

Up Close and Personal:
Domination, Agency, and the Problem of Many Masters

One of the most interesting questions of the recent turn towards conceiving of work as a sphere of *domination* (as opposed to primarily one of inequality, exploitation, and so on) also appears to be one of the simplest to answer: who's doing the dominating?

The most obvious answer, and the one given by most mainstream opponents of domination, is 'the boss'. The boss - roughly, let's say, the agent or group agent with ultimate decision-making power in a firm - dominates their workers, because the boss has the power to decide how to treat those workers, and the exercise of that power is not controlled by those workers. Call this the personal domination account. There are two interesting attacks on this position, both urging us to look towards *structural* domination. The first claims that the personal domination account picks out *too few* dominators. We should relax the strictures of the personal domination account in order to pick out the many *more* agents who have a hand in the domination of workers - for instance, the members of the capitalist class as a whole. The second critique, on the other hand, claims that the personal domination account picks out *too many* dominators. Bosses are too constrained by the demands of the market to exercise significant choice about how to treat their workers, so it doesn't make sense to treat them as dominators - to get any clarity on the matter, we need to look to the impersonal and systemic domination of capital.

In this paper I want to accept the *spirit* of these two critiques while rejecting the *letter* of both. In other words, the personal domination account neither picks out too many nor too few dominators. But the thrust of these critiques, the demands they make upon the mainstream, is absolutely correct. If we care about personal domination, we need to focus on

the structural and impersonal causes of that domination, much more than on any individual dominating agent.

I

The most influential example of a personal domination account can be found in the work of Philip Pettit¹, which typifies the kind of mainstream account at stake in this debate. The contemporary Republicanism (sometimes called ‘neo-Roman’, ‘civic’, or just ‘neo-’ Republicanism²) to which Pettit belongs is centred upon an ideal of non-domination. Normally, this ideal is equated with freedom; for my purposes, it is sufficient and simpler to stick to the ideal of non-domination itself. Within this tradition, promoting non-domination is taken to be the primary political goal. “Freedom as non-domination is not the only good in life”, Pettit writes, “[b]ut it is a gateway good...whose realisation promises to bring the realisation of other goods in its train³”.

Pettit has changed the details of his account a number of times, but the current general formula is this: A’s power to interfere in B’s choices constitutes domination when that power is not effectively constrained in such a way that B can control A’s exercise of that power⁴. More loosely, domination is the state of being *subject to another’s will*. In this sense an

¹ See, for example, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997); *On the People’s Terms* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012); *Just Freedom* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

² See Laborde (2013).

³ *Just Freedom*, xix.

⁴ For a recent and thorough example of this account, see Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*.

opposition to domination is distinct from an opposition to mere interference: in the former case, it is the *capacity* to interfere, even if never exercised, that is to be rooted out and constrained.

It makes sense to call this a personal account of domination because it only recognises relationships between agents as potentially dominating, and also because the idea of personal agency requires a certain kind of intention on the part of would-be dominators. In order to be a candidate for dominating another person, I must be able to *voluntarily choose* whether to interfere with my victim or not. If I have no real choice in the matter, then I have no *power* to interfere: my would-be victim isn't subject to my will, because my will has nothing to do with it. If I am forced at gunpoint to act as some unlucky victim's jailer, then I don't dominate my prisoner. Their predicament does "reflect subjection to the will of another"⁵, but it is not my will - we are both subjected to the will of the kidnapper. Voluntariness requires that I have the option to act otherwise.

This sort of account also requires would-be dominators to possess "the cognitive resources required for interference"⁶. These resources include at least a measure of *knowledge* and *targeting* concerning the effects of one's actions on their victims. The content of this requirement is fairly hard to pin down. The clearest cases that satisfy this requirement are simple, face-to-face relationships of domination. A slave owner may know exactly *whom* their choices affect and exactly *how* they affect them - which behaviours they want to promote and which they want to prohibit. The slave owner can consciously and clearly invigilate the behaviour of their victim. But just how far away from this case dominators are allowed to deviate is unclear. Pettit certainly wants to allow for the domination of workers by

⁵ *On the People's Terms*, 43.

⁶ *On the People's Terms*, 62.

the distant owners of a large corporation⁷, who will know the people their choices will affect only in terms of numbers on a page. At best, these owners know only the *type* of person affected by their decisions, or by the enforcement of rules and procedures they are in a position to impose.

