Varieties of economic dependence

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Published in *European Journal of Political Theory* 2021

https://doi.org/10.1177/14748851211001549

Abstract

For several decades public political discourses on 'welfare dependency' have failed to recognise that welfare states are not the source of economic dependence, but rather reconfigure economic dependencies in a specific way. This paper distinguishes four senses of 'economic dependence' that can help to clarify what is missing from these discourses, and what is at stake in political and legal decisions about how we may economically depend upon one another. While feminist, republican and egalitarian philosophical work has examined the problems of dependence on states, in families, and in markets, the present approach adds a further dimension to our cultural and political concerns with economic dependence: it argues that it is reasonable and useful to consider the economic dependence of the economically powerful. Doing so requires a clarification of the 'varieties of dependence' that exist in contemporary societies and economies, and the recognition that legal and political choices regarding social and economic justice are often about choosing between varieties of dependence, not about escaping dependence entirely.

1. Introduction

The most common and politically influential discourses on economic dependence suggest that economic dependence is an exceptional condition that is lived in by a very specific section of the population. The Centre for Social Justice, the think tank that informed the last wave of welfare reforms in the UK in which "Universal Credit" was introduced, flatly states: 'If someone is economically dependent it means that they rely on welfare payments from the state to meet their basic needs' (Centre for Social Justice, 2013: 19). This conflation of economic dependence with welfare dependence, which has been a prominent feature of normative political discourse in capitalist welfare states for several decades, has eroded our ability to see the varieties of economic dependence that exist in all societies. There are at least four senses of 'economic dependence' that we should be concerned with in debates about economic and social justice, which will be developed in this article, but the idea of 'welfare dependency' has been an effective tool in narrowing our public concern with dependence to political questions concerning welfare provision.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom – and no doubt many other countries around the world – leading politicians have made 'welfare dependency' a prominent topic in policy manifestos and public debate. In the 1990s, US presidential candidate (soon to be president) Bill Clinton argued that he would 'break the cycle of welfare dependency' (Clinton, 1992) and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair argued that 'The new welfare state must encourage work, not dependency' (Blair, 1997). In the 2010s, before becoming president, Donald Trump was calling welfare dependency 'morally offensive' (Trump, 2011: 107), and in the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron imagined welfare recipients 'trapped in a fog of dependency' (Cameron, 2016).

This kind of discourse on 'welfare dependency' has a longer history (O'Connor, 2001). While it is a characteristic worry of the New Right – highlighted, for example, by Charles Murray in the 1980s – it had also been invoked earlier by conservative Democrats in the US context (e.g. Moynihan, 1965) and even by the architect of the US welfare state, F.D. Roosevelt (O'Connor, 201: 223). Its prominence in the last 40 years owes much to the way in which these decades saw neoliberal welfare reform coincide with a resurgence in conservative paternalism (Cooper, 2017). Public political discourses about welfare dependency imply, or even state, that welfare dependency is a problem about psychology, habits, individual will or collective culture that have made some people willing to live off the hard work of others. In short, the normative implication is that welfare dependence is a kind of economic parasitism.[1]

The attack on 'welfare *dependency'* as a subjective, psychological and moral, condition only makes sense if, as these discourses assume, the 'economic *dependence'* of welfare recipients is somehow unique in our societies. As Marion Smiley (2001: 26 – 29) has pointed out, it is exactly this slide between the identification of an 'objective' condition of 'dependence', on the one hand, and the attribution of a 'subjective' trait of 'dependency', on the other, that gives these political views their rhetorical force. That slide depends on the assumption that there really is a section of society who are uniquely 'economically dependent' by virtue of receiving state support. But making ‘economic dependence’ synonymous with ‘welfare dependence’ is myopic and selective. This has not gone unnoticed by political theorists, who have examined welfare dependence in very different normative terms (e.g. Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Kittay, 1998; Kittay and Feder, 2002). Not only have welfare states been repeatedly defended for *freeing* individuals from other forms of economic dependence such as on the family or charity (Esping-Anderson, 1990), but the concept of ‘economic dependence’ is often explained as *vulnerability to coercion or exploitation* (Goodin, 1985,1988; Gourevitch, 2013).

