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Social Domination and the Class Structure: Extending Left-Republicanism

by

M. Alan Hettinger II

Under the Direction of S. M. Love, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

There is a debate in republican political philosophy concerning whether, and under what circumstances, workers are dominated. Philosophers such as Pettit, Anderson, Gourevitch, and Vrousalis argue that employers dominate workers, either in extreme circumstances or as a necessity under capitalism. Some, such as Vrousalis, argue the domination of workers is a structural feature of capitalism. Others, such as Pettit, argue workplace domination is an extreme to protect against. I argue that capitalism requires the vulnerability of workers as a class to domination. Republicans who view workplace domination as an extreme fail to account for the structural cause of that domination. Capitalism requires profit-maximization, which requires the vulnerability of the working class so that workers will accept working in ways that are contrary to their interests, and over which they lack control. My argument parallels, but is distinct from, accounts of structural domination given by Gourevitch and Vrousalis, among others.

INDEX WORDS: Political philosophy, Domination, Capitalism, Republicanism, Marxism, Labor relations

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2024

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1 INTRODUCTION

Capitalism may seem to be the freest economic system. Individuals are not forced into any one career – they can enter into or quit jobs as they wish. Firms can structure themselves however they want, and engage in whatever market activity they choose to. The only constraining factor is other people, mediated through the market mechanism, which, its advocates say, efficiently responds to the needs and desires of everyone in society.

On the other hand, capitalism may seem incompatible with freedom. While one formally has a choice in their job and career, most people merely take whatever job they can get. Once at work, workers have little say over how their time is spent – one's schedule and tasks are strictly regulated by management, often down to the minute. Additionally, the course of one's life is strictly limited by market forces. The choice of career, whether and when to have children, when and how to retire, are all to some extent outside of one's control, and are governed by forces that most individuals have little or no control over.

From the anti-capitalist standpoint, there are two primary sites where workers are unfree. The first is the workplace – a hierarchical structure that is typically controlled undemocratically and which organizes its goals and activity around profit maximization. The second is abstract forces – the demands of the market, economic cycles, and ideology – which shape and limit one's life. The range of options for long-term life choices is set by these abstract forces. These forces almost vanish in everyday life, and seem to have been operating since long before one was even born.

My goal is not to argue for a particular conception of freedom, but to intervene in an ongoing debate within one school of political philosophy, namely republicanism, which defines freedom as the absence of domination. Domination is a relationship in which one party has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere in the choice-situation of another.

I will use a conception of capitalism that draws from Marx, but does not require accepting all the premises of historical materialism. The relevant features of capitalism for my argument are:

1. Private ownership of the means of production.
2. Abstract markets as a mechanism for the distribution of commodities.
3. The exchange of labor-power for wages.

Some republicans argue that the structure of the capitalist workplace is either inherently or potentially unfree because it, under at least some circumstances, places employers in a dominating position over employees. I call this the "workplace domination argument," or "WDA." Other republicans counter that the contractual, market nature of capitalism protects workers from domination, at least under ordinary circumstances.

I wish to intervene in the workplace domination argument in order to strengthen anti-capitalist republicanism. I propose an alternative argument to the WDA, called the class domination argument, or CDA. The CDA considers employers and employees at the level of socio-economic classes — capitalists and workers, respectively — and argues that the capitalist class dominates the working class. Where the structure of the labor market was outside the scope of the WDA, which considers only the structure of the workplace, the CDA considers the structure of both the market and the workplace, and the dynamics and interactions between them.

I argue for the following claims: The WDA is missing certain premises and is vulnerable to objections. The CDA solves the problems with the WDA. The CDA is broader in explanatory scope than the WDA. The WDA is a component of the CDA, and, considered in that context, is no longer problematic.

1.1 Republicanism

Republicanism (sometimes called "neo-republicanism") is a school of political philosophy centrally based around a particular conception of freedom. As a contemporary political theory, its central theorists are Phillip Pettit and Quentin Skinner. Both writers, especially Skinner as a historian, also emphasize its role as an interpretation of a historical tradition dating back to Cicero and playing a central part in the English, American, and French revolutions ([Skinner 2003](#)) ([Pettit 1997, 5–6](#)). Pettit is particularly associated with synthesizing republicanism as a contemporary approach to political philosophy and an alternative to Rawlsian liberalism. I will treat his definitions as the paradigm starting-point for republicanism¹, though open to dispute and modification.

For republicans, freedom (or sometimes, "liberty") is the condition of non-domination. Domination is a relationship in which one party is subject to the arbitrary power of another. The dominating party has the capacity to interfere with the dominated party on an arbitrary basis. The primary components of this definition are: interference; the *capacity* for interference; and arbitrariness.

Interference is the first important component of the definition. For Pettit, to interfere with someone is to intentionally reduce the available choices they would otherwise be in a position to make. Interference is, on its own, amoral ([Pettit 1997, 54](#)). For example, if a teacher takes away a student's cell phone to induce the student to pay attention (and such measures were established in advance as acceptable through some proper procedure), the teacher interferes with the student, but does not necessarily wrong the student.

¹ Pettit's definitions are commonly taken as the starting-point. For example, Pettit is cited extensively by ([Breen 2017](#)) ([González-Ricoy 2014](#)) ([Gourevitch 2013](#)) ([Roberts 2016](#)) ([Vrousalis 2019](#)).

The next important feature is that domination is a *capacity* for interference, not necessarily actual instances of interference. If someone has the capacity to take choices away from me, they have a certain amount of power over me, regardless of whether they exercise that capacity (Pettit 1997, 54).