On the personal domination account, then, *how* and *by whom* are workers dominated? Pettit's answer is the obvious one described above - they are dominated by their employer, to the extent that their employer has power over them that the workers do not themselves effectively control. Workers face significant costs to leaving a job. At worst they face poverty and starvation. At best - if they can find a new, similar job immediately - they face transfer costs, insecurity, the loss of built-up professional and social capital in their old workplace, and all for the reward of having a new, substantially similar boss⁸. Employers, on the other hand, face the usually minimal cost of replacing that worker. This basic imbalance is the source of much of an employer's power, and this power is entrenched by the areas of open-ended managerial authority almost uniformly baked into employment contracts. That this power is not effectively controlled by workers is almost a given: far from any democratic control, workplaces are overwhelmingly as autocratic as the law allows. Where formal checks on employer power exist, they reduce domination to a degree - for instance, allowing workers the right to contest unfair dismissal or dangerous working conditions in an impartial hearing. Nevertheless, the ongoing relationship is one of domination between a pair of agents: the

⁷ *On the People's Terms*, 112.

⁸ Unless, of course, they are in a position to find a job in the tiny cooperative sector, where they may be able to participate fully in the governance of the firm. Even with this condition, jobs within cooperatives - or genuine self-employment, or homesteading - are not realistic options for most workers.

owner, who daily makes decisions that interfere in the life of the worker, and the worker, who must largely put up with this treatment in return for a wage.

This account of personal domination in the workplace has a long pedigree. “The Roman slave”, writes Marx, “was held by fetters: the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads. The appearance of independence is kept up by means of a constant change of employers, and by the *ficto juris* [legal fiction] of a contract⁹”. Cutting through this “appearance of independence”, the contemporary Republican is in this sense joining a family of anti-capitalist critiques. The slave-owner and the employer might derive their power from different sources, and the position of a worker might be drastically better than that of a slave, but both relationships are ones of domination.

A final note: for any individual worker, the employer may not be the only dominator in the workplace, even on this personal account. In an abstract sense, we might imagine the structure of a firm to be something like this: the owners make all the decisions, which are then effectively enforced by managers, and dutifully obeyed by workers. But it is perhaps more often the case that workers are exposed to *two* dominators. First the owners, who are in a position to make important decisions that affect their working life - what they produce, their

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (London, Electric Books, 2000), 823. For a useful discussion of Marx’s use of various conceptions of domination and, relevantly, how far these link him to the Republican tradition, see Bruno Leipold, “Chains and Invisible Threads: Liberty and Domination in Marx’s Account of Wage-Slavery”, in *Rethinking Liberty Before Liberalism*, ed. Annelien de Dijn and Hannah Dawson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

production targets for the year, where the enterprise is to be located, and so on¹⁰. But then the managers, never quite the robots imagined in an abstract anatomy of a firm, will have their own tighter sphere of discretion. Precisely what workers must do, minute-to-minute, precisely how fast they must do it, and any number of petty decisions about their conduct, dress, attitude, and so on, may be left fully in the hands of managers¹¹. In cases like this, workers may well have two dominators in the workplace, but these remain two relationships of personal subjection. With this caveat in mind, I intend to proceed as if there were just one dominator in a workplace on the personal domination account - call them the employer.

II

1. The *too-few-dominators* critique: many masters and structural domination

In a famous passage from *Capital*, Marx dramatises the thin veneer of equality and freedom that exists between workers and their employers, and their descent into the relationship of personal domination described above. Once the worker signs a contract, “we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He, who before was the money owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer¹²”. On the personal domination account, we have our cast.

¹⁰ See Iñigo Gonzalez-Ricoy, “The Republican Case for Workplace Democracy”, *Social Theory and Practice* 40, no.1 (2014): 232-254, for discussion of this point.

¹¹ For a good illustration of this expansion of managerial authority, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Woodstock, Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹² *Capital*, 254.

But there are actors waiting in the wings, and some critics of the personal domination account want to usher them on. On this view, it is a mistake to think that each worker has just one master: they have many, and accounts like Pettit's are conceptually incapable of properly recognising them as agents of domination. Alex Gourevitch makes the case for a "broader view of domination, both in terms of the relevant agents and the relevant sense of intentionality¹³", illustrating the point with an analysis of Classical slavery. Mainstream Republicans like Pettit see only one relevant dominator in any individual slave's life - their master. An individual master fits Pettit's criteria for intentionality - the knowledge and targeting described above - because they are able to have specific intentions towards a specific victim. The master possesses all the cognitive resources for domination in that they know exactly who they have control over, and how to exercise that control. Theirs represents the relevant dominating will.