The present argument builds on this work, and develops an immanent critique of narrow views of ‘welfare dependence’ – views that have underpinned the critique of ‘welfare dependency’ illustrated above. In doing so, the aim is to expand the uses of the concept of ‘economic dependence’ in ways that can be put to work in contemporary debates about economic justice. More specifically, the argument demands consistency and precision in our debates about economic dependence, and suggests that this in itself might not only correct for myopic views of ‘welfare dependency’, but provide resources for further normative argumentation about just and unjust forms of economic dependence. The discussion here proposes that economic dependence is a much more ubiquitous feature of all of our economic lives than our dominant political discourses suggest. This is not to claim that we are all economically dependent in the same way – far from it. Section 2 illustrates the different senses of ‘economic dependence’ employed by feminists, republicans, egalitarians, and indeed politicians in the last few decades, and shows that there are several different moral and political problems that are highlighted by questions about ‘economic dependence’. But it will also be argued there are relationships amongst these problems. For example, private dependence within the family is different to public dependence upon a welfare system – and raises some different moral issues – but in the real world, social policy is often about choosing between these forms of economic dependence in the design of welfare provision.[2]

Sections 3 explains why the concept of ‘interdependence’ risks distracting us from the very real differences between forms of dependence. Section 4 organises and develops the senses of ‘economic dependence’ found in the literature into ‘structural dependence’ and ‘practical dependence’, on the one hand, and ‘personal dependence’ and ‘impersonal dependence’, on the other, and section 5 extends the application of these senses to economic practices that are not normally captured by debates about economic dependence. What will be crucial here will be reasoning by analogy: for example, if receipt of state welfare support is an exemplary case of economic dependence, what elements of this exemplar are present in other economic relationships? If there are some, such as the receipt of unearned income, we can go on to ask whether the applications of our political language should be extended – for example, to apply to unearned income through asset ownership – in order to be consistent.

The conclusion of the argument is that many important decisions about social and economic justice are not about increasing independence or decreasing dependence as such, but about deciding *between forms of economic dependence* that make real differences to distribution of power and resources in our societies. By seeing economic dependence as a ubiquitous feature of our economic lives that can take different forms, we can both blunt the dangerous idea that there are groups in society who are unique in being economically dependent, and call for a radical reappraisal of the legitimacy of core capitalist economic institutions by demanding consistency in our reasoning about the benign and harmful aspects of economic dependence.

2. Economic dependence on states and in markets

Work on economic dependence has been about a number of different problems, from market dependence in early capitalism (Meiksins Wood, 2002), to the parasitism of the financial sector (Hudson, 2015), to patriarchy and domestic power relations (Folbre, 1991)**.** However, a crisis in the legitimacy of welfare provision in capitalist welfare states in the 1980s and 1990s saw the most intensive and explicit work on economic dependence in political theory and political science to date (*removed for review)*. In 1984 Charles Murray famously attacked the corrosive effects of the American welfare state on the economy and society in his book *Losing Ground*, and the new president, Bill Clinton, agreed with the analysis as 'essentially right' (Clinton, 1993). He was followed in the 1990s by Lawrence Mead, who advocated paternalist workfare policies that focussed on the psychology of the poor, and the need for incentives and sanctions that would promote 'self-reliance', even if, in reality, that meant making individuals dependent once more on their families rather than the state (Mead, 1998: 111).[3] In the UK, leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair, voiced similar ideas, as did prominent Conservative politicians after him.[4]

Academics working in political economy and philosophy, and defending the welfare state, turned these critiques of welfare dependence on their head. Gøsta Esping-Andersen argued that 'The social democratic regime's policy of emancipation addresses both the market and the traditional family…The ideal is not to maximize dependence on the family, but capacities for individual independence' (Esping-Anderson, 1990: 28). He also perceptively added that the escape from dependence through universal welfare provision was not quite so simple: 'All benefit; *all are dependent*; and all will presumably feel obliged to pay' (Esping-Anderson, 1990: 28, emphasis added). Similarly, Carole Pateman pointed out that what many women faced was not the choice between dependence and independence, but the choice between forms of dependence: between dependence on the patriarchal family or on the paternalistic welfare state (Pateman, 1989: 199-200). As she pointed out, where women had been included in welfare state provision, it had often been through their relationship to men, as wives and dependents (Pateman, 2011: 119).

