

10 Chains and Invisible Threads

Liberty and Domination in Marx's Account of Wage-Slavery*

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The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads.

Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (1867)

10.1 Introduction

One of the lasting contributions of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* was how powerfully it captured the workers' experience of the industrial revolution as a 'catastrophic change'.¹ Thompson forcefully argued that the working-class' complaint during this period was not reducible to a decline in material well-being. What mattered to workers was how the conditions of their work had changed – that their working life was now characterized by overwork, monotony, discipline, and most importantly the loss of freedom and independence. Thompson thus observed that 'People may consume more goods and become less happy or less free at the same time.'²

Thompson cited the example of a Manchester cotton spinner, who in an 1818 address catalogued the changes wrought by the new cotton mills – the epitome of modern factory production. In emphatically republican language, the anonymous cotton spinner branded the new manufacturers 'petty monarchs, absolute and despotic', who ruled over

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¹ Thompson 1963, p. 191. ² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

the ‘English Spinner slave’. The cotton spinner argued that the formal freedom to sell their labour did not stop the workers from still being ‘bondmen and bondwomen to their cruel taskmasters’, for,

It is vain to insult our common understandings with the observation that such men are free; that the law protects the rich and poor alike, and that a spinner can leave his master if he does not like the wages. True; so he can; but where must he go? why to another to be sure.³

The unnamed cotton spinner thus articulated one of the central features of the workers’ unfreedom, that though they can escape working for a *particular* master, they cannot escape working for *a* master.

The cotton spinner made his address, as Thompson points out, in the same year that Karl Marx was born. By the time Marx attended university, the same emerging worries about wage-labour and modern factory conditions had permeated into German political and social discourse. Marx’s law lecturer and influential Hegelian, Eduard Gans (1797–1839), argued that a visit to the English factories was enough to show you that ‘slavery is not yet over, that it has been formerly abolished, but materially is completely in existence’ and that society was in danger of turning ‘the domination of the [guild] masters into the domination of the factory owner’.⁴ Gans concluded that ‘just as once the master and the slave, later the patrician and plebeian, then the feudal lord and vassal, stood against each other, so now [do] the idle man and the worker’ – words Marx would later echo in the opening of the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (1848).⁵

The condemnation of wage-labour in the neo-Roman republican language of slavery and dependence, domination and unfreedom, was thus an established political vocabulary, and it is not surprising to find that Marx extensively deployed this language in his critique of capitalism. He argued, for instance, that workers were forced to ‘carry out slave-labour, completely giving up their freedom, in the service of greed’ and that ‘the relation of *wage labour to capital*, [is] the slavery of the worker, the domination of the capitalist’.⁶ Indeed, a central guiding thread in his critique of political economy was his attempt to show that beneath the putatively free wage-labour relation, where capitalist and worker contracted ‘only by their own free will’, lay a disguised relation, where the worker was subjected to the domination of the capitalist.⁷ Marx thus

³ Ibid., pp. 199–201. ⁴ Gans 1836, pp. 99–101.

⁵ Ibid. See Bienenstock 2002, p. 169; Sperber 2013, pp. 208–9.

⁶ Marx 1844b, p. 473/237; Marx 1849, p. 398/198. ⁷ Marx 1867, pp. 189–90/186.

maintained, in the standard radical terminology of the time, that wage-labour was in fact *wage-slavery*.⁸

These neo-Roman republican themes in Marx's writings have been noticed by scholars of the tradition.⁹ In the opening pages of the book this volume is dedicated to, Quentin Skinner writes that 'The vocabulary of Roman legal and moral philosophy is strikingly prominent ... in Marx's analysis of capitalism, especially in his discussions of wage-slavery, alienation and dictatorship.'¹⁰ However, there has so far been little sustained examination of the topic. That reflects a broader neglect of republicanism and republican ideas in the nineteenth century. Alex Gourevitch notes, in his study of nineteenth-century American labour republicans, that the 'prevailing historical scholarship' gives 'the strong impression that nothing conceptually meaningful happened in the republican tradition after the American Revolution'.¹¹ That assumption has led to greater weight being placed on the political dimensions of the tradition, rather than the social aspects of freedom and domination that come to the fore in the tradition's later manifestations.

While Skinner rightly argues that the central political insight of the pre-modern neo-Roman republicans was that 'it is only possible to be free in a free state'; the central contribution of later radical republicans, socialists, and feminists was to insist that it was not enough to be free in the political realm if one remained enslaved in the social.¹² As Marx argued in 'Zur Judenfrage' (1844), his famed early essay on the relationship between political and social emancipation, 'the state can be a *free state* without man being a *free man*'.¹³ For Marx, it was only possible to be free in a *free society*.

Marx had originally aimed to write a specific volume on wage-labour as part of his larger critique of political economy.¹⁴ Though he abandoned that plan, he incorporated much of the planned material into the first volume of *Das Kapital*.¹⁵ From that text, and some of his other economic writings, we can draw out his account of why wage-labour amounts to wage-slavery. That account can be usefully divided into three

⁸ For the history of the wage-slavery metaphor, see Cunliffe 1979.

⁹ For discussion of Marx's relationship to the wider republican tradition, and especially its political dimensions, see Leipold 2020.

¹⁰ Skinner 1998, p. x, n. 3.

¹¹ Gourevitch 2015, p. 9. For recent attempts to remedy this oversight, see, for instance, Turnaoğlu 2017; the contributions in Leipold, Nabulsi, and White 2020; and Rogers 2020.

¹² Skinner 1998, p. 60. See Gourevitch 2011, p. 432.

¹³ Marx 1844a, p. 353/152. Marx here uses the term *Freistaat*, a synonym for republic.