The capacity for interference must also be "arbitrary" in order to count as domination. The concept of arbitrariness is both central to this definition and its most fraught component. As Pettit glosses it, an act of interference is arbitrary if "it is chosen or not chosen at the agent's pleasure. And in particular [...] without reference to the interests, or the opinions, of those affected." (Pettit 1997, 55). Though Pettit's original definition used the term "arbitrary," in recent work he more frequently speaks of "uncontrolled" interference (Pettit 2012). As he argues, "arbitrary" interference could wrongly be interpreted as "interference that is not subject to established rules", but some instances of rule-governed interference are still wrong from a republican standpoint. Rather, interference is wrong when it is not under the control of the person who is interfered with (Pettit 2012, 58).

There is also the question of what kind of controls are sufficient. To use an example from (Pettit 1997), suppose I vote for a political party, knowing it will raise taxes in my income bracket. Then, when it comes time to pay those taxes, I decide I don't want to pay. It would be implausible to say that I am thereby subject to domination. Rather, in such cases, "my relevant interests and ideas will be those that are shared in common with others" (Pettit 1997, 55–56). The core point is that structures of interference must be subject to mechanisms that force the interfering party to be responsive to the interests of the party who is interfered with. In the case of taxes, this could be a democratic mechanism for setting tax policy.

The example of slavery illustrates the motivation for this definition. When someone is enslaved, their master is in a position to order them to take any given action. The master is also

in a position to give no orders at all — to allow the slave to act on their own goals and desires. In theory, someone could enslave someone else without ever giving the slave orders. Yet they would still be in a position to give such orders. To republicans, this capacity is itself morally problematic, not just the exercise of it or its effects.

Domination is not, however, limited to a relationship between individuals. For example, one can be dominated by a state. To modify the earlier example from Pettit, if I don't have voting rights or any means of shaping politics, but the state forces me to pay taxes, the state interferes with me on an arbitrary basis. My available choices are reduced since I now have less money, and my lack of political rights means that nothing forces the state to track my interests – it may use the revenue on projects that fit my interests, or it may use the revenue in ways that benefit those who can vote, further worsening my situation. Either way, the state dominates me.

1.2 Capitalism

The definition of capitalism I use draws on the Marxian view. For my purposes, there are two relevant defining features of capitalism: the cyclical reinvestment of money in the market based on the profit motive; and private ownership of the means of production. These two features lead to the emergence of a third key feature: waged labor.

The main way in which capitalist markets differ from non-capitalist markets is in the types of incentive structures. This is illustrated by what Marx calls the C-M-C and M-C-M (commodity-money-commodity; money-commodity-money) forms of circulation ([Marx 1990, 200, 251](#)). In the C-M-C form, characteristic of non-capitalist markets, I have some commodity, such as agricultural goods that I have produced, and need some other commodity, such as clothes. Money serves the role of facilitating the "transformation" of the commodity I don't need, but that someone else does, into the commodity I do need, which someone else has. I sell the one commodity and use the money to buy the other. The goal all along is to meet my needs. In the

M-C-M form, by contrast, the goal is to use money to make more money. I start with money, buy a commodity, and sell it again. This would be a pointless use of my time, unless the second amount of money is higher than the first. The increase in money over the course of this cycle is profit. The amount of profit is, in part, a function of the starting amount of money. Given that I end the cycle with more money than I started, I can now repeat the cycle for even more money.

In some economic systems that were precursors to capitalism ², such as medieval trade, one might buy commodities in places where they are cheap, and sell them in places where they are more expensive. But this has natural limits: as the market grows, prices will tend to equalize, and profit is no longer possible. Instead, one needs a sustainable source of profit, that can grow indefinitely. One such source is the exploitation of labor-power.

Whatever theory of value we take on, the performance of labor can at least sometimes make a commodity more valuable. Under capitalism, labor is primarily bought and sold in units of time – hourly wages, for example. However, labor-time is quantitative, and the actual performance of labor is qualitative. Labor-time does not directly measure the "amount" of labor performed. This creates the possibility of a mismatch – the value added by the performance of labor may be more or less than the value paid in wages. If wages are less than the value-added of the work, the worker is exploited.

Marxian economics generally holds that exploitation is necessary for a functioning capitalist economy – surplus value extracted from labor is the primary source of profit.

Mainstream economists argue that the Marxian view of exploitation follows from an outdated

² There is significant debate among Marxist historians about the structure of precursor economic systems to capitalism, and the point at which they became capitalist, as well as the role of profit and cyclical investment in precapitalist economic systems. In addition to Part 8 of (Marx 1990), see (Braudel 1992) (Arrighi 2010) (Wood 2017). Since my concern is with capitalism as it exists today, the question of what specifically differentiates it from its historical antecedents is immaterial.

theory of value. My argument is agnostic of this debate and debates around the labor theory of value in general³. Rather, all that is needed is that the capitalist market incentivizes productivity above all else, regardless of the precise nature of surplus value.

The second key feature of capitalism for my purposes is the private ownership of the means of production. The means of production are all the components needed for the process of production – buildings, tools, and raw materials⁴. As Marx defines it, "both the instruments and object of labor are means of production" (Marx 1990, 287). To say that the means of production are privately owned means that they are the property of a private party. An individual or a corporation buys the means of production and then has exclusive rights to use them. Under capitalism, this generally means that the capitalist in particular owns the means of production. The goal is to hire workers and cause them to add as much value as possible. If the workers owned the means of production themselves, most would only work enough to meet their own needs, and no profit would occur. Instead, under capitalism, the capitalist buys means of production and labor-power, and "the labour process is a process between things the capitalist has purchased, things which belong to him" (Marx 1990, 292).