Other critics of the political rhetoric and realities of welfare reform engaged directly with the discourses in which 'dependency' had become an important concept. In 1996 in the United States a welfare programme called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families replaced the controversial and long-standing Aid to Families with Dependent Children programme; it was brought into effect by the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of the Clinton administration. Two year before this, Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser (1994) had identified 'dependency' as a key word in US political language, and undertaken a history of 'dependency' discourses in which they showed how a moral and psychological sense of 'dependency' had eclipsed earlier uses of the concept in the Anglophone world. What was lost were all those senses of 'dependency' that suggested that the source of dependence was in social institutions and practices, rather than individual habits. What remained was the moral condemnation of a 'dependent' class, who were thus given responsibility for their own situation.

Underlying this sense of 'dependency' is a concern about economic dependence on *unearned income.* This concern was selectively applied to unearned income received through welfare programmes, thus framing *public* economic dependence as a problem and ignoring *private* economic dependence as either benign or irrelevant. This anti-statist and conservative view of 'dependence' moved in circles between the 'objective' conditions of poverty and welfare receipt, on the one hand, and the individual 'subjective' qualities of welfare recipients, on the other (Smiley, 2001), arguing that a new paternalism could justifiably be applied to those who had become trapped by their habits and psychology (Mead, 1998). The 'trap' of dependency did not, apparently, apply to other forms of unearned income and support.

In order to break this circular, and often question-begging, account of dependence (and dependency), one strategy was to reconstruct a more detailed account of what relationships of dependence are really like in a society. Bringing private relationships of dependence within families back into view, and linking them to the debate about public dependence, Eva Feder Kittay (1998, 1999; Kittay and Feder, 2002) developed the concept of 'nested dependencies', which brilliantly captured the idea that dependence-relations of one kind, such as children on parents (a private relationship), generate dependence-relations of other kinds, such as parents on states (a public relationship) for income while out of the labour market. Others have since looked to extend philosophical discussions of dependence into a much broader agenda that places 'vulnerability' at the core of social ontology (Fineman, 2004, 2008; McKenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, 2014; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, 2016).

These philosophical and sociological responses to public discourses in the 1980s and 1990s examine the link between economic dependence and welfare provision in capitalist welfare states. But running parallel to this a significant body of work has examined questions about economic dependence within the context of *markets* rather than *states*. The idea that market economies produce a particular kind of 'interdependence' has a long heritage. It is a key theme in classical political economy.[5] But the more specific idea that capitalism tends to produce new forms of *dependence* that are veiled by a cultural and legal façade of *independence* was a core insight of those who would later be recognised (amongst other things) as the founding figures of sociology. Karl Marx (1993 [1857]) and Georg Simmel (1978 [1900]) both made this point in their discussions of the money form; Marx developed the account of dependence further in his characterisations of the proletariat under capitalism (Thompson, 2019). For the present purposes what is important is how these ideas about the social effects of markets intersect with, and run parallel to, more recent debates about economic dependence.

One very clear point of intersection is in Robert Goodin's defences of welfare states at the time of prominent public critiques of welfare programmes made in the 1980s. Goodin (1988: 173) argues that 'the problem of dependency is the problem of exploitation.' And this, he claims, is precisely the problem that welfare states can address by giving every individual enough material resources that they will not be forced to make desperately unfair bargains in the various markets that they use to access what they need. Goodin (1985: 196; 1988: 173) succinctly summarises the sense of 'dependence' that is important for his argument, namely dependence upon the *discretionary* control of resources. This kind of dependence is experienced both in relation to states and in relation to market actors. Where people have welfare *rights*, the discretionary element of control over basic resources is removed from those who dispense these resources through the state, which leaves the rights-holder better protected from exploitation by those who would otherwise have that discretionary control (whether in the state or the market).