¹⁴ Marx 1858, p. 312/298; 1859, p. 7/261.

¹⁵ Rosdolsky 1977, pp. 57–62. See also Marx's comments in 1867, p. 565/542.

sequential moments: the periods before, during, and after the agreement of the labour contract.¹⁶ First, the worker is structurally dominated by the capitalist class, whose ownership of the means of production means that propertyless workers have no choice but to work for a capitalist master. Second, during the bargaining of the labour contract, the structural and interpersonal domination of the capitalist class and individual capitalist enables them to exploit the worker by extracting surplus labour (what can be termed extractive domination).¹⁷ Third, once the labour contract has been signed, the worker is subjected to the interpersonal domination of the individual capitalist inside the factory workplace, an outcome premised on the structural domination that precedes it. Together, these three moments of domination undermine the worker's liberty and, according to Marx, makes them a slave of the individual capitalist and the capitalist class.

The interpersonal domination of the individual capitalist inside the workplace comes closest to the kind of arbitrary power that Skinner and Philip Pettit have made the core of the neo-Roman or neo-republican account of liberty and domination. The arbitrary capacity of the individual capitalist to interfere in the working lives of their workers resembles the discretionary power wielded by an absolute monarch over their subjects. That is a comparison, as we will see, that Marx frequently and explicitly makes. But Marx's account of structural domination expands the standard account of domination, by shifting attention away from the arbitrary power of an individual to the way in which power is exercised through a social structure by a diffuse class of individuals.¹⁸ Furthermore, Marx's account of extractive domination provides a material foundation for domination by revealing how it enables exploitation, a dimension often absent from republican discussions of domination.

Marx also believed that the domination of wage-labour was supplemented by an even more general form of domination: the subordination of all of society to the imperatives of the market.¹⁹ While this final aspect of domination is not the primary focus of this chapter, I do discuss its relevance to the workings of extractive domination.

¹⁶ This three-tiered approach is inspired by the invaluable discussion in Gourevitch 2015, pp. 106–16.

¹⁷ Conceptually, personal and structural domination can be thought to refer to the agent(s) that dominate, while extractive domination refers to the purpose of that domination. I take the term extractive domination from Thompson 2018, pp. 47–50.

¹⁸ For further discussion of structural domination, see Laborde 2013, pp. 521–22; Thompson 2013; Gädeke 2017, ch. 5; Rahman 2017, pp. 83–86; Cicerchia 2019; Gädeke 2019; Muldoon 2019, pp. 7–8; O'Shea 2020; Vrousalis 2021.

¹⁹ Roberts 2017, ch. 3.

10.2 Domination and the Means of Production

The structural domination of workers arises from their two distinguishing features: (a) they own their own labour-power and thus have the freedom to sell it and (b) they own no means of production and are thus forced to sell their labour-power.²⁰ Marx argues that these features differentiate proletarians from the other subordinate producing classes in history. Slaves own *neither* their labour-power nor means of production, while serfs own only *part* of their labour-power and means of production. Independent producers (such as peasants and artisans), on the other hand, own *both* their labour-power and their own means of production.²¹

Marx argues that the worker's formal freedom to sell their labour-power is a significant improvement over serfs and slaves. The worker can dispose of themselves and their wages as they wish and thus 'a wide field of choice, caprice and therefore of formal freedom is left to him'.²² But Marx argues that the worker's lack of means of production undermines that freedom. Without means of production, workers are unable to independently produce their own means of subsistence.²³ They are consequently forced to gain their means of subsistence by selling their labour-power to a capitalist, who does own means of production. That means that though workers are not forced to work for any particular, individual capitalist (since they have the freedom to sell their labour-power to whoever they wish) they are forced to work for *a* capitalist from within the capitalist class.

This distinguishes the domination of proletarians from that of serfs and slaves, whose labour is tied to an individual lord or slave-owner.²⁴ As Marx writes, the 'slave belongs to a particular *master*', whereas the worker must 'sell himself to capital, but not to a particular capitalist'. This means that the worker can choose who to work for and has the advantage that 'he may change his master'.²⁵ But what the worker cannot do is have no master whatsoever. Their domination is (in this regard) not by any single capitalist, but by the capitalist class. Marx thus argues that because the

²⁰ Marx 1867, pp. 181–83/178–79, 742/705.

²¹ These are, of course, ideal type categorizations, with some producers falling between these categories, see Cohen 1978, pp. 65–68.

²² Marx 1857–58, p. 377/392. See also Marx 1847, pp. 555–56/436–37.

²³ Marx 1863–64, p. 77/411.

²⁴ However, serfs and slaves can be seen to be structurally dominated by the third parties that uphold the legal and political structures that are necessary to maintain serfdom and slavery, see Gourevitch 2013, p. 601.

²⁵ Marx 1863–64, p. 103/437.

worker's 'sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour, [he] cannot leave the *whole class of purchasers, that is, the capitalist class*, without renouncing his existence. *He belongs not to this or that bourgeois, but to the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class*'.²⁶ This aspect of the worker's domination is a form of structural domination, because it arises from the background ownership structure of the means of production and precedes and is independent of any individual relationship between worker and capitalist.²⁷ As Marx argues, 'the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist'.²⁸

Marx argued that this aspect of the worker's dependency made the unfreedom of wage-labour less transparent than previous forms of unfree labour. In slave-labour and serf-labour, the lack of freedom is patently observable in the serf's or slave's relationship with an identifiable individual lord or slave-owner. But with wage-labour, the worker's formal freedom to sell their labour obscures the structural necessity of the worker having to sell their labour to a master. Marx emphasizes this point again and again in *Das Kapital*. For instance, he contrasts the 'unqualified slavery (*Sklaverei sans phrase*) of the New World' with the 'veiled slavery (*verhüllte Sklaverei*) of the wage-labourers in Europe' and argues that the worker's 'economic bondage is ... concealed by, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, [and] his change of masters'.²⁹ That is also the point that lies behind the title of this chapter:

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 (*fictio juris*) of a contract.³⁰

Marx believed that the fact that the wage-labourer's domination was constituted by 'invisible threads' rather than clearly discernible 'chains', served a useful ideological function. By giving workers 'the consciousness (or better the *idea*) of free self-determination, of liberty' it spurred them to greater industriousness than formally unfree labourers.³¹ Even more importantly, it allowed capitalism's bourgeois defenders to more easily obscure the unfreedom of the wage-labour relationship. Marx says that it enabled the 'smug political economist ... [to] transmogrify (*breitmäulig umlügen*)' a 'relationship of absolute dependency ... into one of free contract between buyer and seller'.³²

²⁶ Marx 1849, p. 401/203. ²⁷ Gourevitch 2015, p. 109. ²⁸ Marx 1867, p. 603/577.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 603/577, 787/747. ³⁰ Ibid., p. 599/573.

³¹ Marx 1863–64, pp. 98/432, 101–2/435. ³² Marx 1867, pp. 796–97/756.

There are two ways that we might understand the workers' structural domination as an inhibition of their freedom. First, workers are unfree because they lack an acceptable alternative to selling their labour-power and are thus forced to sell it.³³ In this regard, Friedrich Engels (1820–95) called it a 'Fine freedom, where the proletarian has no other choice than that of either accepting the conditions which the bourgeoisie offers him, or of starving, of freezing to death, of sleeping naked among the beasts of the forests!'³⁴ Second, the worker is unfree because they have no choice but to work for a capitalist and thus have no choice but to give themselves a master. That seems to be the point Marx is making when he writes that the worker 'cannot get free (*loskommen*) of capital and whose enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom ... [he] sells [himself]'.³⁵ That is a more neo-Roman republican idea of freedom, and it relies on the argument that working for a capitalist means subjecting oneself to a master – a point developed in Section 10.3.³⁶

The argument that wage-labour subjected the worker not simply to an individual master but to a class of property owners was a common feature of nineteenth-century critiques of wage-labour (as we saw with the aforementioned cotton-spinner). The revolutionary socialist Auguste Blanqui (1805–81) had argued in 1834 that when a 'privileged caste' had a 'monopoly on property', while the great majority of citizens were 'completely dispossessed of the instruments of labour', then the latter, 'though not condemned to remain slaves of any given individual, nevertheless become absolutely dependent on that caste, since their only remaining freedom is the choice of which master will rule over them'.³⁷

Marx likely came into contact with this idea through Engels. His ground-breaking study of English factory conditions in *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (1845) was suffused with the vocabulary of wage-slavery and Engels specifically argued that the novel feature of the worker's slavery, compared to the 'old, frank and open (*offenherzige*) slavery', was that the worker was 'not the slave of a particular individual, but of the whole property-holding class'.³⁸ Furthermore, in Engels's later catechistic drafts of what became the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, he answered the usefully titled section 'In what way does the proletarian

³³ For further discussion, see Cohen 1983; Filling 2015, pp. 7–8.

³⁴ Engels 1845, p. 307/376. ³⁵ Marx 1867, p. 642/609.

³⁶ The first argument could be seen to gain its force from the second, since independent producers also have no choice but to work in order to survive; the difference is that they can do so without giving themselves a master.

³⁷ Blanqui 1834, pp. 285/50, 287/53.

³⁸ Engels 1845, p. 310/379. See Persky 1998, pp. 646–49.

differ from the slave?’ with the answer ‘The slave is the property of *one* master ... [whereas] the proletarian is, so to speak, the slave of the entire bourgeois *class*, not of *one* master.’³⁹

Marx’s account of the structural domination of the worker was thus an established feature of socialist discussions of wage-slavery.⁴⁰ Where Marx most extended this argument was to provide a methodical historical investigation into the origins of the workers’ structural domination combined with a theoretical account of the centrality of this fact to the emergence of capitalism. In the celebrated concluding section of *Das Kapital*, on ‘So-Called Primitive Accumulation’, Marx set out the long and brutal historical process, stretching from the end of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, whereby the peasants of England and Scotland were forcibly driven from the land through clearances, evictions, and the enclosure of common land. That process meant that the peasants were divorced from their means of production and subsistence and they thus ‘had to obtain their value in the form of wages from [their] new lord, the industrial capitalist’.⁴¹ Marx stressed that this separation from the land was critical, because while peasants controlled their own means of production they had no need to sell themselves to a capitalist. The independence of the peasant consequently had to be broken, in order to create the ‘great masses of men’ that capitalist production requires to be freely available on the labour-market.⁴² Marx therefore concluded that capitalism required ‘a degraded and almost servile condition of the mass of the people’ for its emergence.⁴³ He argued that without that precondition ‘capitalist accumulation and the capitalist mode of production are impossible’.⁴⁴

A striking feature of Marx’s historical and theoretical account of primitive accumulation is the extent to which it incorporates a republican idealization of independent producers. William Clare Roberts rightly notes its similarity to ‘a popular republican historiography that valorized the ancient constitution and the lost independence of the peasant

³⁹ Engels 1847a, p. 472/100. See also Engels 1847b, pp. 366/343–44.