These key features lead to a certain structure of the workspace. Capitalists, who own the means of production, hire workers to perform some work with the means of production, and manage workers in order to extract as much value as possible.

³ On the positions in the labor-theory/exploitation debate: (Robinson 1966) attempts to bring Marx's view in line with later insights from, for example, Keynesian economics, arguing that "no point of substance in Marx's argument depends upon the labor theory of value" (22). (Roemer 1985), by contrast, views Marx's exploitation argument as depending on the labor theory of value, and argues for a different conception of exploitation. (Elson 2015) argues for a different reading of Marx's theory of value entirely, that for Marx, "It is not a matter of seeking an explanation of why prices are what they are and finding it in labour. But rather of seeking an understanding of why labour takes the forms it does, and what the political consequences are" (Elson 2015, 123).

⁴ Strictly speaking, in Marx's usage, "raw materials" only refers to objects of labor that have "already undergone some alteration by means of labor" (Marx 1990, 285). This distinction is insubstantial to my point, so I preserve the more common English usage.

2 CLASS

Social and economic classes are defined in several ways. I follow Marxists in defining class based around the structure of production⁵. A class is a group of people whose livelihood centers around similar roles in the process of production.

Marx is closely associated with class theory, but his later work (e.g. *Capital*) does not contain a fully articulated theory of classes. Michael Heinrich notes that "In *Capital*, Marx writes repeatedly of classes, but there is no attempt at a systematic treatment or even a definition. Only at the end of the third volume does Marx begin a section on classes, and it is precisely here that the manuscript breaks off after a few sentences. From this arrangement, one can see that a systematic treatment of classes is not the precondition of Marx's depiction, but rather should come at the end as its result" ([Heinrich 2004, 192](#)). However, Marx's mentions of class in *Capital* are not mere passing references. When discussing the process of reproduction of capital, Marx writes that "the matter [the role of means of subsistence] takes quite another aspect if we contemplate not the single capitalist and the single worker, but the capitalist class and the working class" ([Marx 1990, 717](#)). Marx makes a similar remark regarding the role of wages: "The illusion created by the money-form vanishes immediately if, instead of taking a single capitalist and a single worker, we take the whole capitalist class and the whole working class" ([Marx 1990, 713](#)). For Marx, a move from the individual level to the level of the class is necessary for a full understanding of capitalism. In fact, class is directly connected with freedom and domination in this same chapter: "From the standpoint of society, then, the working class, even when it stands outside the direct labour process, is just as much an appendage of capital as

⁵ For a comparative discussion of theories of class, see for example ([Wright 2000, 27–34](#)). My account of the structure of capitalism draws on *Capital*, in obvious ways. See especially chapters 4–6, 23 ([Marx 1990](#)).

the lifeless instruments of labour are." And, later in the same paragraph: "The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads. The appearance of independence is maintained by a constant change in the person of the individual employer, and by the legal fiction of a contract" ([Marx 1990, 719](#)).

At the level of the individual worker and the individual capitalist, then, workers appear independent because employment is a contract with another individual. But at the level of the class, the working class is dependent on the capitalist class.

The working class is dependent on the capitalist class because of the role of the means of subsistence. The means of subsistence are the things an individual needs to survive: food and housing, for example. The means of subsistence are provided for by wages. At the level of the individual, wages seem like a concession to the interests of the worker, and employment contracts therefore seem mutually beneficial. However, on a class level, subsistence is only for the purpose of maintaining a steady supply of labor to enable the continual reproduction of capital ([Marx 1990, 716–19](#)).

For capitalism to function at all, there has to be a steady supply of labor. That supply of labor has to be mediated through a certain set of social relations – the labor market and labor contract. These conditions need to be reproduced in order for capitalism itself to continue. And, as Marx argues, "the capitalist process of production [...] produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer" ([Marx 1990, 724](#)).

The worker is therefore the product of a social process – the process of reproduction of capital. The individual human being may or may not have been born if the economic system were constituted differently, but the process of reproduction of capital influences the manner and place in which they are born and live. By saying the worker is "produced," I do not mean that the individual exists as a result of the process, but that the manner in which they exist is a result of

the process. The process of reproduction produces individuals as available sources of labor. The process of reproduction also produces capitalists, in a parallel manner.

A class is the group of people who are produced by a certain aspect of the process of reproduction. The working class is comprised of people who fill the role of ensuring the constant availability of labor. Centrally, the working class is workers themselves, but this definition is more expansive. For example, a schoolchild is not yet a worker, but is already subject to forces that create and maintain a labor-supply, by being conditioned to the needs of the market. The capitalist class, in parallel, is comprised of those who fill the role of the cyclical investment of capital.

3 CLASS DOMINATION

3.1 Market competition

Let's return to the role played by market competition, and look at its effect on the labor market. Capitalists need to pay the lowest wages possible, to maximize profit. Workers take the best-paying job they can get. It seems like some kind of equilibrium should be reached between the upward pressure on wages by workers and the downward pressure by capitalists. However, the bargaining power here is skewed towards capitalists. Capitalists need this to be the case; otherwise, wages would tend upwards until profits were low or zero. Consider the various factors affecting wages. Wages should go up in the case of skilled workers and when demand for workers is high relative to supply. Skilled workers are not very replaceable, which means they can make more demands. On the other hand, when a given job does not rely on individual skill, and when there is a high supply of workers relative to demand, wages should go down. Capitalists are incentivized to reduce wages, to increase profitability, and to keep pace with their competitors. And whenever a competitor is paying a lower wage, wages across that sector can go down. What all this adds up to is that capitalists are incentivized to reduce reliance on skilled labor and individual talented workers, and to keep unemployment at a high enough level. For each individual capitalist, this is just doing what the market requires of them - if they raised wages and hired more employees they'd slowly go out of business. But, on the level of the class, capitalists collectively drive wages down. This is an action that they collectively take.

