

Structural Domination and Freedom in the Labor Market: From Voluntariness to Independence


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The claim that workers are subject to structural domination in the labor market is a central contention of the recent radical turn in republican political theory, but it remains undertheorized. Two core components—the claim that workers have “no reasonable alternative” to selling their labor to capitalists and the relevance of exposure to potential interference in such cases—remain unclear. Without a more precise specification of the conditions of structural domination, it is difficult to assess how well republican prescriptions minimize it. I develop a revised defense of the central claim through an analysis of these components. I clarify what it is to have reasonable alternatives in the labor market but show that holding such options is insufficient to avoid structural domination. I argue that the dependence at the heart of structural domination can be constituted multifariously and develop an additional criterion directed at capturing such dependence in production.

The concept of structural domination has become central to the developing literature regarding the institutional and economic commitments of republican political philosophy and is increasingly prominent within political philosophy more widely. Generally speaking, its purpose is to draw attention to the ways in which relations of arbitrary power are constructed by, or emerge from, social or economic processes beyond the control of any individual agent (Claassen and Herzog 2021, 468–9; Rahman 2017, 84). Even the paradigm cases of domination are structural to some extent; the arbitrary power of the slave owner over a slave is a function of a legal system that grants and protects that power (Lovett and Pettit 2018, 364–5). In attempting to map out relations of arbitrary power in modern societies, though, many republican theorists have moved beyond the conception of structural domination articulated by Philip Pettit (2012, 63), who uses the term to indicate how “it is usually because of the ways a society is organized, economically or legally, that some people have such power in relation to others that they dominate them directly, and dominate them without necessarily wishing for domination or even approving of it.” Whereas neo-republicans like Pettit and Frank Lovett claim to be able to capture the ways in which structures can endow agents with arbitrary power over others by virtue of their relative standing in a social structure or rules system without requiring a distinctive conception of “structural domination,” other theorists seek to use the concept to capture relations that, they claim, are also characterized by the presence of arbitrary power but may not register on neo-republican accounts (Gädeke 2020b; Gourevitch 2013; O’Shea 2019).

This broader articulation of the concept has most influentially been used as a critique of capitalist labor markets (Cicerchia 2022). This critique has become central to a developing “radical republican” literature, which highlights the historical symbiosis between republican and socialist traditions and engages with the conceptual tools of contemporary republican theory as a (some argue limited) means of diagnosing various forms of unfreedom in modern economic and social contexts. A central contributor to the development of this critique is Alex Gourevitch (2011; 2013; 2015), who, recovering the Labor Republicanism of the nineteenth century United States as part of the republican political tradition, argues that workers in capitalist societies are structurally dominated by virtue of their lack of control over the means of production, which leaves them with no reasonable alternative to selling their labor to a capitalist. This condition does not exhibit all of the characteristics of paradigm forms of domination such as slavery and serfdom; workers are not bound to work for any particular individual, are free to quit their job, and can appeal to employment tribunals if mistreated, and those in democracies have some political power.¹ Gourevitch, though, argues that they nevertheless remain subject to arbitrary power wielded by the owners of the means of production and that this arbitrary power is a feature not only of workplace relations but also of the exchanges made between workers and capitalists in the labor market.

The claim that the labor market is a site of arbitrary power conflicts with many of the leading accounts of domination. Both Philip Pettit (2006) and Frank Lovett

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¹ To train focus on the claim that structural domination occurs even in labor markets that exhibit the characteristics by which they are most commonly justified, I set aside the question of whether the widespread derogation of these protections and rights undermines the idealization of markets along these lines. We can clearly identify domination when workers are prevented from leaving their job or voting; the question here is whether they suffer a different kind of competitive labor markets.

(2010, 63) present free exchanges between agents in competitive market conditions as paradigmatic of nondomination; whereas in a political context nondomination is ideally secured by citizens checking the direction of the state through electoral processes, in a competitive market setting the price mechanism ensures that no one can be subject to the arbitrary will of another. The aggregated preferences of all participants determine prices, and in competitive conditions workers will, with little cost, be able to exit relations with employers who seek to exploit them. As Robert Taylor has argued, this “economic constitutionalism” is a condition in which no agent can impose their will on another and where the interests of citizens are effectively tracked by virtue of the price mechanism and pro-competition policy (Taylor 2017, 48). On this view, labor markets in which individuals are provided with sufficiently varied options and empowered to exit dominating relations are sites of economic nondomination rather than arbitrary power.

Although Gourevitch’s (2011; 2013; 2015) recovery of the Labor Republican claim that labor markets are characterized by structural domination has influenced thinking about labor relations and the workplace in the republican literature and beyond, it remains underdeveloped in at least two areas. My goal in this paper is not to engage with the historical account of Labor Republicanism but to analyze and clarify those two components and, through doing so, to develop and defend a more refined version of the central claim. The first of these components is the claim that the structural domination of workers in the labor market is manifested in their lack of a reasonable alternative to entering into an employment contract with some capitalist. For Gourevitch, this is a function of their lack of control over the means of production. The “reasonable alternative” criterion, though, has been subject to two main lines of criticism. The first concerns how effectively the criterion is able to pinpoint cases of structural domination. As Tom O’Shea (2019) has argued, the lack of detail regarding how to evaluate whether an option counts as “reasonable” makes it difficult to assess whether various categories of workers (such as the unemployed) are in fact dominated. The second line of criticism, in contrast, targets the connection between workers’ lack of reasonable alternatives and the distribution of the means of production. Within certain labor market conditions, it is argued that workers can in fact be supplied with reasonable alternatives. Although different institutional means by which this might be achieved have been advocated, most prominent among which is the establishment of a universal basic income, the core claim is that workers can be furnished with options beyond selling their labor to an employer without the universal worker ownership that Gourevitch advocates.