⁴⁰ A further common feature of these critiques was to argue that the ‘white slavery’ of the worker in Europe was worse than the ‘black slavery’ in America, because chattel slaves were (supposedly) at least provided with a guaranteed subsistence because of the self-interest of their masters in keeping them alive, whereas wage slaves starved if their employer let them go. While Marx occasionally refers to ‘white slavery’ and notes that the slave has the advantage of a guaranteed subsistence, he does not argue that this makes wage-slavery, all things considered, worse than chattel slavery, see Marx 1865, p. 146/143; 1867, pp. 270/262, 478/458, 704/667. Marx’s comparisons with American chattel slavery are instead focused on how cotton production provided a brutal foundation for the wage-slavery in European factories, see Marx 1846, pp. 458/101–2; 1867, pp. 250/244, 787/747.

⁴¹ Marx 1867, p. 773/734. ⁴² Ibid, p. 744/707. ⁴³ Ibid, p. 748/711.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 794/754.

producer'.⁴⁵ Throughout the discussion of primitive accumulation, Marx repeatedly celebrates the role played by England's independent yeoman farmers and favourably contrasts them with the dependent agricultural proletariat that replaced them. For instance, he writes that the free peasant proprietorship of the fifteenth century was the basis of 'popular wealth' and he praises the yeomen for being the 'backbone of Cromwell's strength' during the Civil War.⁴⁶ Marx also slams the greed of the 'English oligarchy' who drove the process of dispossession that replaced the 'independent yeoman ... [with] a servile rabble dependent on the arbitrary will of the landlords'.⁴⁷ Marx argues that England's labouring class thereby abruptly transitioned 'from its golden age to its iron age'; a process that Marx stresses was only interrupted by the English Republic when 'the mass of the English people of all levels rose from the degradation into which they had sunk under the Tudors'.⁴⁸ This popular English republican dimension of Marx's account is even more conspicuous in a draft chapter of *Das Kapital*, where Marx complains: 'What difference there is between the proud yeomanry of England, of whom Shakespeare speaks, and the English agricultural day labourers!'⁴⁹

This celebration of the small peasant producer, with strong echoes of the tradition of the 'free-born Englishman', is something we would expect in a popular radical pamphlet but is an initially surprising aspect of Marx's *Kapital* and requires explanation. Here, Roberts again plausibly argues that the part of the purpose of Marx's invocation of this popular republican narrative was to subvert it. At the time of *Das Kapital*'s publication, Marx's ideas competed with an array of socialist and radical republican movements that in one form or another aimed to recapture the lost independence of small producers. Marx, however, thought that this ideal had been permanently destroyed by the advance of large-scale industrial capitalist production. Socialism would instead have to be built upon the gains of capitalism, by harnessing its tremendous productive power for social ends. That meant maintaining large-scale production, with its 'combined, socialized labour, [and] the entanglement of all peoples'.⁵⁰ The workers' structural domination that arose from their lack of means of production would thus be overcome, not by securing to every person their own individual means of production but by establishing collective ownership over those means of production.

⁴⁵ Roberts 2017, p. 197. ⁴⁶ Marx 1867, pp. 745/708, 750/713.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 752–53/714–15. ⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 746/709, 776/737.

⁴⁹ Marx 1863–64, p. 103/437. The reference to Shakespeare (perhaps to *Henry V*) is repeated nearly verbatim in Marx 1865, p. 148/145.

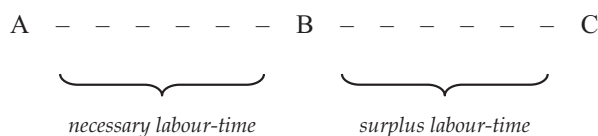
⁵⁰ Marx 1867, pp. 789–90/749–50.

By invoking and then undermining the republican ideal of independence, Marx wanted to show that however attractive an ideal it might have been, it was an untenable alternative to capitalism, and only socialism, an ideal of universal mutual dependence, could replace it.⁵¹

10.3 Domination and the Labour Contract

We have seen how the structural domination of the worker means that she has to enter the labour-market to find a capitalist master to employ her. This structural necessity, which Marx argues ‘throws the worker back onto the market again and again’ and ‘incessantly forces him to sell his labour-power’, sets the stage for the next moment of domination, when the capitalist buys the worker’s labour-power ‘in order that he may enrich himself’.⁵² Marx argues that in this transaction the capitalist class and the individual capitalist use their superior power to set the terms of the labour contract in their favour, in order to extract as much surplus labour from the worker as possible.

Marx’s account of extractive domination is most fully developed in his discussion of the working-day in *Das Kapital*.⁵³ Marx here argues that we should understand the working-day as being split between two periods: *necessary labour-time*, the period when the labourer works to sustain themselves, and *surplus labour-time*, the period when the labourer works beyond that minimum and creates a surplus. Marx argues that in capitalist economies this surplus is appropriated by the capitalist (while in feudal societies the surplus goes to the lord and in slave societies to the slave-owner).⁵⁴ The worker thus works part of the day for themselves and part of the day for the capitalist. Marx, who was not usually given to diagrammatic presentations of his ideas, illustrates this two-part division of the working-day in the following fashion:⁵⁵



⁵¹ Roberts 2017, p. 192. ⁵² Marx 1867, p. 603/577.

⁵³ For Marx’s early account of how extractive domination relates to the determination of wages, see Marx 1844b, pp. 471–72/235–36.

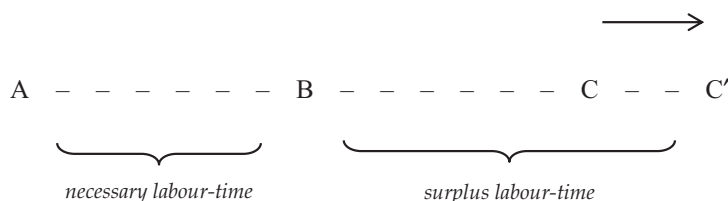
⁵⁴ Marx 1867, pp. 230–31/225–26, 249–50/243–44, 534–35/512–13.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 245/239. I have slightly adapted the diagrams for clarity.