With the rise of universal basic income (UBI) as a proposed model of welfare provision this point has taken on a new significance. UBI holds out the hope that the kind of vulnerable dependence upon state administrators and legislators, on the one hand, and vulnerable dependence upon employers in the labour market, on the other, can be eliminated in the same stroke. Removing the discretionary element from the distribution of a basic income reduces the *immediate* power that administrators and legislators might wield over recipients, while removing the *necessity* of (constantly) selling one's labour in the labour market gives a stronger bargaining position to potential employees in relation to potential employers. Thus, Carole Pateman (2004) has defended UBI as a tool of democratisation that has particular advantages for feminist politics seeking to emancipate women from patriarchal family structures, and republican political theorists have both defended and criticised UBI as a means of promoting social and political justice. For republicans, the question here is very much about dependence: does universal basic income provide a form of 'independence' that sufficiently overcomes the vulnerability to domination that republican views of freedom denounce as unjust? While Philip Pettit (2007) has defended UBI in these terms, Alex Gourevitch (2016) has suggested that even a level of UBI that released citizens from the need to enter into labour contracts would not relieve workers of dependence upon employers for attaining the intrinsic values to be found in work. Only greater worker control of the means of production could achieve the latter aim.

Beyond debates about UBI, labour republicans and supporters of workplace democracy have developed arguments concerning worker agency and control, using the terms 'structural dependence' (Gourevitch, 2013; Claassen and Herzog, 2019) and 'general dependence' (Muldoon, 2019) to describe the condition of a working class whose access of the means of production is controlled by asset owners and their representatives. This discussion of economic dependence, while touching on welfare state politics through topics like UBI, is significantly different from the theoretical debates on economic dependence that were prominent in the 1990s and early 2000s: here the focus is on the d*istributional* and *institutional* underpinnings of the economic power relations within capitalist economies.

As this overview of debates about economic dependence shows, the political and moral problem of dependence shifts as political theorists analyse different parts of our social world, from welfare provision, to family relationships, and finally labour markets. But these different concerns with dependence have also provided opportunities for seeing connections between political issues: Goodin, for example, helps us to see the connections between dependence in labour markets and one normative justification of welfare provision; and Kittay's work explains the connection between dependence within the private sphere of the family and dependence within the structures of welfare states. There are different senses of 'economic dependence' that matter to us, and it is the claim of the present argument that clarifying those different senses could provide fertile ground of building further connections between the political problems that matter to us. Developing that conceptual framework for thinking about economic dependence will be the task of section 4, and showing the work that it might do will be the task of section 5.

First, however, we need to consider whether an appeal to the concept of 'interdependence' makes this work on dependence redundant. I will argue that it does not, but I will also try to explain why the concept of 'interdependence' holds out such appeal to those who regard it as a corrective to misleading accounts of economic dependence.

3. Interdependence

One possible response to critiques of economic dependence is the claim that the dichotomy between 'dependence' and 'independence' is unhelpful and inaccurate when applied to contemporary (or perhaps any) economies, and that a recognition of 'interdependence' would serve political theory and public debate much better. There are two points here that need to be disentangled: the first is a claim about how to describe modern economies; the second is a claim about the usefulness of the concept of 'interdependence' as a key concept in political theory. In what follows I will agree with the first point here, and disagree with the second.

In the complex marketised and monetised economies of modern societies an intensive division of labour and reliance on a medium of exchange that is beyond local control leaves individuals deeply dependent upon countless others every day, just to meet basic needs through market interactions. Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and other 19th century social and political thinkers, observed that we could no longer treat independence and dependence as simple opposites in economies where we are all so *interdependent* (See Kohn, 2019; Marx, 1993: 164; Simmel, 1976: 298; *removed*). Kohn (2013: 12) notes that '[t]he interdependence of commercial society in the 18th century undermined independence, and the process of industrialization in the 19th century was an even more profound and irreversible transformation that rendered the autonomy of the yeoman farmer a relic of the past.' This macro-scale interdependence continues to characterise contemporary economies: those who would claim to be economic independent can do so only in a limited sense that has little to do with self-sufficiency.

But what should this recognition of economic interdependence mean for how we speak about the contrast between 'dependence' and 'independence'? A number of political theorists have argued that an *ideal* state of interdependence may imply equality, reciprocity, and mutuality (Goodin, 1985: 192; Gourevitch, 2013: 610; Purdy, 2007; Kittay, 1998)**.** Goodin (1985: 203), for example, cautioned that an unqualified economic independence could not be our political goal: '[C]omplete invulnerability [and] total independence, is an illusory ideal.' Kittay (1998: 133) also suggests that 'we need a new concept of interdependence' that could re-orientate political discourse. The concept of 'interdependence' has been attractive because it seems to link some degree of descriptive accuracy concerning contemporary economies to a normative model of what economic equality could mean.