The second component is the relevance of the capacity for interference. Domination is usually understood as a condition in which an agent is subject to the capacity of another agent or group of agents to interfere with their choices on an arbitrary basis (Pettit 1997, 52). Interference does not have to actually occur for a relationship to be dominating, but the capacity to interfere in these choices must already exist and be readily exercisable. In this understanding of domination,

workers will not be subject to arbitrary interference in sufficiently free and equally balanced labor markets. Gourevitch (2018, 906), though, argues that the distribution of the ownership of the means of production in capitalist societies endows capitalists with the capacity to interfere with workers in a different way. Workers are forced by virtue of their lack of access to productive property, which is concentrated in the hands of capitalists, to sell their labor. However, this attempt to retain the primacy of interference in the concept of structural domination is an uncomfortable fit, incorporating an extension of the concept beyond the cases of “invasive” interference central to neo-republican accounts. Exactly how—if at all—structural domination can be said to involve exposure to arbitrary interference, and whether it can properly be called domination if it does not, remain unresolved questions in the literature that have been explored more extensively in discussions of race- and gender-based domination than in discussions of economic forms of domination (Coffee 2012; Gädeke 2020a; 2020b).

The conception of structural domination developed by Gourevitch relies on both of these moves. The reasonable alternative criterion enables us to identify cases in which agents do not suffer invasive interference of the kind central to Pettit’s account of domination but *are* subject to the interference of capitalists in the broader sense of being *forced* to sell their labor to them.

Based on my discussion of these two components, I defend the central claim that many workers are subject to domination within the labor market. Although I vindicate Gourevitch’s conclusion, my analysis of these two components leads me to depart from his argument on two crucial matters. First, although the lack of reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to a capitalist is central to the structural domination that many workers experience in capitalist societies, this lack of reasonable alternatives is not a *necessary* component of the structural domination of workers, but one way in which a broader form of economic dependence can be manifested. I highlight how the dependence that workers experience in the labor market (and that presents itself in their lack of reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to a capitalist) can also occur in economic relations outside the labor market. Importantly, it can afflict even those who have some limited access to productive property, as I show by relaxing Gourevitch’s assumption that capitalists hold a monopoly on the means of production in capitalist societies. Second, I claim that this domination is best characterized not in terms of exposure to the possibility of particular kinds of interference but as a condition of dependence on the cooperation or permission of other agents to engage in productive activity. This dependence can, I argue, pertain even when individuals have reasonable alternatives to selling their labor, because it can be manifested outside of the labor market. Therefore, I argue that the reasonable alternative criterion only gets us so far in identifying structural domination in the labor market and that it must be supplemented with a criterion that enables us to identify this broader condition of dependence, which I term the “independent production criterion.”

THE REASONABLE ALTERNATIVE CRITERION

The claim that workers are structurally dominated by capitalists and that this domination partly emerges from the operation of the labor market is at its root a claim that workers cannot act independently of capitalists; that they are dependent on their continual cooperation, on terms insensitive to workers' interests, to secure various goods. Gourevitch's (2013, 602) account locates the source of this dependence in the distribution of productive assets. The condition of workers is defined by their lack of ownership or control over those assets. As a result, workers are unable to produce independently but still need some way of gaining resources. They are forced "by the sword of want" to sell their labor power to a capitalist in exchange for a wage that enables them to secure some resources (Gourevitch 2015, 81).

Gourevitch (2013, 596; 2018) identifies this compulsion in the "lack of reasonable alternatives" to selling one's labor that the worker is faced with due to their lack of productive assets. As he puts it,

Nonowners are forced in the sense that they have no reasonable alternative to selling their labor: they cannot steal, they cannot rely on the charity of those with wealth, and even if some can become owners not all can. This is what labor republicans meant when they said workers "assent but they do not consent, they submit but do not agree" to the wage-labor contract. (Gourevitch 2013, 602)

Workers are, then, dominated by virtue of the distribution of property, which places them under an economic compulsion to sell their labor. As nonowners they cannot choose to work for themselves or to opt out of the labor market. The lack of a reasonable alternative is the central architectural component of structural domination through which workers are subjected to the arbitrary power of capitalists.

The articulation of the structural domination of workers in terms of the lack of reasonable alternatives to selling their labor has been subject to criticism on the grounds that (a) it is insufficiently detailed to enable us to say precisely when an alternative counts as reasonable and (b) workers can in fact be furnished with reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to a capitalist in the labor market. I address these issues in turn.

What Counts as a Reasonable Alternative?

Despite the central role that the reasonable alternative criterion plays in his account, Gourevitch does not provide much detail regarding the standard by which we can judge whether or not an option is reasonable. This has led to criticism from some theorists otherwise sympathetic to the broader identification of the condition of workers as one of structural domination. As Tom O'Shea (2019, 18) argues, the reasonable alternative approach "falls short of a criterion for determining which alternatives count as reasonable" across a range

of cases including when individuals are self-employed or are able to temporarily rely on the independent wealth of relatives rather than selling their labor. Without more detail regarding what makes an alternative reasonable and how we can assess it, it is argued that the criterion will rely on controversial and contextual intuitions based on politically contested baselines of reasonableness and be of little use in evaluating the conditions of less familiar categories of worker.

The natural place to turn in search of a detailed account of what constitutes a reasonable alternative is the work of G. A. Cohen, who used the notion as part of his conceptualization of proletarian unfreedom (Cohen 1979; 1983; 1987). Indeed, Gourevitch cites Cohen's work on the distinction between doing something freely and being free to do something when outlining the role of the reasonable alternative criterion in his argument but does not engage with Cohen's work explicitly in outlining his account (2013, 602fn58). Cohen argues that "B is not an acceptable alternative to A if B is worse than A and B is particularly bad" (Cohen 1983, 30; 1987, 71).² This is a thoroughly objective account, concerned only with the quality of those options as such; for Cohen, we can say that an agent is forced to do something they would in any case want to do because they have no reasonable alternative (Cohen 1983, 30–1).

How do we go about assessing the quality of options? Cohen appeals to the standard of expected utility; an option can be viewed as worse than another if it has a lower expected utility—that is, a lower sum of the utility (defined broadly) that might come about in various outcomes if that option is chosen and the probability of such outcomes arising—than that other option. Using expected utility to weigh options moves us beyond the contextualism O'Shea rejects but, as Cohen himself indicates, retains a degree of imprecision when applied to actual cases (Cohen 1987, 72). This has two aspects. First, it is difficult to calculate expected utility in cases with a range of facts that can be interpreted in different ways and for which data regarding outcomes might be elusive. How can the costs of being subject to sexual harassment or workplace bullying be factored into such a calculus? Second, there is the question of what it means for something to be "particularly bad." Cohen does not provide an answer here beyond stating that this is an absolute judgment. We can infer that an option is particularly bad in his account when it fails to meet some normatively relevant threshold of expected utility.