Here, for instance, the period of necessary labour-time (AB) and the period of surplus labour-time (BC) are both six hours, giving a total working-day (AC) of twelve hours.

Marx notes that the total length of the working-day is not a fixed quantity but can fluctuate between a minimum, set by necessary labour-time, and a maximum, set by both social norms and the absolute physical limits of the working class.⁵⁶ Marx insists that in capitalist production the working-day cannot stay at the minimum level set by necessary labour-time, because then no surplus is created for the capitalist. Moreover, the capitalist has an interest in extending the total length of the working-day as much as possible, in order to increase the period of surplus labour-time and hence the surplus they extract from the worker. The worker, on the other hand, has an interest in reducing the length of the working-day, in order to have more free time for themselves. Hence, when it comes to setting the length of the working-day there is a clash between these two conflicting drives, ‘an antimony, of right against right’ and ‘[b]etween equal rights, force decides’.⁵⁷

The working-day is thus a site of class-struggle, with its length a function of the relative power of the capitalist and the worker. As Marx puts it, the working-day ‘resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants’.⁵⁸ The greater the power of the capitalist the more they are able to extend the length of the working day, and hence the greater the period of surplus labour, and thus the greater the surplus they extract from the worker.⁵⁹ In terms of our first example, a capitalist’s increased power might, for instance, enable them to increase the total working-day (AC’) to fourteen hours, giving a new extended surplus labour-time (BC’) of eight hours:



Marx's argument thus links domination and exploitation: greater domination by the capitalist enables greater exploitation of the worker.⁶⁰ That connection is important, because domination is too easily seen as a phenomenon that is merely the outcome of a master's sadistic or irrational desire for power over others.⁶¹ Marx's argument reminds us that a relationship of domination provides material benefits to the dominator and that the capitalist thus has a permanent interest in expanding their domination over the worker and the working-class.

Marx mentions several factors that can increase the power of the capitalist and the capitalist class over that of the worker and the working-class, including the extent of the division of labour and the size of the industrial reserve army of the unemployed. Marx argues that the progression of the division of labour in production results in workers becoming more and more specialized on a particular task, which means that they increasingly lose their ability to work independently or carry out alternative work. That in turn gives the capitalist who provides that specialized work greater negotiating power over the worker with few alternative options. Marx thus argues that the worker's 'lifelong specialism' results in his 'helpless dependence ... upon the capitalist' and approvingly cites the words of the Scottish enlightenment thinker, Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), who argued that the division of labour meant that 'we make a nation of Helots, and have no free citizens'.⁶² The reserve army of the unemployed, on the other hand, provides every capitalist with an easily accessible pool of alternative candidates should any worker consider rejecting the terms of the labour contract. The larger the reserve army, the greater the competition amongst workers and the more they are forced to 'submit to over-work' and the 'dictates of capital'.⁶³ Marx thus argues that the industrial reserve army ensures the 'absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class', 'completes the despotism of capital', and 'rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock'.⁶⁴

The expansion of the working-day is a particularly stark and crude example of how the capitalist's greater domination over the worker is linked with exploitation. But Marx also outlines a subtler form of extractive domination. He argues that while surplus labour-time can be directly increased by extending the length of the working-day; it can also be

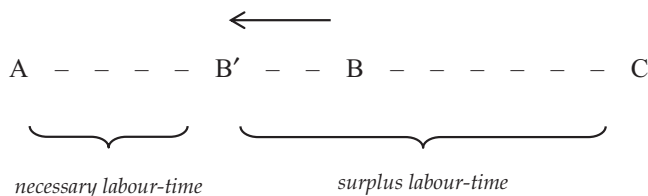
⁶⁰ For the conceptual link between domination and exploitation, see Vrousalis 2013.

⁶¹ Gourevitch 2015, p. 114.

⁶² Ferguson 1995, p. 177. Cited in Marx 1867, p. 375/359. ⁶³ Marx 1867, p. 665/630.

⁶⁴ Ibid. pp. 669–70/634, 675/639–40.

indirectly increased by reducing necessary labour-time.⁶⁵ This occurs through increases in the productivity of labour which reduce the time it takes for workers to produce the products with the value necessary to sustain themselves. This decreases necessary labour-time and (assuming the working-day stays the same length) automatically increases the period of the working-day dedicated to surplus labour-time. Marx clarifies this idea by showing how an increase in productivity affects the ratio of surplus to necessary labour-time within the working-day:⁶⁶



domination over the labour-process they get to decide how productivity gains are spent, and inevitably they appropriate it for themselves. Marx argues that gains in productivity ‘set free’ a block of time (the two hours from B'–B in the above example), which could be converted into more free time for the workers but is instead ‘annexed to the domain of surplus labour’ by the capitalist.⁶⁸ Rather than gains in productivity being used to negotiate a new labour contract with shorter hours, the capitalist keeps the working-day constant and thereby continuously pockets the gains from productivity. That outcome relies on the capitalist being in control of the labour-process – that the decision on how to spend the time gained from increased productivity rests with them rather than the workers. This point is more implicit than explicit in Marx’s argument, though he cites the words of the English political economist John Cazenove (1788–1879) that ‘A man’s profit does not depend upon his command of the *produce* of other men’s labour, but upon his command of *labour itself*.’⁶⁹ The capitalist thus must control the labour process in order to constantly appropriate the gains from productivity.