However, the usefulness of the appeal to 'interdependence' is more limited than it may at first appear.

While it is useful at high level of abstraction, the concept of 'interdependence' significantly oversimplifies the political stakes when applied to specific parts of our societies and economies. Proposing thresholds to define where agents slip from reciprocal interdependence into harmful dependence suggests that the political stakes at any given juncture are between increasing or decreasing the economic autonomy of agents *tout court*; but this is often not the case. In real politics the questions are more often about trade-offs: do we increase economic autonomy in this part of our economic lives, even if it decreases our autonomy, and entrenches our dependency in another part of our economic lives? This is what Pateman pointed out when she noted the ambivalent attitudes of feminists in the 1980s to the welfare state as offering an alternative form of dependence to the patriarchal family structure. It is not a sign of cynicism to recall such trade-offs; it is simply a reminder that there is a danger that philosophical abstraction misses the real contradictions of social and economic relationships. Like the liberal insistence that 'rights must be respected' in a real world in which actual rights conflict, the egalitarian or republican insistence that 'economic autonomy must be promoted' can become empty where it fails to account for the trade-offs that a descriptively adequate account of economic politics would highlight.

The danger, therefore, with the concept of 'interdependence' is that it takes precisely this descriptive shortcut, substituting an abstract sense of 'interdependence' for a detailed description of the qualitative differences between our many varieties of dependence relations. While it is useful as a description of contemporary economies at a macro-scale, 'interdependence' is too general and too vague to describe specific economic relationships and institutional arrangements with accuracy and political pointedness.

4. A new conceptual framework: four senses of dependence

Clearly the senses of 'dependence' developed by political theorists in republican, feminist, and egalitarian theories of economic justice have little in common with what David Cameron meant when he imagined a 'fog of dependency' in which welfare recipients wandered about. Prominent political discourses make 'economic dependence' synonymous with 'welfare dependence,' in narratives that allocate responsibility to individuals, who, at best, create their own vulnerability, and, at worst, are parasitical upon value produced by others. As Smiley (2001) has explicitly argued, and many others have implicitly assumed, this myopic and often circular subjectivistic model of dependence is damaging to public life and political theory. Without denying that the subjective dimension of our economic lives and cultural habits matters, we can still insist that we cannot fairly or accurately analyse and assess that dimension unless we are fully aware of the kinds of economic dependence that exist in our societies and economies: many of which have little or nothing to do with welfare state arrangements.

This wider, and hopefully more accurate, view of economic dependence as a feature of economic relationships is developed in this section. Here, I propose a conceptual framework – a set of distinctions between different senses of 'economic dependence' – that may help us to grasp the differences amongst, and relationships amongst, the varieties of economic dependence that exist in contemporary economies and societies. It also aims to revise and extend the existing terminology in a way that clarifies the moral and political stakes in our decisions about dependence: I will be suggesting that in social and economic policy, legislation, and in individual choices about living and working arrangements, we are often choosing between these varieties of dependence, and we would do well to be aware of this fact.

The four senses of 'economic dependence' developed below may be divided into two pairs: the distinction between *personal* dependence and *impersonal* dependence captures the '*who'* aspect of dependence relations; the distinction between *structural* dependence and *practical* dependence captures the '*how'* aspect of dependence relations. There is no claim here that this framework is exhaustive of possible meanings of 'economic dependence', but I do claim that these categories will help us to analyse, to intervene in, and perhaps also to extend, debates about economic dependence in contemporary societies and economies.

The contrast between 'personal' and 'impersonal' dependence is the simpler distinction proposed here. Economic dependence on specific known persons – within families, for example – has different consequences for the individuals involved than economic dependence on anonymous, unknown, persons such as the tax-payers who ultimately fund social welfare within a state. And many policy decisions are about trade-offs between these forms of dependence: sometimes the impersonal form is regarded as superior**;** sometimes the personal form is defended.[6] The choice between public welfare provision (through institutions of welfare states) and private welfare provision (largely in families) is one example of where trade-offs between these forms of dependence are made in public policy.