Where might this threshold be? One option is provided by Serena Olsaretti, who identifies as unacceptable an option that "no rational agent may reasonably be expected to choose" (1998, 72fn36). Olsaretti (2004,

² I take the account Cohen provides in "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom" as his developed view. An early articulation can be found in "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat" (Cohen 1979), which is considerably less plausible—a judgement he presumably shared, given that his revised version of this paper presents a view much more aligned with that articulated in his later work (Cohen 2011, x).

119) does not prescribe any particular objective measure to perform this role, but does suggest that “an option that involves sacrificing some basic need is not an acceptable one.” Talk of basic needs departs from an expected utility framework in substituting protections against incursion of particularly valuable interests for an all-things-considered threshold. In doing so, it rules as unacceptable a class of options that sacrifice the basic needs of an agent but are still of reasonable overall expected utility. But it is reasonable to assume the outputs of basic needs accounts and accounts that stick with a pure expected utility threshold of what counts as particularly bad will largely align in practice.

These questions indicate two important things. First, even a basic needs account of the threshold for what makes a particularly bad option would have to incorporate expected utility calculations for comparative purposes. Second, both of the main ways in which this threshold might be cashed out provide only a relatively imprecise identification of where it actually lies. This reflects the complex reality of all kinds of border cases that do not admit of easy answers in which information regarding expected utility and effect on basic needs may be hazy and about which reasonable agents may disagree. But they do at least provide a basis for such judgements that do not rely on context-bounded intuition. Notwithstanding their imprecision, we are now able to see what might make options reasonable or not and are able to make judgements on at least some cases.

Reasonable Alternatives in (and outside) the Labor Market

Although the first concern with the reasonable alternative criterion concerns its precision, the second takes issue with the larger substantive claim that workers in capitalist societies necessarily lack reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to capitalists by virtue of the latter’s monopolization of the means of production. Rather, it is argued that this lack of reasonable alternatives can be remedied using policy instruments of various kinds rather than by introducing the kind of collective ownership that Gourevitch claims is necessary.

We can identify three overlapping strategies that republicans have promoted to this end: competition, decommodification, and combinations of the two. Theorists who promote competition as a means of minimizing domination in labor markets, such as Robert Taylor, view that domination as a consequence of insufficiently competitive market conditions and insufficiently resourced exit rights. As Taylor (2018, 445) puts it,

competitive markets in general protect the [freedom as nondomination] of their participants by eliminating economic power; they create a structural context within which their constitutive relationships can be free of domination, thereby advancing republican ideals.

A primary element of this structural context is the ability of workers to access the resources to be able to

exit relationships without cost, resist coercive offers, and establish new organizations (Taylor 2019a, 215). Taylor (2017) proposes a broad panoply of policy proposals that he argues can produce nondomination within labor markets including antitrust policies, capital demogrants, and universal at-will employment. Under these conditions workers will not be subject to the will of a capitalist but will be able to choose between a wide range of reasonable alternatives that enable them to pursue different goods and exercise occupational freedom. Workers will, for instance, have the option of pooling demogrants with others to create firms with cooperative working practices or starting their own business. This bundle of policies, Taylor (2019b, 271) claims, abolishes structural domination in the labor market by “universalizing private capital ownership” and thus turning “all citizens into capitalists.”

An alternative strategy for providing reasonable alternatives to workers attempts to decommodify their labor. Whereas the competitive market approach outlined by Taylor seeks to generate reasonable alternatives through the labor market, those who advocate decommodification argue for the deployment of state power to create reasonable alternatives to entering into the labor market as it currently operates. By doing so, citizens are provided with a means of subsisting that is not determined by the logic of the market. Decommodification, in Gosta Esping-Andersen’s influential articulation, “occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market” (Esping-Andersen 2013, 41).

The most prominent proposal for decommodification in the republican literature involves the introduction of a universal basic income. An unconditional income provided to citizens by the state would, it is argued, act as a bulwark against the commodification of labor, enabling citizens to plan their lives and organize their activities based on factors other than market discipline and the imperative to work (Raventos 2007, 72; Standing 2013, 35). Although such schemes are often advocated as a means of empowering workers within the market (including by Taylor), arguments from within a republican framework usually place more weight on the enhanced control that workers hold over their labor when they are able, at least temporarily, to exit the labor market (Pettit 2007, 5).

Another way of producing reasonable alternatives through decommodification is through the state acting as an employer of last resort. A version of this idea has recently outlined in republican terms by Alan Thomas (2021). Like Taylor, Thomas argues that “organizational pluralism” is essential to nondomination in the labor market but suggests that workers will only be able to realize the full value of exit when the state takes on the responsibility of acting as an employer of last resort (SELR). The SELR strategy decommodifies labor as part of a macroeconomic arrangement that renders interpersonal domination impossible by securing the fair value of the political liberties and creating a permanent public option of employment that is immune to

private interests (Thomas 2021, 537). This means that all citizens are furnished with this option as a reasonable alternative to selling their labor to a capitalist. The state can take on this role in a variety of institutional setups; the model of economic democracy developed by David Schweickart (2011, 75–6) involves the state performing this function but differs from Thomas’s account in focusing more on the internal structure of firms.

As Thomas’s (2021) account indicates, most recommendations for institutional reforms or policies that are directed at generating reasonable alternatives combine elements of each of these strategies. The distinction between the two is ideal-typical and largely concerns the location of these reasonable alternatives; the competition strategy seeks to produce them within the labor market, but the decommodification strategy seeks to generate them outside of that market. Combinations of the strategies target producing both kinds of alternatives or at creating one of these kinds using both mechanisms. The “mixed economy” promoted by Philip Pettit is a combination of the former kind, whereas market-oriented arguments for a universal basic income are of the latter.³

Each of these strategies can plausibly generate a varied range of options that appear to comfortably vault the threshold of not being particularly bad. Do they, then, eradicate the structural domination of workers? Not necessarily. Although workers may be provided reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to capitalists in the labor market in these conditions, they may still be subject to the arbitrary power of those capitalists through other means. They may still be dependent on them to be able to engage in productive activity that allows them to meet their basic needs. As small business owners or members of cooperatives, they may be subject to structural domination if the distribution of goods remains highly unequal as the success of their enterprise (and thus their ability to meet their basic needs) will continue to depend on the cooperation and permission of capitalists. In the absence of adequate checks that ensure that the terms of this cooperation and permission are forced to sufficiently track their interests, workers will continue to be dependent on capitalists.