Domination thus plays a central role in Marx’s account of exploitation. This extractive domination can, to a certain extent, be understood in terms of the individual capitalist’s arbitrary power to set the terms of employment as they wish. Marx notes that when workers are not hired on a regular daily contract, the capitalist can ‘according to his own convenience, caprice, and the interest of the moment’ decide however many hours to give to the worker.⁷⁰ But Marx is also at pains to emphasize that the capitalist’s will is itself constrained by the imperatives of the market. Capitalists that do not extract as much surplus labour as possible out of their workers will probably be driven out of business by their competitor’s cheaper commodities. That means that capitalists do not simply have the arbitrary *capacity* to exploit, they *must* exploit in order to survive on the market. Even if a capitalist wanted to shorten the working-day, their ability to do so is severely limited by the competition from other capitalists. Marx thus observes:

But looking at these things as a whole, it is evident that this [the length of the working-day] does not depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Free competition makes the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Marx 1867, p. 338/324. For Marx’s discussion of the failure of capitalism to convert rising productivity into more free time, see *ibid.*, pp. 552/530–31 and Cohen 1978, pp. 302–7.

⁶⁹ Cazenove 1832, p. 49. Cited in Marx 1867, p. 337/323.

⁷⁰ Marx 1867, p. 568/545. A concern reminiscent of contemporary zero-hour contracts.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286/276. See similarly Arnold 2017, p. 115.

The extractive domination of capitalism thus cannot be solely understood in terms of whether the individual capitalist's 'will' is 'good or bad', because all capitalists are subjected to the imperatives of the market. For Marx, the capitalist is also ruled by the forces that necessitate the domination of the worker.

10.4 Domination and the Workplace

Once the conditions of the labour contract have been set, the worker enters the workplace and is exposed to the final aspect of their unfreedom: the interpersonal domination of the individual capitalist boss. This dimension of domination is the most tangible aspect of the worker's dependency (Marx and Engels note that while workers are 'slaves of the bourgeois class', they are 'enslaved ... above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer'),⁷² though crucially this interpersonal domination is premised upon the structural domination that precedes it. Marx's depiction of the interpersonal domination of the capitalist can be divided between his early philosophical account of labour and his later more empirically informed studies of factory workplace conditions.

Marx's early economic writings from 1844, the *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* and the lesser-known *Auszüge aus James Mill*, are littered with neo-Roman republican language in their condemnation of the power exercised by the capitalist over the worker in the workplace. One of the deleterious aspects of this arbitrary power that Marx highlights is the effect it has on the character and behaviour of the workers. Marx argues that the worker's dependency on the capitalist's good will for continued employment means that they have to ingratiate themselves with the capitalist through flattery and debasement. He claims that,

no eunuch flatters his despot more basely or uses more despicable means to stimulate his dulled capacity for pleasure in order to sneak a favour for himself than does the industrial eunuch – the producer – in order to sneak for himself a few pieces of silver, in order to charm the golden birds out of the pockets of his dearly beloved neighbours in Christ.⁷³

Marx's comparison of the 'industrial eunuch' who serves a capitalist with the eunuch who serves a despot, is a reference to the old republican objection to the role of courtiers in an absolute monarchy. As Skinner describes in *Liberty before Liberalism*, a recurrent trope in early modern

⁷² They here also argue that the worker is enslaved by the 'bourgeois state', the 'machine', and the 'overseer', Marx and Engels 1848 p. 469/491.

⁷³ Marx 1844b, p. 547/307.

neo-Roman critiques of monarchy was that the king's arbitrary power placed those around him in a state of dependence, resulting in obsequious and toadying advisors who 'cultivate[d] the flattering arts required to appease a ruler'.⁷⁴ Neo-Roman theorists harshly criticized the corrupted, servile, and slavish character of these courtiers and the 'eunuchs employed by kings'.⁷⁵ Marx's invocation of this classic republican trope serves to highlight the similarly degrading effects of modern relationships of dependency, while also emphasizing that, according to Marx, the economic dependency of proletarians surpasses the political dependency of monarchical courtiers.

Marx's use of neo-Roman republican language is also particularly striking in his discussion of alienation. For instance, he argues that in capitalism 'man regards his will, his activity and his relation to other men as a power independent of him and them. His slavery, therefore reaches its peak'.⁷⁶ Marx sets out several dimensions of alienated labour, of which the most pertinent to our current discussion is his account of alienation in the act of production (i.e., the worker's experience of labouring in a modern factory).⁷⁷ Marx argues that this is alienating for three reasons. First, the work is *unfulfilling*; second, it is carried out under *compulsion*; and third, it does not *belong* to the worker. Regarding this third aspect, Marx says that work is alienating for the worker because 'it is not his own, but someone else's ... it does not belong to him ... in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another'. Similarly, Marx writes that the worker experiences production as an 'alien activity ... which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him'.⁷⁸ Marx thus repeatedly associates alienation in the act of production with work that belongs to another. The first two aspects of alienation in the act of production, that work is dull and done out of necessity, are frequently commented upon in the literature, but it is noteworthy how much stress Marx also places on worker's not having control over their work.⁷⁹ The fact that a worker has to carry out their labour activity for and under the direction of someone else makes the act of production an alienating one for the worker. Dominated work is thus, on Marx's account, alienated work.

⁷⁴ Skinner 1998, p. 90. ⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 94. ⁷⁶ Marx 1844c, p. 446/212.

⁷⁷ Marx 1844b, pp. 514–15/274–75. The other dimensions are alienation from the product, alienation from other people, and alienation from our species-being.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ For sophisticated accounts of Marx's ideas on alienated labour (though which do not address the role of domination), see Leopold 2007, pp. 229–34; and Kandiyali 2020. For some discussion of the relation, see Forst 2017, pp. 539–44.