This, argues Gourevitch, misrepresents the position of a slave. Of course slaves were tied to their master's will, but they were tied to the wills of a large group of other people as well. The institution of slavery required the support of the body of Roman citizens: to defend the legal system which enabled the practice, to capture runaway slaves, to oppose or be ready to oppose demands for the end of slavery. The wills of these "many masters¹⁴" are just as relevant to the position of any individual slave as that of their own, individual master: each of the many masters dominates every slave. In a similar way, Gourevitch argues for the expansion of the cast of dominators in the case of contemporary work. Just as a slave is tied to the wills of those who propped up the institution of slavery, a worker is tied to the wills of

¹³ Alex Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work", *Political Theory* 41, no.4 (2013), 600.

¹⁴ "Labor Republicanism", 602.

those who prop up the institution of wage labour - the private and concentrated ownership of the means of production. It is this distribution of property that guarantees that all (or virtually all) *non*-owners must work for someone else, because they lack any reasonable alternative to doing so. Workers might have a choice of masters, but the structural compulsion to have *some* master is produced and re-produced by the willingness of a property owners to defend the current distribution of productive assets¹⁵.

The demand is this: a satisfactory anti-domination approach to the position of a worker must recognise two types of dominators. The individual employer, whose relationship to the worker is one of personal subjection, *and* every private owner of productive assets - every capitalist - whose willingness to defend their ownership of those assets guarantees that the worker in question must suffer such personal subjection. In order to make this change, we have to relax the conditions of intentionality that theorists like Pettit impose. These many masters have no particular desire that any *specific* worker be tied to any *specific* employer, and so do not exhibit the kind of knowledge or targeting required to properly count as dominators on the personal account. As a matter of detail, Pettit is slightly looser on these requirements than Gourevitch imagines, indeed looser than Pettit himself seems to imply at points. As described above, Pettit *does* want to allow for the proper domination of workers by the owners of large, multinational corporations, who may never really intend for their edicts to affect any particular, specific worker in any specific way. At an even greater remove, Pettit wants to count as domination the way that large corporations “may treat the local population or the local environment when the community would be put in serious economic jeopardy by the corporation’s departure¹⁶”. Surely no board of directors, upon deciding to move their

¹⁵ “Labor Republicanism”, 601-603.

¹⁶ *On the People’s Terms*, 116.

factory out of a small town, has any specific intentions as to *which* restaurants close, *which* schools can no longer fill their classrooms and retain teachers, and so on. Perhaps the effects of moving a factory on the local community are *knowable* or *foreseeable* in the right sense, even if rarely *known* or *foreseen*. But Gourevitch is absolutely right to claim that mainstream accounts like Pettit's cannot see just any owner of productive assets as relevantly dominating every individual worker.

The joint opposition to both *personal* and (what Gourevitch calls) *structural* domination has historical pedigree as well, most directly in his case from the 'Labour Republicans' of late nineteenth-century America¹⁷. Marx and Engels, too, rail against this kind of structural domination, sometimes even appearing to do so at the expense of an opposition to personal domination. "The slave is the property of one master", Engels writes, in the *Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith*, "...the proletariat is, so to speak, the slave of the entire bourgeois *class*, not of one master¹⁸".

2. Rejecting the letter of structural domination

Gourevitch's proposed change is conceptual, expanding the cast of dominators by loosening the demands of intentionality. But the reasons for this change are deeply practical.

¹⁷ Gourevitch goes into much more historical depth in his excellent book-length treatment of this Labour Republican movement: see Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, "Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith", in *Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol.6*, eds. Jack Cohen, Maurice Cornforth, Maurice Dobb et al (Lawrence & Wishart/Electric Book, 2010), 100.

Gourevitch observes that mainstream Republicanism often appears relatively unconcerned with the sphere of work or, when it turns to the subject, tends to shy away from proposals that might radically reshape that sphere, an observation shared by others from both within and without the broad Republican tradition¹⁹. This practical failure, Gourevitch argues, is *because* the personal account limits its cast of dominators to the individual employers of individual workers. Mainstream Republicanism is conceptually impoverished, left “without theoretical resources to address certain forms of economic domination²⁰”. Personal domination accounts cannot “...extend to a normative concern with access to productive resources and control over work²¹”. Indeed, without recognising the domination of workers by capitalists *in general*, we are left “indifferent to the background structure of control over productive assets and to what kinds of control labourers exercise over the work activity²²”.