In the next section, I argue for this claim by showing that structural domination in the labor market should be understood as an expression of a broader relation of dependence that can be manifested multifariously. I will argue that the structural domination of the labor market can only be understood by decentering the potential for interference—in both its narrow standard sense and the broader sense that is central to Gourevitch’s account. The dependence to which workers remain subject even in a competitive and pluralistic labor market need not be manifested in exposure to the

possibility of interference by any individual capitalist or in a lack of reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to some member of the capitalist class. Even those who are not employed by capitalists or who are able to engage in other forms of production may still be subject to structural domination when certain conditions pertain.

THE PRIMACY OF INTERFERENCE

I begin by returning to Gourevitch’s account of structural domination, showing that exposure to the possibility of interference is not the conceptual core of the condition of structural domination. The concept of structural domination is presented by Gourevitch as both an extension of that of domination, covering new instances, and a different kind of dominating relationship. These differences are mainly constructed by expanding the notion of intentionality beyond its use in Pettit’s account and identifying a broader range of actors as relevant to conditions of structural domination. Although Gourevitch’s account expands rather than discards the relevant notion of “interference,” incorporating cases of “forcing,” I argue that an underappreciated implication of this shift is that dependence, rather than the possibility of interference, becomes the characteristic component of structural domination. Once this becomes clear, we can see how this dependence can remain even in competitive labor markets and can also be manifested in various economic relations outside of the labor market.

Domination, in Pettit’s (1997, 52) account, occurs when an agent/group is exposed to the possibility of the arbitrary interference of another agent/group. Gourevitch (2013, 600) notes that Pettit incorporates an “intentionality” requirement in this formulation whereby “[a]n agent interferes intentionally when he knows, or at least ought to have known, that he has the power to interfere in the choices of a known, specific agent.” Pettit’s rationale for limiting domination to actions that exhibit this intentionality is that “were non-intentional forms of obstruction also to count as interference, that would be to lose the distinction between securing people against the natural effects of chance and incapacity and scarcity and securing them against the things that they may try to do to one another” (1997, 53). Domination, then, occurs when individuals have the capacity to make things worse for others in ways that are either intentional or foreseeable.

This view of intentionality, Gourevitch (2013, 600) claims, blinds Pettit to the domination at play in labor markets: “[s]ince the overall distribution of property is *unintentional*, whatever obstacles it places in the way of a person’s life plans—such as forcing him to sell his labor rather than find some other means of living—do not compromise that person’s freedom.” However, relations of arbitrary power can exhibit a different degree of intentionality that can be manifested through support for social structures or practices. Gourevitch argues that it is this kind of intentionality that we can

³ Although I focus here on interventions concerning labor markets, all of these strategies are generally presented as part of broader institutional arrangements viewed as optimally promoting nondomination.

identify in the labor market. Although the relationship between a capitalist and a worker in the labor market may not afford the capitalist the power to worsen the option set of the worker—say, by preventing her from quitting—the worker is still subject to the “many masters” who own the means of production by virtue of her lack of a reasonable alternative to selling her labor to one of them. Although those capitalists do not intentionally act to worsen an individual’s option set, they do intentionally or foreseeably support laws and engage in practices that leave the worker in that condition of dependence; “all that owners need to intend is to defend the unequal, private ownership of productive assets” (Gourevitch 2013, 602).

Once we identify structural domination as operating at a “different order of intentionality” (Gourevitch 2013, 601), various implications become apparent. A relation of structural domination need not involve subjection to the possibility of interference of the kind we see in paradigmatic cases of domination. Rather, a broader range of “intentional interferences” come into view, characterized by the asymmetrical imposition and control of constraints on the voluntariness of agents rather than the worsening of options within an option set. To be “forced” to sell one’s labor because of the monopolization of control of the means of production by capitalists now appears as a species of intentional interference. The constraints on arbitrary interference that are incorporated in competitive market conditions may prevent the development of personal relations of dependence but do not alter relations of structural domination that may be enacted and enforced *through* voluntary market exchanges.

The decentering of interference that emerges from this shift in the intentionality requirement is furthered by identifying a wider range of agents as relevant to a relation of structural domination. If we understand the intentionality requirement to entail that domination can only occur when one agent purposively or foreseeably interferes with another identified agent’s choices, we conceive domination, in Gourevitch’s (2013, 606) terms, as “always and only by *particular* masters.” But structural cases of domination can only be understood with reference to a far more extensive cast list. A complete account of structural domination in the labor market involves discussion of all those agents who own productive assets as well as those who support the existing distribution of resources in various other ways. Workers are subject to the many masters on whom they are dependent for employment. Just as the dominated agent in paradigmatic relations of domination must ingratiate themselves to a master, so must the worker in the labor market ingratiate herself to these masters. In the labor market, though, this takes the form of presenting oneself as competitive amid a vast number of rivals for a position—one “must attract investment to survive,” and the “acts of economic prostration” that this engenders resemble the toadying that Pettit identifies in interpersonal cases (Gourevitch 2013, 603; Pettit 1997, 5).