Thus, the contrast between 'personal dependence' and 'impersonal dependence' helps us to pin down what appears to be an important distinction concerning the 'who' of economic dependence. *Personal dependence* is reliance on a particular individual (or individuals) for access to economic resources, and *impersonal dependence* is reliance on unspecified and anonymous others for access to economic resources. This distinction matters a great deal in a liberal democracy that has aspirations to respect individuals as individuals, rather than as components of larger cultural units like families or status groups. As Esping-Anderson (1990) points out with regard to the ambitions of social democratic welfare states, a transition from personal- to impersonal dependence is not a trivial matter in the lives of real people. The same resources (in cash or in kind) come with very different demands and obligations depending on whether the control of those resources is in the hands of, for example, a spouse or parent (see e.g. Zelizer, 1989, 2000), or channelled through anonymous institutions with an ever-changing set of social actors who administer them. While personal dependence can be linked to obligations to deliver things like sexual favours, emotional care, domestic labour, or filial piety, impersonal dependence may come with obligations to carry out significant amounts of administrative labour: in the case of recipients of various forms of welfare payments, this can include documentation of job applications, attendance to scheduled meetings, and compliance with the conditions set down by administering authorities, such as rules about housing occupancy. In short, the distinction between personal and impersonal dependence matters a great deal in liberal democracies because individual obligations to an impersonal entity such as a state or corporation are both different in kind to private personal obligations, and subject to public scrutiny in ways that the obligations of personal dependency relations are not. This is not to say that impersonal dependence is always preferable to personal dependence; the obligations that are attached to the former may be unfair and harmful. But it does suggest that the conversion of personal dependence into impersonal dependence through instruments like social policy, family law, and the public provision of essential services, allows the state to set the terms of obligation generated by the dependence relationship, rather than *de facto* delegating this power to private individuals.

Most of these comments on personal and impersonal dependence will cover familiar ground for feminists, egalitarians, and republicans. However, the contrast between 'structural dependence' and 'practical dependence' may be more controversial, and requires further explanation and justification, not least because the term 'structural dependence' is used to mean something rather different in the labour republican debates cited above. It will be helpful to briefly examine what 'structural dependence' means in that context, in order to then explain and justify my own use of the term.

For labour republicans, contemporary capitalist labour relations are characterised by structural domination, in which the power of an asset-owning class is made effective through the institutions that structure the economy, such as private property in productive assets. For labour republicans, this structural domination is built upon the *structural dependence* of those who are dominated. In other words, it because those without ownership or direct access to basic economic resources such as workplaces, industrial plant, or credit, depend on those who do own and control access to these things that an arbitrary power can be wielded by owners over non-owners. In a capitalist economy this access is organised in markets – labour markets, credit markets, real estate markets, etc. – which means that the underlying pattern of ownership distributes bargaining positions within these markets: some bargain with their labour, others with their assets, and the terms of these bargains will depend on which parties are well organised enough and can hold out long enough to win favourable conditions in the exchange.[7]

This view of structural dependence describes a real and important feature of capitalist economies. However, as it stands, it contains ambiguities. First of all, the impersonal and institutional aspects of structural dependence need to be more clearly distinguished from one another. Economic dependence can be *impersonal* – such as dependence on foodbanks for access to food – but not *institutional* – in the sense of being built into the *rules* by which economic relationships are regulated. Secondly, the difference between benefitting from existing rules of economic interaction, and actually authoring those rules is sometimes eclipsed. For example, in Rutger Claassen and Lisa Herzog's (2019: 10) example of the dependence of a debtor vis-à-vis a creditor, the former is described as 'structurally dependent' when access to credit is organised through institutions (such as banking laws, bankruptcy laws, contract laws, and so on) over which the debtor has no control, and which leave the creditors protected from personal face-to-face accountability. But if ‘structural dependence’ results when individuals do not have control over the terms in which they engage with others in economic interaction (such as lending and borrowing credit), then it looks like *both* debtor *and* creditor are ‘structurally dependent’ insofar as neither are legislators. It is not clear whether this is meant in their argument.