Marx closes his account of alienated labour with a discussion of what ultimately underpins this alienation. He argues that contrary to the supernatural explanations of earlier ages, ‘only man himself can be this alien power over man’, and Marx identifies that man as the ‘capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the lord of labour’.⁸⁰ This point is vividly made in the subsequent passage:

Thus, if the product of his [the worker’s] labour, his labour objectified, is for him an *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then he relates to it such that another man, alien, hostile, powerful and independent of him, is its master. If he relates to his own activity as an unfree activity, then he relates to it as an activity in the service, under the domination, the coercion, and the yoke of another man.⁸¹

This is perhaps the clearest explicit linking, in Marx’s writings, of liberty to domination. Marx argues that work carried out under the ‘domination’, the ‘yoke’, of another is ‘unfree activity’. Here, Marx clearly uses freedom in the negative sense of having no master.⁸²

But though we can certainly detect neo-Roman republican aspects in some of Marx’s uses of freedom, that does not entail that it is his only conception of freedom. Indeed, Marx frequently deploys more positive conceptions of freedom, where he equates it with self-realization in productive activity. For instance, Marx claims that a person ‘only truly produces in freedom’ when they produce ‘free from physical need’.⁸³ Freedom, in this sense, implies productive activity that is free from economic necessity. At other points, Marx suggests that under the right conditions, freedom is realized in work itself, even when it is necessary labour. For instance, he suggests that necessary labour can be a ‘manifestation of freedom’ – that it can result in ‘self-realisation, objectification of the subject, and thus real freedom, whose action is precisely work’.⁸⁴ Marx thus deploys multiple conceptions of freedom across his works – positive and negative – and it would be a mistake to reduce his account of liberty to just one of these.

Marx’s early philosophical account of modern factory production was later supplemented by the ‘extraordinary wealth of statistics, official reports and pieces of press reportage’ that went into the creation of *Das Kapital* and which he weaved into a damning account of workplace

⁸⁰ Marx 1844b, pp. 518–20/278–79. ⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Marx also frequently objected to more limited understandings of negative freedom, see, for example, Marx 1844a, p. 364/162.

⁸³ Marx 1844b, p. 517/276.

⁸⁴ Marx 1857–58, p. 512/530. For further discussion, see Kandiyali 2014; and James 2017.

conditions.⁸⁵ In forensic detail, Marx set out the factory workers' meagre pay and long hours, their unsafe and unhealthy workplaces, their monotonous and intellectually unstimulating tasks, and, finally, how the capitalist 'subject[ed] him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness'.⁸⁶ This description of the capitalist's rule over his workers in terms reminiscent of an absolute monarch's despotism over his subjects is a recurrent theme in *Kapital* (for instance, Marx also refers to 'factory autocrats' and the 'despotism in ... the workshop').⁸⁷ Marx presents the capitalist's rule in the factory as arising alongside the long process of the increasing social division of labour with a concurrent growth in the need for direction and supervision in the labour-process. With a capitalist in control of the factory, that requirement translates into workers experiencing the division of labour as 'confront[ing] them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and, in practice, as the authority of the capitalist, in the shape of the powerful will of another, who subjects their activity to his aims'.⁸⁸

Marx argues that as capitalist production advances, this supervisory role is increasingly passed on to overseers, who subject the workers to 'barrack-like discipline', making the factory resemble the strict military hierarchy of soldiers and officers.⁸⁹ To enforce this discipline, the capitalist develops his own set of rules and regulations that the overseer uses to control the worker. Marx argues that these rules are carefully designed by the capitalist or 'factory-Lycurgus', with his 'law-giving talent', to ensure that any infraction of the rules is, where possible, more profitable to the capitalist than obeying them.⁹⁰ Moreover, Marx argues that these rules are drawn up entirely at the capitalist's discretion:

In the factory code, the capitalist formulates his autocracy over his workers, like a private legislator (*privatgesetzlich*) and as an emanation of his own will (*eigenherrlich*), unaccompanied by either the separation of powers otherwise so much approved of by the bourgeoisie, or the still more approved representative system.⁹¹

In support of this argument, Marx cites a long passage from Engels's *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*:

The slavery in which the bourgeoisie holds the proletariat chained, is nowhere more conspicuously brought into daylight than in the factory system. Here ends all freedom in law and in fact. The operative must be in the mill at half-past five in the morning; if he comes a couple of minutes too late, he is fined; if he comes ten

⁸⁵ Stedman Jones 2016, p. 428. ⁸⁶ Marx 1867, p. 674/639.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 377/362, 449/428. ⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 351/337. ⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 447/426–27.

⁹⁰ Ibid. The original Lycurgus had founded Sparta's oligarchical constitution. ⁹¹ Ibid.

minutes too late, he is not let in until breakfast is over, and a quarter of the day's wages is withheld, though he loses only two and one-half hours' work out of twelve. He must eat, drink, and sleep at command The despotic bell calls him from his bed, his breakfast, his dinner.

[I]nside the factory ... the employer is absolute law-giver; he makes regulations at will, changes and adds to his codex at pleasure, and even, if he inserts the craziest stuff, the courts say to the working-man: 'You were your own master, no one forced you to agree to such a contract if you did not wish to; but now, when you have freely entered into it, you must be bound by it.'⁹²

Both of these passages stand out for their description of the capitalist's arbitrary power (his rules are described as an 'emanation of his own will' and being created 'at will ... [and] at pleasure') and the clear allusion both Marx and Engels make to the arbitrary power of an absolute monarch (they refer to 'autocracy', the 'despotic bell', and the 'absolute law-giver'). Engels also explicitly ties being subjected to this arbitrary power to the end of 'all freedom in law and in fact', highlighting the fact that the law and the courts recognize no inhibitions of freedom once the worker has 'freely' contracted with the capitalist. Furthermore, Marx makes the striking point that this kind of arbitrary power is unacceptable to the bourgeoisie in the public realm (where political power has to be constrained by the separation of powers and representative government) but is considered entirely acceptable by them when it occurs in the private realm of employment.⁹³