What we can now see is that, due to the shift in these two components, structural domination should be

understood as a condition of domination wherein dominated agents *need not be exposed to the possibility of invasive interference from dominators*. This is a more fundamental, and underappreciated, departure from Pettit’s account of domination than any other aspect of the concept of structural domination. Although theorists discussing gender- and race-based forms of structural domination have developed this point in a variety of ways, it has been given less explicit prominence in work on economic relations of domination (Gädeke 2020a; 2020b).⁴ In part, this is because the possibility of intentional interference remains important in Gourevitch’s account; rather than abandoning the requirement, Gourevitch expands the notion of interference beyond the standard use to include the kinds of forcing to which workers are subject in the labor market. What has not been fully appreciated, though, is that this departure means not only that structural domination need not involve invasive interference of the kind required in Pettit’s account but also that the category of interference consequently becomes less important in our understanding of the kinds of unfreedom that the concept is meant to capture. The central component of structural domination is instead dependence, which may pertain even if agents hold some capital and are able not to sell their labor to capitalists. The particular mode in which this relation of dependence is expressed in different contexts—a lack of reasonable alternatives, vulnerability to invasive interference, the deliberative isolation⁵ in which capitalists are able to decide on the distribution of socially necessary goods and cooperation—is secondary to the basic relation of dependence emergent from the distribution of power to make decisions about whether certain kinds of economic cooperation occur and on what terms.⁶

To make this claim, we must weaken one of Gourevitch’s central stipulations—that structural domination occurs when capitalists have monopolistic control over the means of production. In monopolistic conditions, workers will indeed have no reasonable alternative to working for a capitalist. But the structural domination that is identified most starkly in the labor market can pertain even when other options are available and capital is more widely (though still highly unevenly) distributed. It can pertain even when labor market reforms of the kind Taylor argues for are implemented or when all citizens are supplied with a universal basic income. Although it is standardly viewed as the nexus of the class relation, the dependence of workers on capitalists extends significantly

⁴ For an exception, see O’Shea (2019).

⁵ See McCammon (2015).

⁶ A consequence of this shift is that the view of structural domination articulated here more closely resembles the notion of “systemic domination” developed by Dorothea Gädeke, as the focus of analysis lies in the continual reproduction, through frequent interactions within social rules, of the dependence of workers on capitalists rather than on tracing chains of interference or intention. My account does not, like Gädeke’s, rely on the claim that all cases of domination are necessarily structural, though it is compatible with it; I remain agnostic on that question here.

beyond the labor market, and a wholesale transformation of economic conditions rather than mere labor market reforms are required to eradicate it.

Consider those individuals who take up the option of starting an independent business, either individually or as part of a small group. They are certainly free to organize the internal structures of the enterprise and may introduce structures that promote nondomination within the firm. They are not forced to enter into an employment contract with a capitalist. But that does not mean that they are not still subject to the arbitrary power of capitalists in their economic activity in certain conditions. They may still be dependent on the investment or patronage of those who wield more significant economic power—that is, those whose ownership of the means of production extends beyond the public provision of demogrants or a basic income—to be able to make a living through the operation of this entity (White 2011, 568–9). They may be dependent on the cooperation of firms that hold monopolistic power over communications technology or who act as gatekeepers to markets they wish to participate in. Consider, for instance, the control that companies like Apple and Google exert over the terms that developers must conform to for their apps to be hosted in their respective app stores and the influence they have over which of an enormous number of available apps appear most prominently (Muldoon 2022, 14–6). To be sure, this control is partly a function of unchecked monopoly power that effective competition policy would play a part in dismantling (though the influence that these corporations are able to exert over political institutions, which must itself be understood as part of the dominating relation, is a major obstacle to such changes), but it is also rooted in the development of the network effects that are central to the value of digital platforms and that enable them to develop this market power in the first place.

This dependence can also develop in cases when, in contrast to the app market, the market is more open and power is less radically concentrated. Indeed, various radical republicans have argued that decisions regarding business investment (i.e., where a multinational corporation will locate manufacturing facilities) can be understood as structurally similar to structural domination in the labor market (Cicerchia 2022; Gourevitch 2013, 603); both workers and regions/cities require this kind of investment and must market themselves in a way that appeals to those who make hiring or investment decisions. The billions of dollars of tax incentives and infrastructure spending, changes to the public realm (including offers to build an exclusive airport lounge and rename streets), and legislative exemptions or changes that were offered across the pitches made by 238 U.S. cities to be the site of Amazon's "second headquarters" in 2017 are a vivid example of this. Whereas in the app case the structural dependence is a function of a tiny number of corporations having control over platforms that are essential to commercial viability, the structural dependence in the investment case is a function of the dependence of communities on investment that is not required to track

their interests. In both cases structural domination is no longer taking place exclusively in the *labor* market, but a relation of arbitrary power remains between those who control the bulk of the economic resources of society and those who require access to those resources to engage in productive activity and meet their economic needs.⁷ This access is not granted by right or determined with reference to the interests of those who are subject to this power but by, and according to the interests of, the holders of those resources.

Why think that workers who have independent access to capital and who thus have reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to a capitalist will remain subject to the arbitrary power of capitalists? Because they remain dependent on the cooperation of capitalists, on terms insensitive to their own needs, to engage in productive activity and make a living. The only difference is that this dependence is manifested differently. Workers have a reasonable alternative to selling their labor to a capitalist, but these alternative options (which, as Thomas [2021, 541] notes, still include involuntary unemployment) may still leave them dependent on those capitalists. This dependence is an objective relation that can occur even if capitalists do not recognize the power they hold over workers and that can pertain between agents who do not know of each other. It is useful here to recall that the reasonable alternative criterion is standardly used to judge whether someone has been forced to perform an action; Gourevitch uses it to demonstrate that in conditions of monopoly ownership of the means of production, workers are forced to sell their labor to capitalists. But the central component of the concept of structural domination is the *dependence* that characterizes the lack of ownership of the means of production, with this dynamic of forcing simply the most prominent way in which that dependence is manifested. Within the labor market, the reasonable alternative criterion demonstrates the structural domination in labor markets in conditions of monopolization of the means of production, but it does not exhaust that relation of domination, which can manifest itself in contexts where the reasonable alternative criterion is less applicable.

STRUCTURAL DOMINATION AND THE CONDITIONS OF INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION

The potential for the domination of workers by capitalists in relations of production other than the wage relation is articulated by various figures in the Marxist tradition.⁸ Most useful for our purposes is Cohen's treatment. The condition of the worker is often thought to involve ownership of one's own labor power (in contrast to slaves or serfs) and a *lack* of ownership of any means of production. It is the condition of such

⁷ Many cases of this kind will also involve relations of domination rooted in the distribution of political power.