I disagree with Gourevitch here. Adopting what he calls a ‘structural’ account of domination is not necessary in order to be sufficiently attentive to these background structures, and it results in an unhelpfully large and unwieldy cast of dominating agents. I don’t want to challenge the idea that mainstream Republicanism can often exhibit a level of practical indifference towards these ‘background structures’ - the legal and social conditions

¹⁹ See Keith Breen, “Freedom, Republicanism, and Workplace Democracy”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 18, no.4 (2015): 470-485; Gonzalez-Ricoy, “Workplace Democracy”; and Cecile Laborde, “Republicanism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, eds. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ “Labor Republicanism”, 591.

²¹ “Labor Republicanism”, 593.

²² “Labor Republicanism”, 599.

that create the structural compulsion to work for some employer. I want to argue that even if this is the case, it is not the result of some deep conceptual fault, and it does not require the acceptance of Gourevitch's so-called 'structural' account of domination to fix. An opposition to personal domination alone is more than enough to motivate opposition to the background structures - the private and concentrated ownership of productive assets, the default hierarchical structure of the firm, and so on. Gourevitch mistakes a series of practical and individual failures for an expression of a deep and principled disagreement over the nature of domination, and seeks to remedy it through an unnecessary and unnecessarily expanded cast of dominators, one that – I argue – causes us to lose some of the intuitive appeal and simplicity of the personal account.

Here is my proposal. The badness of what Gourevitch calls 'structural' domination lies in the fact that it causes the vast majority of people to enter into contracts of employment with those lucky few who own productive assets. Employers have power over their workers because 1) even though workers are formally free to leave any particular job, doing so comes at great cost to them, a cost that is reduced but not eliminated by welfare-state institutions, whereas the costs of replacing a worker are much more minimal, and 2) the overwhelming majority of employment contracts establish wide areas of managerial authority. These are relationships of domination because employers have power over their workers that is not effectively controlled by the workers themselves. In other words, the badness of structural domination rests upon the badness of personal domination, and a thoroughgoing opposition to the latter will (or should) require an opposition to the former.

I fully accept Gourevitch's argument that, like in the case of Roman slavery, a wide network of actors are in some sense implicated in the personal domination of every individual worker by their employer. A factory owner, in defending or being willing to defend the private ownership of factories in general, is in this sense a cause of the structural compulsion

of *all* workers to work for *some* employer. It is unclear why Gourevitch stops here, however - people other than owners of productive assets defend, or are willing to defend, that system of private ownership: the employee of a think tank who writes spirited defences of free-market capitalism, or even just the worker who is nevertheless ready to uphold property law that compels them to seek a wage. None of this requires us to think that these ‘many masters’ *constitute* a different, structural kind of dominator. The point is that all of these facts can be expressed in merely *causal* terms: they *cause* instances of personal domination, and are therefore relevant to us on that basis. We can justify the most radical “transformation of work²³” just through an opposition to these structural causes, and any mainstream Republican failure to do so is not through lack of conceptual resources.

We can test this argument with reference to some specific disagreements Gourevitch has with Pettit’s approach. For instance, Pettit suggests that a “well-functioning labour market²⁴” or a universal basic income²⁵ would eliminate the domination of workers by their employers, by allowing them to smoothly and costlessly transfer between jobs at the slightest hint of managerial power being wielded in a way that workers resent. Gourevitch disagrees, because in both scenarios workers would still face a structural compulsion to work for *some* employer, and gives these as examples of Pettit’s conceptual inability to recognise important forms of domination. If we can’t reject these bad suggestions without recourse to a concept of structural domination, the argument goes, then this gives us enough reason to adopt one.

²³ Gourevitch, “Labor Republicanism”, 591.

²⁴ Philip Pettit, “Freedom in the Market”, *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 5, no.2 (2006): 139.

²⁵ Philip Pettit, “A Republican Right to Basic Income?”, *Basic Income Studies* 2, no.2 (2007):1-8.

Assuming that these are bad suggestions (a position I'm very sympathetic to), I disagree that we cannot say so in the vocabulary of personal domination. In fact, Gourevitch *himself* can say so merely in the vocabulary of personal domination, and does so in the same paper. The idea of a well-functioning labour market is that workers leaving a job will not face long-term unemployment - they will be able to quickly and easily find a suitable replacement. The idea of a basic income, assuming it is not high enough to opt out of work entirely, is similar. Both attempt to reduce the material costs of leaving a job as far as possible, and so give workers greater bargaining power over their employers. In the words of Gourevitch, however, "the threat [of leaving a job] is often either not credible or inadequate. It cannot compensate for all the costs of leaving a job and threatening to leave a job is a kind of nuclear option that is simply not credible in many low-level disagreements²⁶". This means that workers are still personally dominated by their employers, and so from the perspective of reducing personal domination, both proposals are inadequate²⁷.