Capitalists, as a class, need the working class to exist and be maintained. For profit to be possible at all, it has to be the case that a large portion of society has no other choice but to engage in waged labor. If this wasn't the case, if workers generally had other options available to them, this would place workers in a much stronger bargaining position. The supply of workers on the labor market would go down, and because workers wouldn't *need* a job, they could

decline jobs much more easily. Wages would go up, profits would go down, and eventually profits would approach zero. This would make the capitalist class unsustainable.

The perpetuation and maintenance of the working class involves a number of actions and effects. The working class is defined by the fact that its members sell their capacity for labor in order to survive. In order for capitalist profit-maximization to be possible, there has to not only be a working class, but it has to be sufficiently large, and it must be stable in the long term. The long-term stability of the working class requires that workers are not generally able to leave the working class.

3.2 Competition is collective action

Not only do capitalists need the working class to exist and be maintained at a certain level, they also act collectively to make this the case. The main mechanism for this is competition. Competition is a group action. Capitalists engage in the activity of competition with each other. For example, one capitalist finds a way to make the same product with fewer workers. His profit increases. Someone else in the same sector now has to find a way to cheapen production, or she will lose out. She then cuts wages. Now the first capitalist can also cut wages to reduce costs even more. Together, these two capitalists have reduced wages in their sector. This is a series of actions taken by individuals, but to make sense of the actions we have to think about them as parts of a whole - competition. The competition isn't reducible to any one of the actions - but is an activity they are engaged in together. Scaled up to the market as a whole, everyone who cyclically invests on the market - that is, capitalists - are actively competing with everyone else. They are acting in concert. The group of people who do this action together are the capitalist class. Understood as a group, they are active and agentive in market competition. The results of that action are attributable to them as a class. As has been established, those results include the creation and maintenance of the working class.

Collective action by capitalists to ensure the continued existence of the working class constitutes a form of domination. It reduces the choice situation of workers by ensuring they have no other option than waged labor, and that most workers will never have another option. This constitutes interference, in the republican sense. This interference is arbitrary. Firstly, there is the fact that many people would prefer to engage in other kinds of productive activity, or no productive activity at all. Secondly, the effects of this interference are undesirable. The need to work long hours, at a job that one may have no particular investment in, for low pay, is stressful and depressing, and prevents one from pursuing other fulfilling goals and projects.

No doubt, some workers find their work fulfilling, are paid well, and find enough free time to pursue other life goals. However, domination concerns the capacity for arbitrary interference, not the satisfaction or fulfillment of the dominated subjects. Workers who have good jobs are still subject to the whims of market competition, and can find themselves in a worse position for reasons that are out of their control and that are not forced to track their interests. For example, computer programming was seen as a stable, high-paying job with favorable working conditions for much of the 2010s. However, in 2022 and 2023, the tech industry implemented widespread layoffs ([Gurley 2022](#)). These layoffs may not even be attributable to lower profitability - the mere perception of a tightening labor-market, and the perception that a new technology may save labor in the future ([Verma and Vynck 2023](#)), are enough to make room for worsening employment conditions, allowing employers to pay less for the same work, and increasing profit. Even highly-paid workers in stable jobs, then, are subject to potential arbitrary interference by market competition. Even if these layoffs had never occurred, the conditions that made them possible render workers unfree.

3.3 Group Agency

Pettit's definition of domination requires that the dominating party must be an agent. He allows for "corporate or collective agent[s]," but stipulates that "it cannot just be a system or network or whatever" (Pettit 1997, 52). The capitalist class is such an agent.

Pettit himself has a book on group agency, co-authored with Christian List ([List and Pettit 2011](#)). List and Pettit offer the following criteria for group agency:

- 1 "It is methodologically defensible to regard a group as an agent only if it makes sense to ascribe intentional attitudes to it" ([List and Pettit 2011, 39](#)).
- 1 "We regard a group as an agent just when we think something is amiss if those attitudes are inconsistent, or otherwise irrational" ([List and Pettit 2011, 39](#)).

One example offered by List and Pettit is the case of a political group, such as a party or government. Such groups "enforce a consistent set of attitudes as to how things should be done in the locality" ([List and Pettit 2011, 39](#)). The example of a political party is particularly helpful. Political parties commonly have internal disagreements about certain issues. But these disagreements are typically delimited within a certain range of opinions, so they may not rise to the level of inconsistency. Further, we regard these disagreements as something to be resolved. Political parties and governments have a specific way in which they express their propositional attitudes: through legislating, governing, and policy-making.

The capitalist class meets these criteria for agency. There are certain propositional attitudes that can be ascribed to them – they hold the attitude that the workplace should be structured in a hierarchical manner, profit should be maximized, certain types of work are demanded and some are refused. They communicate these attitudes through market signals. And

if capitalists send inconsistent signals through the market, we regard these as something to be resolved over time through the mechanism of competition.