Both passages also draw attention to the arbitrary application of fines to control the worker.⁹⁴ This is a repeated target of Marx's anger across his writings. He describes how workers are penalized for the smallest infractions, from sitting down to take a rest, to speaking or even laughing out of turn.⁹⁵ Marx depicts fines as a particularly modern form of control, arguing that in the factory, 'In place of the slave-driver's whip steps the overseer's book of penalties.'⁹⁶ What particularly upsets Marx about this practice is that the capitalist and their overseers are able to impose these fines without any method of contestation or redress by the workers. He notes that the factory falls under '*the private jurisdiction*' of the capitalists, with '*a penal code of their own*', and where the 'employer combines in his own person the parts of legislator, judge and executor'.⁹⁷

⁹² Engels 1845, pp. 398–99/467. Cited in Marx 1867, pp. 447–48/427.

⁹³ A theme recently explored in Anderson 2017a.

⁹⁴ On the use of fines in early factories, see Pollard 1963, pp. 257, 261–62.

⁹⁵ Marx 1848, p. 448/456. ⁹⁶ Marx 1867, p. 447/427.

⁹⁷ Marx 1871a, p. 347/339; 1871b, p. 528/472;.

Marx's complaint, once again, is that the bourgeois principles of the right to redress and impartiality do not extend past the factory gate. Once the worker crosses that threshold, they are subjected to power that that would be unthinkable outside of it.

A further dimension of the capitalist's domination over the worker is how it can be used for sexual exploitation. Marx does not devote much attention in *Das Kapital* to this aspect of the worker's domination in the workplace and instead (again) points to Engels's discussion of the issue in *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*.⁹⁸ Engels had here set out how the 'threat of discharge' makes the employer the 'master over the body and the charms of his female workers'.⁹⁹ Crucially, Engels argued that 'If the master is mean ... [then] his mill is also his harem; and the fact that not all manufacturers use their power, does not in the least change the position of the girls.'¹⁰⁰ Engels thus utilizes the classic neo-Roman republican insight to argue that the problem is not simply that 'mean' manufacturers interfere with their female workers by demanding sexual favours, but that all manufacturers, good or bad, have this power to interfere.

A consistent theme across Marx's early and later discussions of wage-labour is his insistence that its objectionable character cannot be reduced to its effect on the worker's material welfare, because at its core wage-labour denies freedom to the worker. For instance, in the *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*, Marx claims that an 'increase in wages' for the worker would 'be nothing better than *payment for the slave*'.¹⁰¹ The same concern is expressed in *Das Kapital*, where Marx argues that while an increase in wages can 'extend the circle of [the workers'] enjoyments' by allowing them to buy and save more, it does not set the worker free; for 'just as little as better clothing, food, treatment and a larger *peculium* abolish the relationship of dependence and the exploitation of the slave, so little do they abolish that of the wage-labourer'.¹⁰² Marx thus maintained that without fundamentally addressing the fact that the worker produced under the control and supervision of a master, the worker would remain unfree. Skinner is thus right to suggest that Marx's critique of wage-labour displays 'recognizably neo-Roman moral commitments'.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Marx 1867, p. 421/403. ⁹⁹ Engels 1845, p. 373/441–42. ¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Marx 1844b, pp. 520–21/280.

¹⁰² Marx 1867, p. 646/613. In Roman law, *peculium* was the property controlled by slaves, but still owned by their master.

¹⁰³ Skinner 2013.

10.5 Conclusion

In summary, Marx believed that wage-labour amounted to wage-slavery because of the structural and interpersonal domination of the capitalist and the capitalist class over the worker, which in turn enabled their extractive domination. Marx thus maintained that the putatively free labour contract concealed the actual domination and unfreedom that lay beneath its surface. This chapter has shown how this argument was suffused with neo-Roman republican vocabulary, even as Marx, in contrast to some interpretations of the tradition, stressed the structural dimensions of domination and its relationship to exploitation.

We also saw how Marx's response to wage-slavery differed from his republican contemporaries. They believed that wage-slavery should be addressed through an economy of independent producers who owned their own means of production. Marx instead insisted that capitalist domination could only be overcome by a society where the means of production were held in common. Marx did not provide much detail of what this would look like – a consequence of his theoretical opposition to specifying the details of a future socialist society.¹⁰⁴ But his writings do provide some glimpses of its general contours, especially in his positive appraisal of producer co-operatives, where workers collectively own and control their means of production. Marx thought that these provided an inspiring example of how large-scale modern production could be carried out 'without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands', where the former 'monopolised' the means of production as a 'means of dominion' over the worker.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, Marx was always careful to specify that isolated co-operative experiments would by themselves not be enough to overcome all the manifold aspects of domination in capitalism. Workers, he argued, could not avoid confronting the power of the bourgeois state and the impersonal subjection of the market. But Marx enthusiastically embraced the practical example co-operatives had set and praised them for showing that the 'despotic system of the *subordination of labour* to capital can be superseded by the republican and beneficent system of *the association of free and equal producers*'.¹⁰⁶ Co-operative production would thus play an important role in how a socialist society would sever the invisible threads that tied the worker to the capitalist and the capitalist class and thereby set them free.

¹⁰⁴ See Leopold 2016. ¹⁰⁵ Marx 1864a, p. 11/11.

¹⁰⁶ Marx 1866, p. 195/190. Marx's explicitly republican language was possibly the result of the need to appeal to other factions in the International Working-Men's Association, see, for example, Marx 1864b, p. 15/18.