of external coercive laws” (Marx 1976, p. 381). Vrousalis (2017, p.180) suggests that “the market imperatives criticized by Marx do not involve arbitrariness. Therefore, impersonal domination and republicanism pull in different directions; they are incompatible”. Similarly, Thompson (2013) argues that neo-republicans do not pay sufficient attention to the functional logic of the economy and to the corresponding structures of power.

The idea here is that in a perfectly competitive market capitalists do not act on their own will. On the contrary, the pressures of the market force individual capitalists and managers to maximize profits in order to survive. The impersonal nature of the market forces individual capitalists to exploit workers whether they will it or not. Therefore, market processes do not involve the arbitrary will of individual capitalists but the impersonal law of production (Vrousalis 2017).

There are two responses to this objection. First, this critique hinges upon a very narrow understanding of republican domination and arbitrary power. As we noted above, this narrow conception of arbitrary power does not capture the structurally constituted relations within whom different interests emerge and whether this relation *itself* tracks the interests of the parties involved. That is, even though a will might not be involved there is still domination in the republican sense. The recent radical republican literature suggests that a broader conception of arbitrary power that does not neglect the structural and impersonal components of domination is superior at capturing the asymmetric power relations within modern societies. The arbitrary power of capitalists is structurally constituted through a number of rules and norms such as the private ownership of productive assets, market exchange, an antagonistic social ethos and so on. Our account, following this strand of radical republicanism, conceives of domination as a structural relation that pertains between agents and locates these relations within a broader social context that captures these phenomena more adequately. It would take a very narrow and unworkable account of domination – which would be incompatible with our exploitation account – to suggest that capitalists do not have arbitrary power over the workers.

Second, capitalists still have comparatively more power than workers even within perfectly competitive markets. Even though Marx describes “laws working themselves out with iron necessity” there is still room for capitalist action within market constraints (Marx 1976, p. 90). Even taking into account the various market incentives, capitalists can still make exploitative business decisions even if they cannot do it systematically. The Marxist view places capitalists on the far end of the spectrum of structuration where they have no discretion whatsoever. We argue that even though the capitalists are “heavily structured” in competitive markets they still have some discretion in particular instances. For example, freelance workers might lose a contract because an individual capitalist is negatively biased against them. The main point here is that capitalists have *some* discretion over their business decisions even within the confines of the market. As O’Shea (2020, p. 557) puts it “you *can* buck the market—even if you cannot always do so costlessly or systematically.” Republicanism makes good sense of

exploitation as it can account for both the impersonal and interpersonal nature of capitalist domination and exploitation.

4. Conceptual Muddle Objection

The second objection to consider concerns the possibility that conceiving of exploitation as a form of domination may produce a conceptual muddle, in which both concepts of domination and exploitation are obscured rather than clarified. Such a view might incorporate the claim that while conceiving of exploitation in broad terms as domination — as Vrousalis and Wood do — may help us to understand the specific structure and wrong involved in cases of exploitation, applying the narrower terms of the republican understanding of domination leads to an unintuitive inflation of the value of freedom. Exploitation and domination have, after all, contrasting genealogies, with exploitation generally identified as a form of unfairness rather than a threat to freedom. If exploitation is conceived instead as a form of domination, one might fear that the concept of freedom is becoming over-burdened.

This objection taps into an undeniable expansion of what is commonly taken to be included in the definition of domination by republican theorists over the past two decades. Alongside straightforward cases in which individuals are dominated by virtue of their vulnerability to the arbitrary interference of another party in the exercise of their basic liberties, republicans have more explicitly incorporated structural and systemic forms of domination, in which individuals are subject to arbitrary power that emerges from the practices or rules of particular sets of institutions. Even those who are sympathetic to this shift might reasonably worry that it leads republicans to identify as unfreedom what is more properly conceived as injustice, or harm, or even misfortune. If conceiving exploitation in terms of domination implies that civic freedom demands or is partly constituted by economic justice, there would be good reason to think that something has gone awry in our reasoning.

Although the importance of ensuring that political concepts are not overly expanded is clear, the incorporation of structural and systemic forms of domination into the republican framework in recent years has retained the core elements and restrictions of

the concept of freedom as non-domination. Problematizing phenomena such as financial liberalization and the operation of global reserve currencies or the condition of workers in the labour market in terms of unfreedom illuminates rather than obscures the nature of civic freedom in complex modern societies.²² In each case, individuals are subject to power over which they have insufficient control, and consequently hold a compromised political and economic status. The exploitation of workers by capitalists involves the same core structure and features as these other forms of structural domination. As we have shown, subjection to arbitrary power is a fundamental component of this exploitation; arbitrary power is present both as structurally constitutive feature of the labour market processes into which workers must enter and in workers' lack of alternative to entering extractive economic relationships with capitalists. Exploitation is not merely a likely consequence of domination, but a structural component of capitalist societies that partly generates the lack of control held by workers over economic resources that is the basis of the capitalist wage relation. Arbitrary power is its central feature.

A second form of this objection focuses on the potential inflation not of freedom, but of exploitation. Our account of exploitation is a long way from those which depict it as a form of transactional unfairness. Why not, then, use some broader term as a label for the arbitrary power we have identified in the capitalist productive process – perhaps 'capitalist domination' – and conceive of exploitation as a particular kind of transactional unfairness or interference which will be an important but conceptually distinct component of that domination? Because our argument provides an analysis of a specific kind of economic relation that is central to the capitalist productive process, is characterised by the extraction of value – and, as we have shown, involves subjection to arbitrary power. As Section 2 shows, capitalists may dominate workers in a whole range of ways. The kind of structural domination we are concerned with can properly be termed 'exploitation' because it shows how value is extracted from workers by capitalists through capitalist production processes because of the arbitrary power the latter wield over the former.

²² See Herzog (2021) and Preiss (2021).

We have provided a number of reasons to think that capitalist exploitation can be usefully understood in the terms of domination; whether or not this is the best way to think about it is of course a question that theorists of exploitation will continue to disagree about. Note though, that we have not argued that *all* forms of exploitation are cases of domination. In addition to those cases of state of nature blackmail identified earlier, there may well be other forms of exploitation that either differ in structure to those discussed here, or incorporate additional features requiring more specific analysis.²³ Our argument extends only to the economic exploitation involved in the capitalist mode of production.

Conclusion

We have argued that republicans should be interested in exploitation. In particular, we showed that republican theorists can endorse an account of exploitation as structural domination. Exploitation, understood as a form of domination, is detrimental to the functioning of the republican polity as it undermines the political and economic independence of citizens while it also hinders the development of their civic virtues. The structural domination view of exploitation is able to reanimate the Marxist concern for structures that are a defining feature of capitalist exploitation and combine it with the recent critical reformulation of neo-republican ideas (Cohen 1988). As such, we believe that the exploitation account we offer can be a valuable resource for radical republicans as it can add to the existing conceptual tools for critiquing the power imbalances within contemporary capitalist societies.

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²³ Note that this will be true for any account of exploitation.

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