3.4 Capitalists dominate the working class

Capitalists, as a class, have the capacity to interfere with the working class, by constraining their life choices in order to serve the goal of profit-maximization. This is a constraint on choices that members of the working class would otherwise be in a position to make. The capitalist class counts as an agent in this domination. Therefore, by Pettit's definition of domination, the capitalist class dominates the working class.

4 THE WORKPLACE DOMINATION ARGUMENT

Within republican political philosophy, several authors have argued that workplace relations in at least some contemporary contexts constitute domination. Authors who hold some version of this argument include ([Pettit 2006](#)), ([Pettit 2008](#)), ([Anderson 2015](#)) (and partially in ([Anderson 2017](#))), ([González-Ricoy 2014](#)), ([Taylor 2017](#)), ([Gourevitch 2013](#)) ([Gourevitch 2016](#)), and ([Vrousalis 2019](#)).

This set of authors all argue that workplace or labor relations are structured such that workers are (at least sometimes or potentially) dominated by employers. Employers can make decisions that reduce workers' choice situations without being forced to track the interests of their employees. Employers and employees have conflicting interests: employers want to maximize profit – to get as much revenue as possible from as little input as possible. Employees want a good life – to be safe, well-paid, have a fulfilling career, and so on. Employers have more leverage in the relationship: they make decisions about what employees do and how they do it during working hours, and can fire employees for almost any reason, or none at all. Employees have limited recourse: they can quit their jobs, or sometimes can take collective action such as strikes. The actions available to workers are (at least sometimes) insufficient to force their employers to track their interests, therefore employers' capacity for interference is arbitrary, and employers dominate workers.

These authors differ in significant ways on a number of key points:

- They hold different interpretations of the relevant features of the workplace: as primarily a contractual relationship, a structure of commands, or a type of government.
- Some argue that workplace domination is a concerning possibility, or has existed in some contexts but not others. Others argue that domination is inherent to the capitalist workplace.

- They disagree about the appropriate solution, ranging from legal protection, to a basic income, to the abolition of capitalism.

4.1 Employment, contracts, and markets

While proponents of these arguments agree that capitalist labor-relations can or do involve domination, they disagree about the relevant features of the relationship in question.

For Pettit, workplace domination is primarily about contracts and the market. Pettit discusses the issue in two papers: ([Pettit 2006](#)) and ([Pettit 2008](#)). In the first, he begins his discussion of the issue with the assumption that "conditions are such that workers who contract into employment, for example, are not subjected to anything approximating [...] wage slavery" ([Pettit 2006, 142](#)). By this assumption, Pettit seems to mean that there is not such an imbalanced distribution of wealth and such an unfavorable labor-market that workers are severely impoverished. Given this assumption, Pettit asks whether republicanism can "look with complacency [...] on market exchanges?" ([Pettit 2006, 142](#)). He responds that it can. Pettit's argument is that labor contracts (and other forms of exchange) are an offer of reward, rather than a threat of punishment, and that these are normatively different such that an offer of a reward cannot be domination. In the later paper, Pettit sets aside the assumption of favorable conditions, and instead supposes a disfavorable labor-market, in which "there are just a few employers and many available employees" ([Pettit 2008, 5](#)). In that case, domination is indeed a threat to protect against. In both cases, the conditions of the market is the primary concern, rather than the workplace itself.

By contrast, Gonzalez-Ricoy, Gourevitch, and others take the workplace as more fundamental, and argue that the market and contracts cannot fully explain the domination of workers. As Gonzalez-Ricoy defines it, "the employment relationship consists in the voluntary

subordination of the worker to the command of the employer regarding the material details of the job" ([González-Ricoy 2014, 238](#)).

Gourevitch especially emphasizes that the contractual view of employment is insufficient. He discusses two forms of domination to which workers are subject: structural through the labor-market and personal through the workplace.

Structurally, the labor market is unlike other markets – "the labor market is not just another commodity market in which property-owners are, or can be made, free to participate or not participate. ... Workers who have no other consistent source of income than a wage have no reasonable alternative to sell their labor-power" ([Gourevitch 2016, 313](#)).

Gourevitch also argues that contracts are insufficient to understand the workplace: "The view of the workplace as a product of private contracts makes it difficult to even grasp the political structure of the workplace itself ... The ruling legal and social assumption is that decisions about how to run the workplace are up to employers and their managers. Workers are expected simply to obey" ([Gourevitch 2016, 316](#)). Gourevitch ties workplace domination to the commodification of labor-power. Workers sell their labor-power to employers. But unlike the sale of other commodities, labor-power is intrinsically tied to the person of the worker. As the buyer of a commodity, the employer has the exclusive authority over how the labor-power they have purchased is used. But the exclusive authority over the use of the purchased labor-power gives the employer authority over the worker. "In other words, there is no way for the boss to enjoy his property right in the purchased labor-power without also exercising the arbitrary power over the person of the laborer" ([Gourevitch 2016, 316](#)).

Anderson takes a third perspective on the nature of workplace relations. She agrees with Gourevitch and others that contracts are insufficient for understanding workplace domination. But for Anderson, the contract view is insufficient because workplace relations are a form of

governance structured by state regulation. She argues that markets as well as contracts are beside the point: "Markets are not distinctive to capitalism; they exist in all economic systems ...

Capitalism is distinguished from other economic systems by its mode of production" ([Anderson 2015, 50](#)). Instead, the crucial issue is the form of government of firms. The state sets the "parameters for the constitution of labor governance within the firm" ([Anderson 2015, 51](#)).