A trickier case, but one that I think can still be dealt with, can be found when we examine some indirect features of the power of large corporations. If a large corporation is a major employer in a community, then it exercises significant and uncontrolled power over the members of that community - it dominates them as a collective agent, we might say, or the board of directors dominates them. It is able to rely upon the threat - implicit or explicit - of moving its operations elsewhere, and thereby extract concessions from that community. This is amenable to a personal domination account. But consider the structural compulsion for

²⁶ "Labor Republicanism", 608.

²⁷ For another, more developed critique of basic income as a strategy to reduce domination at work, see Alex Gourevitch and Lucas Stanczyk, "The Basic Income Illusion", *Catalyst* 1, no.4 (2018): np.

communities to *pre-empt* the demands of corporations, and change themselves to attract them: the recent race-to-the-bottom in the hopes of attracting a new Amazon headquarters was as good an example as any of the ‘courtier spirit’ so despised by traditional Republicans. Shaping laws and slashing regulations in order to attract desperately-needed employment opportunities seems to be the exercise of *someone’s* power, even if the only possible actor is the capitalist class at large. Since it pre-empts any possible personal relationship, it is not easily placed in that frame. But on a conceptual and practical basis, it seems to me that a mere opposition to personal domination can also motivate an opposition to the impersonal economic arrangements that create these ‘business-friendly’ incentives. While the adaptation of a town towards the needs of large multinational corporations (for instance) doesn’t occur *within* a personal relationship of domination with any particular corporation, it *invites* such a relationship, is oriented *towards* personal domination. If we oppose personal domination, we can oppose conditions which make communities adapt themselves in order to attract a would-be dominator, and support practical steps towards those communities instead achieving independence from those corporations as a class.

3. Accepting the spirit of the critique

Against Gourevitch, I’ve argued that when it comes to domination and work, we don’t need to expand the sphere of proper dominators in order to expand our sphere of *attention* and *normative concern* to encompass things like the private ownership of the means of production. We can pay attention to and oppose what he calls ‘structural’ domination perfectly well solely with reference to its tendency to causally produce this narrower, personal domination.

This is, broadly speaking, the approach that personal theorists of domination already purport to take. Frank Lovett, another influential mainstream Republican, considers the position of agents very much like Gourevitch's 'many masters' in the case of Classical slavery. While they may be "...a part of the background conditions for the social relationships of domination existing between slave owners and their slaves...strictly speaking, they are not themselves members of those relationships, and thus not themselves agents of that domination²⁸". Pettit goes further. "It is usually because of the ways a society is organised, culturally, economically, or legally, that some people have such power in relation to others that they dominate them directly", he writes. "The republican theory of justice...is designed in great part to target such *structural domination* [emphasis mine]²⁹". This use of the term itself, while merely metaphorical, indicates just how amenable the conceptual apparatus of *personal* domination is to motivating the kinds of *structural* critique Gourevitch wants to be able to make.

So I reject the letter of this first critique - those concerned with domination in the workplace, then, don't need to expand Marx's *dramatis personae*. But I am wholly sympathetic with the spirit of it, and share Gourevitch's practical dissatisfaction with the attitude towards work taken by many, if not most, personal domination theorists. And in a sense, Gourevitch gives mainstream Republicans too much credit in assuming that this deep, conceptual limitation is the reason for their apparent hesitance to direct their energies towards

²⁸ Frank Lovett, *A General Theory of Domination and Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010): 37.

²⁹ *Just Freedom*, 63-64.

issues of control over productive assets, and control within the workplace³⁰. They have all of the conceptual resources necessary to do so, as I've shown and as even their own writing on the topic seems to indicate. If they fail to do so, then it is the result of a practical and political disagreement with the arguments that recommend those strategies.

III

1. The *too-many-dominators* critique: freedom to act and the logic of capital

If the previous critique was a call to *expand* the cast of dominators in the workplace, this next critique sends half of the cast offstage. Never mind the 'many masters' who enable employers to dominate their workers - we shouldn't see the individual employers *themselves* as proper agents of their workers' domination. Michael Thompson gives a clear recent example³¹ of this particular argument, and makes it with specific reference to Pettit's personal account of domination, so provides a useful contrast to Gourevitch's attacks on the same target. Recall the two demands that Pettit places on the intentionality of would-be dominators: they must be able to choose to interfere in the choices of their would-be victims *voluntarily* and with *knowledge and targeting*. The claim here is that individual employers fail to meet the first demand. The logic of the market, rather than any truly voluntary choice, dictates how they may treat their workers.