⁸ See, for instance, Roemer (1982) and Vrousalis (2018).

workers and the way in which they are forced to sell their labor that Gourevitch's account so effectively captures. But Cohen identifies another category of workers, who again own their own labor power but also own *some* of the means of production they must use to make a living (Cohen 1978, 66–73). He illustrates that in some cases those in this category are properly thought of as proletarians; the garment worker who is required to own their own sewing machine as a condition of their employment, Cohen (1978, 71) says, is “manifestly ... a proletarian” despite owning means of production. Indeed, the garment worker's ownership of means of production is described as merely “illusory,” as they are only able to produce using them “under capitalist aegis” (Cohen 1978, 70–3). This is not the case for all agents in this category, which admits of wide variation, spanning “a continuum between independent and proletarian status”; some producers who own some but not all of the means of production necessary to make ends meet (perhaps those with comparatively more productive property or who operate in more favorable market conditions) will be sufficiently free in their dealings that they cannot plausibly be viewed as subject to structural domination (Cohen 1978, 68).

A determination of whether an agent has reasonable alternatives within the labor market is, then, only a partial answer to the question of whether they are subject to structural domination. The reasonable alternative criterion must be accompanied by what I call the “independent production criterion.” Although the former reveals when agents are forced to sell their labor, the latter indicates the extent to which agents' ability to engage in productive activity is more broadly constrained by the arbitrary power of others. Both are to a large extent a function of the unequal distribution of the means of production and occur in situations where agents are dependent on the cooperation of others to be able to engage in productive activity and access the resources required to meet their basic needs.

We can judge whether the independent production criterion is met by asking the following questions. First, to what extent is an agent reliant on the cooperation or permission of others to be able to meet their needs by engaging in productive activity? Second, to what extent are (a) the decision as to whether that cooperation or permission is forthcoming and (b) the terms of that cooperation or permission forced by the agent, using relevant forms of control, to track their interests? The more an agent is reliant on cooperation or permission of others that is not subject to these kinds of controls, the lower their ability to engage in independent production.

In typical cases neither (a) nor (b) will be satisfied; workers will not have reasonable alternatives to selling their labor to a capitalist within the labor market and will therefore be unable to engage in productive activity without being subjected to arbitrary power. And as I have argued, in some cases agents may be subject to structural domination even if they have reasonable alternatives—notably, when the ability of an agent to meet her basic needs by engaging in productive activity

is subject to the inadequately controlled power of others, as when platform access is determined by terms that promote only the interests of the platform owners or investment decisions are made only with reference to corporate profit.

Each of the two aspects of this criterion requires further explication—first, the matter of reliance on the cooperation or permission of others to engage in productive activity. In modern economic conditions, this reliance is, for most people, extensive. Those of us without significant personal or familial wealth or extensive ownership of the means of production—that is, those of us who are forced to engage in productive labor to meet our needs—are reliant on states, corporations, and civil society organizations for investment or employment; on monopolies to grant us access to their digital platforms or physical shelves; on financial institutions to provide credit and enable us to make transactions; and on these and other agents for much else besides. In some of these cases, we are reliant on actors with significant market power, including monopolists or monopsonists. As I have already argued, agents who own some means of production may still be very deeply reliant on other agents to engage in productive activity in certain market conditions.

To be reliant on other agents—be they identified individual actors, groups, or whole classes who have access to resources one must access to engage in productive activity—is not in itself a constraint on one's freedom. Clearly, reliance of this kind has a great many benefits. Being exposed to the actions and power of a wider number of agents and agencies may introduce constraints on agents, but it can also promote choice for consumers and producers, improve productivity and efficiency, and enable the development of financial institutions and instruments that producers can use to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of the market (Pettit 2006, 134). Knowing how far an agent is reliant on others is a starting point for determining whether they are subject to structural domination in the market but does not intimate toward any particular verdict.

We can judge the extent of an agent's reliance on others by determining *which needs* they do not require the cooperation of others to meet and to what extent (i.e., for how long, or to what level of satisfaction). This enables us to see that agents who have significant personal or family wealth and who thus are *not* forced to engage in production to meet their needs may accordingly be less reliant on the cooperation of other producers to meet their needs (though they may be reliant on the continued goodwill of family members or benefactors), at least for a period of time (O'Shea 2019, 18). Of course, reliance is often domain specific; I am reliant on being able to access and transact with a plumber to fix my broken shower but not for internet access or a trading permit. As well as an overall determination of an agent's reliance on other market actors for other goods, we can also identify the extent of their reliance on particular agents or groups across a range of goods.

Perhaps the most obvious relation of reliance pertains between agents and the state, which provides the

legal apparatus enabling production and exchange to reliably occur, enforces contracts, protects property rights, and much more. We should be careful in our articulation of the distinctive role of the state within these relations though. The state creates the conditions for cooperation among agents in production, and in capitalist societies it does so in ways that generally promote the interests of capital (by, for example, prioritizing the protection of property rights over poverty relief). It is important to distinguish the reliance agents have on the state's role in providing the conditions for cooperation between agents and the reliance that agents may have on the state as an economic and political actor that can exercise significant power itself in areas such as investment, employment, and infrastructure spending. As only the latter directly concerns cooperation directed at productive activity, it is this kind of reliance that is most relevant to our discussion.⁹

When reliance is converted into dependence, it becomes a form of structural domination. The difference between these two conditions is the subject of the second aspect of the independent production criterion — control.

It is central to the identification of structural domination in and beyond the labor market that agents are reliant on the cooperation of agents whose decisions are not forced to track their interests. The complete deliberative isolation of corporations deciding where to invest or tech firms deciding the terms of their platforms is exemplary of this. Although I cannot provide a full account of precisely what kinds of constraints and forms of control will allow agents to engage in independent production, we can make some progress toward such an answer in two ways. The first of these is by indicating the threshold at which an agent can be said to have sufficient control to be viewed as an independent producer, whereas the second is to outline some compatible frameworks of control that will be applicable to different kinds of power.