Vrousalis objects to Anderson's view, and takes a more radical position. For Anderson, it is specifically the employment relationship that enables workplace domination, and not a mere property relationship. On Vrousalis' reading, "It follows, according to Anderson, that market relations [...] do not come under the purview of republican democratization demands. On this view, only *intra*-firm capitalist acts between consenting adults are candidates for domination" ([Vrousalis 2019, 263–64](#)). Vrousalis accepts Anderson's argument that the workplace is not merely a property or market relation. But, he rejects her exclusion of market relations. Rather, for Vrousalis, capitalism involves two forms of domination: what he terms "horizontal" and "vertical" domination. Horizontal domination is domination through market competition, and vertical domination is domination in the workplace. Vrousalis goes on to argue that these two forms of domination are analogous to each other. If workers controlled their firms democratically, but still competed on the market, then one firm out-competing another, would force the second firm into arbitrary restrictions in order to keep up (Vrousalis gives the example of the second firm banning bathroom breaks at certain times). Therefore, Vrousalis concludes, economic democracy is not sufficient to solve capitalist domination, the economic system itself must also be controlled democratically ([Vrousalis 2019, 266–69](#)).

Vrousalis' position is the closest to my class domination argument – I also argue that capitalist domination cannot fully be understood by considering the workplace in isolation. I further agree with Vrousalis, and Anderson, that the workplace cannot be reduced to a property

or contract relation. However, I differ from Vrousalis in that he treats the market and the workplace as separate, parallel cases, while I argue that market forces are continuous with class domination, of which workplace domination is a component.

4.2 Extent of the problem

Proponents of these arguments differ regarding the pervasiveness of the problem. Different analyses of the extent of the problem also imply different solutions. If workplace domination is an extreme into which we risk falling under certain circumstances, then the solution is to prevent those circumstances. If workplace domination is an inevitable consequence of a capitalist economy, then the solution involves an alternate economic system entirely.

Pettit (2008) argues that workplace domination is a possibility that must be protected against. For example:

Suppose there are just a few employers and many available employees, and that times are hard. In those conditions I and those who like me will not be able to command a decent wage: a wage that will enable us to function properly in society. And in those conditions it will be equally true that we would be defenseless against our employers' petty abuse or their power to arbitrarily dismiss us. Other protections, such as those that strong trade unions might provide, are possible against such alien control. But the most effective of all protections [...] would be one's ability to leave employment and fall back on a basic wage available unconditionally from the state (Pettit 2008, 5).

Pettit's argument here is that workplace domination is a risk under extreme circumstances, such as a very unfavorable labor market. He poses two possible solutions,

characterized as "protections". When these protections are in place, the labor market can function free of domination.

4.3 Interference: arbitrary and non-arbitrary

Hsieh, while making a Rawlsian argument for workplace democracy, describes three dimensions in which workers are subject to interference:

First, decisions that either direct a worker to perform specific tasks or specifically limit the actions that a worker may take within the context of her employment with the enterprise; second, decisions that are made directly about a worker and relate not so much to her actions, but to other features of her employment, such as working conditions, compensation or promotion; and third, decisions that are not made directly about the worker, but nevertheless affect her, such as decisions to change what a firm produces or to relocate a firm's operations. ([Hsieh 2008, 91](#)) discussed in ([González-Ricoy 2014, 238](#)).

Employers command employees based on the interests of the firm. If there is nothing that counteracts this, then the interference is arbitrary. Consider possible features that may force employers to track workers' interests: workers are free to quit their job, labor relations are subject to regulations, and workers can take collective action such as strikes. It is at this point that proponents of the WDA diverge once again. Some argue that some of these features are sufficient, but that they do not always obtain, or must be strengthened. Others argue that these features are all insufficient.

First, workers can, under typical circumstances, quit their jobs. Employment is a contract, and all workers are legally free to end their contracts. The ability of workers to quit is termed "exit rights" (for example, in ([González-Ricoy 2014, 239](#))). There are historical and

contemporary instances of workers who are not free to leave their jobs due to coercion or overt force, but it is uncontroversial to say that such workers are not free. It is less obvious in the case of voluntary labor. Gonzalez-Ricoy considers exit rights as a response to workplace domination. He describes two versions of this response: the strong version asserts that the bare presence of exit rights is sufficient to protect workers from arbitrary interference. The weak version "assumes that power asymmetries can arise in free labor markets. And it argues in favor of making exist as costless as possible by modifying the background conditions" ([González-Ricoy 2014, 239](#)). For example, Pettit argues for solving workplace domination along these lines, by providing for a basic income: "the most effective of all protections ... would be one's ability to leave employment and fall back on a basic wage" ([Pettit 2008, 5](#)).

Against the weak version, Gonzalez-Ricoy points out that in imperfect labor markets or under conditions of imperfect information, involuntary unemployment occurs. Therefore, "even under background conditions that may dramatically improve their bargaining position, unemployment is likely to serve as a disciplinary device" ([González-Ricoy 2014, 240](#)). Further, quitting one's job incurs a number of additional costs: the social and psychological effects of leaving a job, the effort of finding and transitioning to a new job, and the sunk costs of developing skills specific to one's old job. These additional costs are not accounted for by either the strong or the weak versions of the response ([González-Ricoy 2014, 240](#)). Thirdly, Gonzalez-Ricoy responds that alternative jobs may all have the same structure of potentially-arbitrary interference as a worker's current job. If all available options share the same problematic features, then the ability to choose between them means little ([González-Ricoy 2014, 241](#)).