³⁰ Some Republicans do direct their concern towards this: see Gonzalez-Ricoy, "Workplace Democracy".

³¹ Michael Thompson, "Reconstructing Republican Freedom", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39, no.3 (2013): 277-298.

Although perhaps counterintuitive, Thompson is not idiosyncratic in making this sort of argument. Marx, writing about the terrible working conditions imposed by many capitalists of the time, writes "...looking at things as a whole, all this does not, indeed, depend on the good or ill will of the individual capitalist. Free competition brings out the inherent laws of capitalist production, in the shape of *external coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist* [emphasis mine]³²". Again, I want to accept the spirit of the critique but not the letter. There is a weak sense in which Thompson is absolutely correct - we ought to focus on the logic of the market, rather than the will of any particular employer, if we want to *predict* or *change* the way they will *tend* to treat their workers. But the strong claim - that employers *do not voluntarily choose* how to treat their workers - is one I argue we should reject.

First, the strong claim. Thompson considers the simple case of a factory, whose owner faces the choice of whether to sack the workforce and move the operation abroad in search of cheaper labour. On the personal domination account we can clearly see the employer as dominating those workers. The power to make that choice is in the hands of the employer - the workers do not control that decision in any sense - and so the employer has the power to interfere in his workers' lives in a significant way. Thompson disagrees. Although we might argue that the factory owner could simply choose to stay where he is and make less profit, "it is more likely that, regardless of the predisposition of the owner as a moral agent, the functional logic of the economy would dictate such a move: the need for more extractive power (lower wages, less organised labour force, and so on.)³³". In this sense, the workers are "dependent less on the individual capitalist than on the structure of extractive power. We

³² *Capital*, 389.

³³ "Republican Freedom", 288.

would *hardly be able to characterise this kind of domination as 'arbitrary'* in the sense that Pettit theorises it, and we would also be unable to characterise it as *between two agents* in the sense that there exists a systemic context within which these agents operate, constraining their choices and options [emphasis mine]³⁴”.

The general case of the strong version of this argument runs as follows.

1. In order for an individual capitalist to personally dominate their workers, they must be able to voluntarily choose how to treat those workers.
2. The capitalist must make economic decisions according to the logic of the market - they must maximise their ‘extractive power’.
3. Because of (2), capitalists are unable to voluntarily choose how to treat their workers.
4. Because of (1) and (3), individual capitalists do not personally dominate their workers.

The argument has a number of flaws. First of all, even if we accept premise (2), the inference in step (3) doesn’t hold. Assume that individual capitalists must increase their extractive power as much as possible, and so cannot voluntarily choose to make decisions that will weaken their extractive power. Their choice to move the company abroad in search of cheaper labour is not really a choice at all, much like the choice a highwayman gives his victims between their money or their lives. Even in this case, employers are still in a position to make a whole host of voluntary decisions about how to treat their workforce, so long as those decisions are *non-economic*. An employer could choose to wield their power to sexually harass their workers, or to influence their political activity, or for any other purpose that would have little impact on their ability to extract profit from those workers. In other

³⁴ “Republican Freedom”, 288.

words, even if an employer has no ability to voluntarily choose between a range of economically-relevant options (market forces compel them to choose the most extractive option), there is a vast sphere of economically *irrelevant* choices available for them to freely make. Workers are still at their mercy, and as such still personally dominated by them³⁵.

But more directly, premise (2) itself is false, when taken in the strong sense. Employers may well have strong incentives to act according to the functional logic of the market - profit maximisation, increasing relative power over workers, and so on - but these incentives do not render that choice non-voluntary. The demands of the market upon an employer are importantly *unlike* the case of a highwayman's demands upon his victims to choose between their money or their lives. To see why, consider another relevant case where we adjudicate between voluntary and involuntary actions: the choice of a proletarian to sell their labour power. How can we make sense of the traditional Marxist claim that a worker is *forced* to sell their labour power to a capitalist, when they are free to choose between a host of alternatives (starve, steal, beg, and so on)? Because, one influential answer has it, the worker is left with *no acceptable alternatives*. It is a non-voluntary choice. A voluntary choice, on the other hand, is one made between two or more acceptable alternatives.

And what constitutes an acceptable alternative? Serena Olsaretti's work on the topic defends an idea of an acceptable alternative, roughly, as one that would not cause the chooser's well-being to dip below a certain threshold³⁶. The precise level of that threshold is up for debate, but intuitions will do for my purposes. Is choosing the option of being murdered by a highwayman likely to lead to my welfare dipping below an intuitively

³⁵ I am indebted to Bruno Leipold for a useful discussion on this point.