We can say that an agent is reliant but not dependent on the cooperation or permission of another agent to engage in productive activity when the decision of whether to cooperate or grant permission and the terms of that cooperation or permission are forced to accord with constraints that represent the interest of that agent in engaging in independent productive activity that enables them to meet their basic needs. There is much more to say about this. First, note that it does not commit us to saying that independent production involves anything like wholesale state ownership and management or individuals holding exclusive private ownership rights over the goods they need to engage in production. Other agents owning and controlling goods that others need to access to engage in production is not of itself a source of structural domination; that

domination emerges in the absence of adequate constraints on those agents' use of those goods. It does, though, intimate toward a distinction between those goods that can be subject to effective forms of popular control through regulation by legitimate public institutions and those that require more direct capacity to control held by affected agents. The constraints which represent the interests of an agent in engaging in independent productive activity will include some mechanisms subject to only relatively distant forms of control from that agent while mandating more direct and local forms of control over, for instance, the organization of productive activity. Second, my use of the term "constraint" is relatively broad, encompassing not only legal and contractual obligations or procedural requirements but also the distribution of powers and goods themselves. This does not imply that all kinds of power can be rendered nonarbitrary with the imposition of procedural or legal constraints; it may be that the decision-making power must be redistributed or relocated in order for a relation of power to become nonarbitrary. Third, some fuzziness is introduced into this threshold with the concept of basic needs. Although some needs are uncontroversially basic, others (such as certain levels of education or access to the internet) are not. My view is that this indeterminacy is productive in this context. It indicates that these are points of reasonable political dispute, and it also coheres with the broader continuum between proletarian and independent producer status in which agents will be able to satisfy different needs to different levels.

What kinds of control can ensure that this reliance does not develop into dependence? The kind of control that is standardly viewed in the neo-republican literature as rendering power nonarbitrary involves the capacity to alter the inputs in a system in ways that reliably produce different kinds of outputs (Pettit 2012, 155–6). For a state to be nonarbitrary and thus legitimate, citizens must have individuated efficacious influence over the policies and practices of that state; they must have the ability to input in various ways (voting, political speech, running for office, protesting, petitioning, etc.) that have some influence on what the outputs (institutional arrangements, policies, holders of office) are.

While this accounts for the power that employers hold over employees, it doesn't directly address our main concern of structural domination with labor markets and other kinds of markets. In contrast to capacities for coercive interference, neo-republicans view market power as unobjectionable except in cases where, due to the development of monopolies or insufficient regulation or support for worker or consumer rights, capacities for coercive interference arise (Pettit 2006, 141–4). I have argued, though, that what appears in this framework as mere unobjectionable influence can, viewed from a broader perspective, be understood as constituting a relation of structural domination between parties. When a corporation decides where to build a new factory, it does not coerce or invade the choices of the residents of areas in need of investment or employment opportunities, but as *Gourevitch's*

⁹ This is not to derogate the significance of the basic legal and political structures upon which the state ordinarily acts, merely to indicate that although these structures shape market relations (and may do so with great force), they are not themselves market actions. Evidently, these structures will only be legitimate if agents have sufficient political control over their form and content.

account illuminates, those residents are reliant on *some* entity making such an investment. This, though, poses the question of what kind of control is necessary to render such power nonarbitrary. The kind of control that republicans argue employees should have in workplaces, or citizens over the state, cannot directly apply in these cases.

It might be thought that citizens can exercise sufficient control over these corporations through state regulation (Pettit 2006, 144–6). Regulatory power can impose constraints that ensure that private actors behave in ways that track the shared interests of citizens. This kind of power can certainly be used by the state to direct private actors toward certain kinds of behaviors and to prohibit others. These constraints can ensure that cooperation occurs on terms that track the interests of citizens, ensuring that they have recourse against agents who fail to meet the terms of an agreement, who discriminate against them, or who exploit their position of vulnerability by price gouging. But there are reasons to be skeptical that this will yield a level of control for citizens over private bodies adequate to prevent structural domination in all cases. State regulation can incentivize certain actions and prohibit others, but it leaves significant discretion in the hands of private agents to make their own decisions regarding things like where and how much to invest and the terms on which one allows apps to be accessed on one's app store. This is unproblematic in many cases; so long as relevant suppliers are obliged to operate within constraints that force them to act in ways that in the aggregate track citizens' interests in free productive activity, a plumber or app developer will not be dependent on them (Pettit 2006, 146). But regulatory power cannot produce this outcome in all cases.

This is because regulatory systems are generally not intended or designed to provide citizens with control over the kinds of decision and power of concern here but to prevent actors from abusing their market power in particular ways. A regulator may demand that power be redistributed, but the purpose of this redistribution is to prevent monopolization or punish bad actors, not to provide control over the direction of investment or the terms of platforms. Regulatory power can enforce constraints that adequately control the use of market power when the power of the state is sufficiently independent from that of corporate or private power and when those constraints extend over relevant forms of power held by those agents. The latter of these conditions is often left unmet; regulation of tech markets may impose some constraints on the policies that Apple, Google, and Amazon use in determining the conditions for acceptance onto their app store, but they leave intact their power to change the cut of revenues they take from hosted apps or promote whichever apps they choose.

The demand for control that resides in the identification of structural domination in labor markets and the other markets discussed here can only be achieved through the redistribution and reconstitution of these powers or democratic social control of those platforms or resources. New regimes of control over the direction

and terms of investment and over the terms of access to economically and socially important platforms are necessary to provide those agents who are currently subject to the forms of structural domination that are outlined in this paper adequate forms of control over these goods. The severity and structure of the reliance of agents on those who hold control rights over these resources is such that the imposition of constraints alone is unlikely to sufficiently track their interests, as it leaves the terms of the cooperation and permission of corporations largely untouched. This is especially so when it comes to relations of reliance that are naturally monopolistic or subject to powerful network effects, where agents are not only reliant on the market to provide them with goods and services but also have a particular reliance on an identifiable set of corporations or other actors.

It should therefore be clear that the independent production criterion does not simply restate the reasonable alternative criterion but is an additional condition of free participation in productive markets. The two criteria represent different interests. The reasonable alternative criterion protects the interest that an agent has in free choice and, in the particular context of the labor market, occupational freedom. The independent production criterion protects the interests that agents have in being able to meet their basic needs through engaging in productive labor and in being able to do so without exposure to arbitrary power.

This account captures a range of cases that sit outside of the labor market beyond the cases of investment and platform monopoly. For instance, it also helps illuminate the experience of those in the "informal economy," which, though often neglected in philosophical discussion, represent an enormous segment of the global working population subject (to varying degrees) to arbitrary power on the part of exploitative employers, recruitment agencies, and the state and are in a significant number of cases only able to engage in productive activity through these agents.