However, Gonzalez-Ricoy includes a caveat. Exit rights carry different weight in different contexts. For example, an experienced, high-skill worker may be "de facto immune to arbitrary interference" while "employees who lack such skills are not ... Hence, additional means

to exit rights may not be necessary for the former" ([González-Ricoy 2014, 241](#)). Gonzalez-Ricoy is making a case for workplace democracy, and set out to show that other measures, such as exit rights, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for freedom. To what extent does this caveat undercut his argument? If exit rights are sufficient for better-off workers, they would seem to be fine without workplace democracy. The caveat introduces complicated empirical issues about the conditions under which domination obtains. If his goal is a critique of the structure of the capitalist firm, rather than particular firms, then the caveat poses a serious problem.

Workplaces and employment are under certain regulations. Depending on the jurisdiction, there may be: health and safety regulations; a minimum wage; maximum working hours and overtime pay; restrictions on the reasons for firing an employee; and benefits such as unemployment insurance to soften the cost of being fired.

Gourevitch (2016) argues that, due to the domination of workers both structurally and personally, workers have a right to strike ([Gourevitch 2016, 314](#)). For Gourevitch, the right to strike is a more important and effective way of resisting workplace domination than exit rights and any other form of protection, because a strike is "a challenge to the market as the appropriate standard by which to judge the fairness of workers' compensation" ([Gourevitch 2016, 315](#)). But Gourevitch also does not seem to claim that strikes are sufficient to end workplace domination: "Absent an actually democratic workplace, the right to strike remains a central way for workers to resist these arbitrary forms of authority" ([Gourevitch 2016, 318](#)). For Gourevitch, strikes are about resisting domination, mitigating it, and challenging the market, but workers' self-government is the only way to truly end the domination ([Gourevitch 2016, 318](#)).

5 THE PROBLEM WITH THE WORKPLACE DOMINATION ARGUMENT

The workplace domination argument (WDA) alone is insufficient to demonstrate its conclusion. To summarize the argument: Employers in a typical workplace have the capacity to interfere with their employees. This interference is arbitrary - employers are not forced to track the interests of employees in interfering with them. Employees' rights to turn down a job offer and to quit their jobs is ineffective to render the situation non-arbitrary. Employers are responsible for the situation of arbitrary interference. They can be considered basically agentic in the situation. Therefore, employers in a typical workplace dominate their employees.

Proponents of the WDA can be roughly divided in two camps based on the further conclusions they use the WDA to support, and which solutions they argue for. There are moderates who support a narrower conclusion, and radicals who support a broader conclusion. The narrow conclusion is that there is a normative problem with some, but not all, capitalist societies. This conclusion is deployed by more moderate political philosophers, such as ([Pettit 2008](#)) or ([Dagger 2006](#)). What these authors want to show is that there should be social and legal measures taken to strengthen workers' leverage against their bosses by giving them a more viable alternative. The broad conclusion is that there is a normative problem with capitalism itself. The WDA is deployed in support of this conclusion by more radical political philosophers, such as ([Gourevitch 2016](#)) ([Vrousalis 2019](#)) ([Breen 2017](#)) ([Anderson 2015](#)) and ([Hsieh 2008](#))⁶.

The first problem with the argument is that it must account for why the situation of arbitrary interference exists. In particular, why there is nothing forcing employers to track the interests of employees. One possible approach is to simply assume that the situation is a possibility or exists because of contingent facts about some specific situations. This approach

⁶ Anderson and Hsieh draw on Rawlsian liberalism as well as republicanism.

lends itself to the moderate camp, who are only interested in making a claim about narrow, specific situations. If the assumption is the bare possibility of such a situation arising, then the argument only obtains for a hypothetical situation. I take it that (at least most) proponents of this argument are concerned with a real problem in the world that is in need of a solution. If the problem is purely hypothetical, then the argument loses much of its force. If we instead assume that the situation is either a pressing possibility or exists in at least some situations, or in other words if there is a problem that we have reason to be troubled by and for which to seek a solution, then we have to account for why the situation exists.

One might claim that the causes of the problem are the result of contingent, even accidental, facts about certain particular situations. However, the features that render the interference arbitrary occur across many different contexts. Workers often face restricted choice situations, insufficient protections, and the threats of sudden layoffs or significant changes to their working conditions over which they have no control. Given that these features occur with such regularity, there is good reason to think that they are not completely causally isolated. Even if the initial cause of the situation is context-specific, there seems to be some larger unifying feature.

The moderate interpretation of the WDA, therefore, needs an account of the causes of workplace domination in order to claim that conditions of arbitrary interference either obtain in some situations, or that there is a real possibility of such conditions obtaining. The radical interpretation of the WDA, as well as my own argument, provide such a causal account: the domination of workers is caused by the structure of capitalism itself. The moderates need an alternate account showing that workplace domination is not a result of the structure of capitalism itself. No such account is given. Pettit, for example, in two discussions of the domination of workers, merely hypothetically assumes that such conditions are present, without any empirical

or causal claims ([Pettit 2006, 142](#)) ([Pettit 2008, 5](#)), and in another, mentions working conditions in 19th century capitalism, and concludes that workers were dominated, but does not discuss the underlying causes ([Pettit 1997, 141–42](#)). Dagger, similarly, in discussing how a republican economy would function, suggests that markets are beneficial when properly constrained, but that constraints on managerial decision-making and greater legal protections are necessary to prevent the domination of workers, without discussing underlying causes of the relevant problems or how these considerations might interact ([Dagger 2006](#)).