³⁶ Serena Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004).

acceptable threshold? I suspect so. Is choosing the option of starving to death? Similarly, I would think so. Is choosing the option of failing to maximally exploit my workers, thus risking losing my edge in a competitive market? In this case, I think it is not. In order for employers to be in a genuinely non-voluntary position when it comes to economic decisions, they must be so constrained by the demands of the market that they are left with *just one acceptable option*, just *one* option that doesn't cause them to drop below a minimum well-being threshold. Even leaving aside precisely the level of that threshold, this seems very unlikely.

In a sense, this is obvious stuff. Market forces don't really *force* an individual capitalist to do anything, and the pressure of competition isn't really *coercive* power. However an employer chooses to act towards their workers, they could always choose otherwise. Employers could even choose to erode the personal basis of their power, and, as Gourevitch notes (but does not expect) simply give over control of their firm to a cooperative of workers and the local community - "it is all *at their whim*³⁷". The choices made by individual employers are voluntary in precisely the sense required by personal accounts of domination. And, back to Thompson's example, the owner of a factory who faces the choice of sacking the entire workforce and moving abroad is free to choose otherwise, even if that choice might come at significant cost to their profit margins.

2. Accepting the weak form of the critique

Although employers have entirely the right sort of minimal agency required to be treated as proper dominators of their workforce - for any decision they make, they could choose

³⁷ "Labor Republicanism", 605.

otherwise - Thompson is right to observe that this tells us very little about what they will actually choose to do, or what should be done to curb their power. In order to predict *which* decisions employers will make, we do need to look to the institutional arrangements that shape their incentives, interests, and abilities. Coupled with the need, discussed in section II of this paper, to direct our *practical* energies towards these social and economic structures, rather than towards individual dominating agents, this observation may well mean that “[i]ndividual agents do not become the primary unit of analysis, but the logics of social systems³⁸”.

This weak version of Thompson’s argument can be found in passages like the following: “[S]ocial processes and structures have the ability to constrain and even shape the agency of individuals...[r]ead in this way, domination cannot be reduced solely to the will of an agent, but must be seen as generated by the logic of social structures³⁹”. This is true - the possibility that employers could deviate from the demands of the market is a necessary condition of their being proper agents of domination, but the *probability* of them deviating from those demands will be very low. They will largely try to increase their power over their workers, all the better to increase the profit they can extract from that workforce. As such, appealing to the “predisposition of the owner as a moral agent⁴⁰” is a waste of time, in both practical and epistemic terms: it isn’t likely to reduce domination, and nor is it likely to tell us anything very interesting about the causes and consequences of that domination. Far better, as Thompson argues, to look for these answers in the logic of the wider systems in which personal relations of domination are embedded. Theorists of personal domination are

³⁸ Thompson, “Republican Freedom”, 284.

³⁹ “Republican Freedom”, 287.

⁴⁰ “Republican Freedom”, 288.

perfectly capable of absorbing this advice without denying that an employer dominates their workers.

IV

I have spent this paper defending the personal account of domination, upon which an individual worker is dominated in a proper sense by just one person - their boss (with the caveats discussed at the end of section I). In both critiques, the argument is that the limitations of the personal account prevent us from making *practical* and *epistemic* progress. Personal domination theorists thereby fail to properly understand or properly oppose the domination of workers under capitalism. I have argued that in each case, the personal domination account is fully able to absorb the spirit of the critique, and so fully able to reject the letter of the critique. Sticking to the simpler personal account, we are still able to correctly identify the causal structures of personal domination in the workplace (private ownership of productive assets, employment and corporate law, and so on) as the best place to target the efforts of an anti-domination politics: we do not need to include the background agents whose actions and choices constitute these causal structures as proper, relevantly dominating agents. And sticking to the simpler personal account, we are still able to recognise that the individual disposition of any individual employer is more or less irrelevant when we want to understand the logic of capitalist power: we do not need to *exclude* those employers as relevantly dominating agents. In both cases, not only are we *able* to accept the spirit of the critique without any deep conceptual change - we *should* do so.