Rather than imposing a homogenous interpretation on diverse cases, conceiving of the structural domination experienced by workers in the labor market as a function of a broader form of dependence can track the varying constraints faced by different actors and recognize that some are more protected from arbitrary power than others are. Some workers experience domination in the firm, others by virtue of precarious working situations; some are subject to monopolistic conditions; some have their working rights protected by effective regulations, whereas others are subjected to state violence when they protest mistreatment. By incorporating a considerably wider range of relations under the banner of structural domination than would appear using only the reasonable alternative criterion, the account includes some relations that involve less severe restrictions of freedom than those in the paradigm cases of structural domination, extending beyond the particular kind of forcing captured by Gourevitch's account. Working under terms over which you have insufficient control has a less serious effect on an agent than being forced to work. Rather than diminishing the

normative significance or analytical usefulness of the category of structural domination, I suggest this simply reflects the breadth of ways in which agents can be subject to arbitrary power in productive relations and indicates the need to engage with the specifics of an individual case to gauge the severity of the domination involved.

The structural domination experienced by some will be more severe than for others. The construction of the set of options available to an agent within labor markets is deeply racialized and gendered and can more abstractly be said to be intertwined with other forms of injustice that affect the options available to agents in often complex ways. The questions of how the conceptual apparatus proposed here helps us to understand the conditions that different groups of agents subject to structural domination face and how this relates to existing research detailing the empirical and social scientific expressions of these relations or analyzing their conceptual and historical shape are deeply important ones that I do not have space to explore adequately. Here, I simply note that this account can register the influence of a variety of axes of domination on the construction of the value and range of option sets available to agents in their economic activity.

It also provides a basis for thinking about how production might be organized so as to eradicate structural domination. A full assessment of this would incorporate consideration of the expected promotion of nondomination brought about by specific packages and the effects they would have on those who are especially dependent in their economic relations. We can briefly, though, consider which of the three strategies for promoting nondomination outlined earlier—competition, decommodification, and both combined—appears most likely to generate conditions of independent production. Competition approaches can produce reasonable alternatives within the labor market, generating opportunities for self-employment and easy exit from employment relations, but they fail to effectively address the conditions of independent production beyond this. Decommodification, on the other hand, targets both elements, providing reasonable alternatives both within and beyond capitalist labor markets.

Although decommodification approaches appear more promising, some of them—specifically, basic income schemes—will also be found wanting in this account. The extent to which these schemes decommodify labor is largely determined by the level of income they provide and the broader framework of policy changes they accompany. The levels at which some recent and ongoing basic income pilots are set—at around \$6,000 a year—would effectively satisfy some, but far from all, basic needs. Such an amount might cover the annual grocery costs of a U.S. household. Combined with free public provision of health care and education, a significant range of basic needs might be met. What should be clear here is that to enable an individual to cover even the most basic of needs—food, shelter, heating, transportation, clothing, the costs of an internet connection—without being dependent on capitalists, a scheme would need both to be set at a rate that

is currently politically infeasible and to be accompanied with extensive unconditional public provision of various critical services. Lower levels of income may decommodify labor to some extent, but only schemes that enable agents to at least meet these most basic needs either without capitalist cooperation or that restructure the means by which such needs are met can be meaningfully said to create the conditions of independent production.¹⁰

Decommodifying labor through SELR seems more likely to satisfy these criteria; such a proposal clearly produces a reasonable alternative within the labor market and seeks to reorient production and distribution so as to prevent concentrations of power within the economy. Any successful combined approach must have a similar ambition.¹¹ Note, though, that SELR on its own does not provide the conditions for independent production beyond the labor market; it must rely on separate reorganization of the control of investment and the powers of ownership. The independent production requirement helps to reveal that the abolition of structural domination in the labor market relies on the abolition of those relations of economic domination that extend even outside of it in the realms of investment and access to certain kinds of goods. These considerations are dealt with internally in both Gourevitch's cooperativism and Schweickart's economic democracy, reflecting the fundamental connection between these issues argued for above. Regimes of this kind appear to provide the best prospect for creating the conditions of independent production for all.

CONCLUSION

The claim that workers are subject to structural domination in labor markets is a central plank of the recent radical turn in republican theory. This paper provides a clarification and revised defense of this claim. As I argue, in order to understand the structural domination of workers in the labor market we both need a clearer idea of what it means to have a reasonable alternative in a choice situation and to supplement the reasonable alternative criterion with an additional criterion that reflects that this domination in fact extends beyond the constraints of voluntariness within the labor market. The inclusion of the independent production criterion in our determination of whether workers are subject to structural domination illuminates a wider range of ways

¹⁰ Within and beyond the republican literature, there are a range of arguments distinct from that developed here that attend to the limited capacity of basic income schemes to promote nondomination within the workplace (Gourevitch 2016) and their precarious place in the kinds of political systems that are standard in oligarchic democracies (Gourevitch and Stanczyk 2018; Lazar 2021).

¹¹ None of the combined proposals outlined in the literature satisfy the conditions outlined here, but it is at least a possibility that some mixed approach may do so (especially given the ultimately schematic nature of the distinctions made between types here and the likelihood that a just economic order will involve competitive markets of some kind).

in which such domination can operate and its various possible origins. Such a move is also instructive in indicating what kind of institutional structures and policies may be required to eradicate such domination. I have suggested that some decommodification strategies (as well as some strategies in which decommodification is combined with competition) may, when married with other policies that target other potential sources of structural domination, provide a basis for the nondomination of workers within labor markets and in other markets. Most crucially, I have argued that the eradication of structural domination in production requires the redistribution rather than merely the regulation of concentrated economic power.

My argument in this paper focuses on only one relation of structural domination and does not preclude the possibility that such domination can take other forms or suggest that an agent who is able to engage in productive activity independently will be free from domination in all other respects. Identifying the economic systems and institutions that optimally promote nondomination involves a broader range of considerations including the structure of firms and the organization of political power as well as extensive comparative analysis of the effects of different ways of arranging production, especially on those who are subject to the most severe structural domination. To make progress on these questions, we must have a thorough and detailed account of the forms of unfreedom and injustice that must be minimized. My argument here is a contribution to this end.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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