The broader, radical interpretation of the WDA, held by Anderson ([Anderson 2015](#)), Gourevitch ([Gourevitch 2016](#)), and Vrousalis ([Vrousalis 2019](#)), among others, holds that the domination of workers is a problem with capitalism itself. As discussed above, these authors each offer a slightly different interpretation of how capitalism connects to the domination of workers. Anderson is distinct in this camp in that she traces the problem to the way in which the state shapes workplace relations and the structure of the firm. Gourevitch and Vrousalis each argue for an interpretation of structural domination. My account parallels theirs, but is distinct in how group agency functions in my view, the ways in which class domination shapes the lives of workers, and my use of Marxian insights regarding the process of production of workers themselves.

A smaller problem with the workplace domination argument concerns the often unstated premise that employers are responsible for their arbitrary power over their employees. Workers face a restricted choice situation, which would seem to be a key component of their domination. However, employers themselves aren't individually responsible for which other options are available to their employees, and it isn't in any given employer's power to alter the background choice situation of their workers. Because of that, it is not clear that they are in fact responsible for the purported domination of their employees.

6 CLASS DOMINATION SOLVES THE PROBLEM WITH THE WORKPLACE DOMINATION ARGUMENT

The workplace domination argument has two main problems: the need for a causal account, and the apparent lack of agency on the part of employers in workers' choice situations.

Class domination causes workplace domination. Class domination places workers in a position where they have no other choice but to engage in waged labor for some capitalist. The reason for this is so that they can be made to work more, for lower wages, than they would otherwise. The precarity of workers' available options means that their employers are in a position to interfere in such an arbitrary manner, which is workplace domination.

Class domination is a necessary feature of capitalism. The relevant features of capitalism are the private ownership of the means of production and a profit-based market system. Capitalists have to maintain the existence of the working class, in order for profit to be maximized, because workers, in virtue of their class membership, have no choice but to accept low wages and unfavorable working conditions. The reduced choice situation faced by workers is a crucial part of the workplace domination argument, but the WDA alone does not account for it. When considered as part of class domination, the problem is no longer present.

The second problematic claim is that employers are actually responsible for the domination of their employees. The problem is that each individual employer doesn't make it the case that their employees lack alternate choices. However, on the level of classes, the choice situation of workers is a result of a group action that the capitalist class engages in together. The group is responsible for the situation in a way that is not reducible to any particular group members.

To summarize the two arguments, taken together, then: Capitalists engage in competition with each other, by cyclical investment, under the general expectation of profitability. The

profitability is made possible by the existence and maintenance of the working class - those who have no viable choice but to sell their capacity for labor at whatever wage and under whatever conditions they can. The existence of the working class is a result of the competition, and is thus attributable to the group of people doing the competition - the capitalist class. The existence and maintenance of the working class is arbitrary interference in the choice situation of its members. The capitalist class therefore dominates the working class. Individually, because they have no alternate choices, workers are subjected to the whims of their bosses; employers dominate their employees. Workers have to be in that position in order for their bosses to successfully participate in competition. Workplace domination is therefore a component, at the individual level, of the broader situation of class domination.

To be clear, I am not saying class domination is the "real" thing and workplace domination is secondary or epiphenomenal. The workplace domination argument is incomplete without class domination, but the class domination argument also entails workplace domination. I have treated these as separate because the claim about class is the controversial one. In a capitalist context, they both constitute one system of domination. The working class exists as a class in order to enable workplace domination, which in turn exists in order to meet the profit motive. The profit motive in turn exists because of the collective activity of the capitalist class, without which the market would not exist.

7 CONCLUSION

Following a neo-republican definition of domination, under capitalism the capitalist class dominates the working class. Capitalists collectively have the capacity to interfere in the choice situation of workers by constraining their long-term life choices, career options, and economic prospects, in order to maximize profit. This interference is arbitrary: capitalists are not forced to track the interests of workers in this interference, and in fact each of these types of interference is directly opposed to the interests of workers. Capitalists are agents in this domination by acting collectively through the market.

The workplace domination argument is that employers dominate employees in the workplace. Employers have the capacity to interfere by reducing workers' choice situation regarding what they do at work, how they do it, and firing workers with no notice and little reason. Workers have insufficient checks against this interference, and therefore employers' capacity for interference is arbitrary.

Some proponents of the workplace domination argument hold that workplace domination is a contingent feature present in some contexts or only a possibility, while others hold that it is a necessary feature of capitalism. In either case, the argument as I have summarized it does not account for the causes of workers' vulnerability. For that reason, the claim that workers have insufficient checks against the authority of their bosses is unsupported. Some proponents of the workplace domination argument account for this weakness by arguing for the presence of structural domination. My argument parallels theirs, but differs significantly in my account of what structural domination is. A further problem with the workplace domination argument is that the agency of employers, which is a necessary condition for the presence of domination, is undercut by the argument's reliance on background facts of the situation.

My account of class domination solves these issues by demonstrating that workplace domination is caused by class domination, and that class domination serves the purpose of enabling workplace domination. The problem of agency is solved because the capitalist class as a whole is responsible for the domination of the working class, and employers are responsible in virtue of their membership in the capitalist class.

A major question for further research is which economic and political structures adequately solve class and workplace domination. For example, neo-republicans who are concerned with workplace domination have varyingly proposed a universal basic income, workplace democracy, and market socialism as possible solutions. On my view, class, the market, the profit motive, and the workplace are inherently intertwined as parts of one totalizing system. Each of those three popular solutions seeks to preserve some or all of the market system. Therefore, on my view, each of those solutions risks reproducing the same problems as capitalism. Further investigation is needed regarding whether those solutions are thereby precluded entirely, and if so which other solutions would be adequate.

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