In sum, I've argued that the answer to the question 'who counts as a proper agent of domination?' matters a lot less than some critics seem to believe. Much more consequential

are the answers provided to the questions ‘what enables domination?’ and ‘what shall we do about it?’. This is perhaps reflected most clearly in the fact that identifying the agents of domination doesn’t even give us a good basis upon which to make evaluative judgements about those agents. If non-domination is enough of a good to be given a central place in political theory, then we might think that deciding upon the identity of people who engage in domination is a matter of urgency. The distinction between those who dominate and those who merely enable (and, of course, those who neither dominate nor enable, or those who resist) might be thought to be morally relevant, reserving the full force of our condemnation for those who themselves qualify as dominating agents. But this is not the case.

Consider the example of 19th Century marriage law in the UK. Under such a system, any reasonable conception of domination will say that husbands dominate their wives. A blunt power imbalance of property ownership, combined with an explicit legal and social right on the part of husbands to act virtually free of constraints towards their wives, meant that married men could impose their will, practically unconstrained, on their relatively powerless, entirely dependent wives. This is a textbook case of domination, shared amongst every conception in the literature. Unmarried men did not dominate individual women in this sense (although, of course, they did in many others). But from the standpoint of individual moral condemnation, this distinction is useless. An unmarried but vocal defender of the status quo certainly seems far worthier of condemnation than a married man who nonetheless campaigns loudly and tirelessly for reform, while refusing to *exercise* any of the considerable power the law and norms of the time gave him over his wife. More generally, enablers of domination, even if we decide that they are not dominators themselves, may be personally far more morally condemnable than some dominating agents who (even fruitlessly) try to change their position. Clearly a non-dominating enabler is worse than a non-dominating, non-enabler: an unmarried defender of the status quo is more condemnable than an unmarried

man who seeks to change the system that would give him unconstrained power over any future wife. But domination itself doesn't clearly map onto moral condemnation. The relevant comparison is between two vocal defenders of this dominating institution of marriage - one married and one unmarried. Do we think that the married man is worse? If the married man exploits or is violent towards his wife - if he takes advantage of his dominating position in the way that people tend to when given unconstrained power - then this will surely tip the balance. But this has little to do with the actual domination in the scenario. Domination is, in the sense under discussion, the *ability* to treat someone else in those ways (and the ability not to do so - the point is that it is up to the dominator). Assuming that the married man does not in fact exercise this ability doesn't reduce his domination over his wife, but it does, I suggest, make it even harder to make a clear evaluative judgement between the married and the unmarried man. Separating dominators from non-dominators will not, therefore, leave us well-prepared to make moral judgements about the individuals involved. This might be seen as surprising - domination is supposed to be bad, even centrally and uniquely bad, such that non-domination can act as a primary political goal. Shouldn't dominators at least be straightforwardly morally condemnable?

This is a good illustration of the degree to which domination - even personal accounts of domination - is really *about* individuals. On the personal account, domination is indeed a relationship first and foremost between individuals, and those individuals must relate to each other with a certain minimal degree of agency and intentionality. But this is where it ends. From the perspective of non-domination, individual dominators just aren't that interesting. Often they didn't *choose* to dominate, and sometimes it is not easily within their power to give up that position. And almost always, looking at an individual dominator tells us nothing very interesting about the source of their domination, or the way to go about dismantling it. Except in certain highly specific cases, even personal domination is a cooperatively enabled

affair. The resources required for personal domination are largely not themselves just personal resources of strength, intelligence, and so on. Only in very rare cases will such personal resources tell the whole story – say, the case of a stronger castaway dominating a weaker castaway on a desert island. In the overwhelming majority of politically interesting cases, the resources that allow some people to dominate others are what Cecile Laborde calls ‘systemic’ resources, ones that people acquire “by virtue of [their] location in a specific institutional system, as an IMF official, a police officer, a company director⁴¹”. Whether or not one has the resources to dominate another almost always depends in large part upon where one sits within a wider social structure. The factory owner, for instance, has the resources to personally dominate their workers because of the economic arrangement of society, by a property regime enforced by the legal apparatus of the state. And as well as these positive resources, personal domination often requires what we might call ‘negative’ resources – the inaction of bystanders and wider society. Cultural norms of a private sphere, for instance, place what goes on inside the home outside of public concern, and where those norms are strong they constitute cultural resources of domination by giving men the power to control their families without serious risk of discovery and punishment. In almost every single case, conceptualising and opposing personal domination involves looking at, and acting upon, precisely the structural or systemic features of a society that Gourevitch and Thompson think are occluded on a personal account. Or at least, it *should* involve this. Where it does not, and where theorists of personal domination fail to orient their thought and action towards these larger structures, they fail on their own terms.

⁴¹ Cecile Laborde, “Republicanism and Global Justice: a Sketch”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no.1 (2010), 57.