In order to avoid both issues – confusing impersonal with institutional arrangements, and confusing benefit with control – I propose that ‘structural dependence’ should not be contrasted with ‘personal dependence’, but instead be contrasted with ‘*practical* dependence’.

If we do this, then the distinction between ‘personal dependence’ and ‘impersonal dependence’ remains conceptually separate from the distinction between ‘structural dependence’ and ‘practical dependence’. The latter distinction now addresses a specific question: Is the transfer of (or access to) resources in the dependence relation systematic or discretionary? In other words, does getting something depend on institutional design and enforcement or on a judgement and decision? By asking this, we are distinguishing more precisely between the importance of the *impersonal* nature of relations of dependence from the importance of how resources are *controlled*.

Where a person relies on the discretion of another for access to a given resource, there exists a relationship of practical dependence. And where this practical dependence is profoundly a-symmetrical in a way that gives overwhelming bargaining power to one party, any *inter*dependence is converted, as Gourevitch (2013: 604 – 605) argues, into a power relationship that may be a form of domination. Practical dependence thus encompasses various degrees of vulnerability to someone else’s decisions on access to resources – perhaps I am a parent doing unpaid care work in the home and dependent on a wage-earner for access to money, perhaps I am a worker trying to sell my labour in an economy in which I own no productive assets and am dependent upon the decision of an employer to earn a living, perhaps I am a person in need of a loan to buy a house and access to these loans is under the discretionary control of mortgage lenders. In each case I am practically dependent. ‘Practical dependence’ implies that a person’s activities are periodically interrupted by the need to be *granted* the means of carrying on: this granting can take the form of, for example, a cash transfer between family members (that may be more or less irregular), the renewal of a labour contract (which may be more or less *ad hoc*), or an administrative decision on continuation of a welfare benefit (which may be more or less discriminatory). In short, practical dependence is a form of vulnerability.

I propose that, by contrast, the term 'structural dependence' be used to show how institutions channel flows of value that are not interrupted by discretionary controls. Political economist Andrew Sayer's view of economic dependence helps provides a helpful introduction to the idea. As he points out, in a society where productive assets are unequally distributed amongst the population the legal frameworks and institutions of a capitalist economy '…transfer[…] wealth from those who have limited income based on work, to asset owners, and the greater this inequality the greater the dependence of the former on the latter, though of course the asset rich are dependent on workers for producing the goods which gives their money value' (Sayer, 2016: 52). What Sayer captures here so concisely, is the difference between two senses of dependence: dependence as *vulnerability in markets* and dependence as *reliance on others' work*. Similarly to classical socialist and anarchist critiques of class privilege in capitalist economies,[8] Sayer's second sense of 'economic dependence' identifies a *reliance* that is deeply embedded into the structures of capitalist property relations: unearned income (of the asset-rich) is only possible because others in the economy are earning their income through useful labour.

I propose that this reliance on the transfer of value – whether secured through the rights of ownership or through the rights of citizenship – should be called '*structural dependence*'. It is a reliance upon an institutionally-structured and systematic transfer of value from one part of society to another. That transfer may be instituted in welfare rights that systematically redistribute income in society through tax-and-transfer systems, but it is also instituted and supported by rent-generating private property and other forms of asset ownership. The point of this conceptual framing, as developed in the next section, is to argue that as long as 'welfare dependence' is a troubling political issue, the dependence of the economically powerful should be too. Thus, with the concept of 'structural dependence' the present argument is reviving, in a modified form, a very old discussion about earned and unearned income, which has fallen out of fashion with the decline of labour theories of value since the 19th century. This is a discussion about the transfer of value in society between social groups, and which has historically worked with distinctions such as those between 'productive' and ‘unproductive’ labour, ‘earned’ and ‘unearned’ income (see *removed for review*), and has more recently generated research by political economists on the differences between value ‘capture’ and value ‘creation’ (e.g. Hudson 2015; Piketty 2014; Sayer 2015). The present argument does not need to make any commitments on a basic theory of economic value, but it agrees with the proposals of radical political economists like Sayer (2016) that we cannot do without some kind of distinction between earned and unearned income. It is enough, for the present purposes, to draw the analogy between the structural dependence of state welfare recipients and the structural dependence of the asset-rich: whatever theory of value-creation ultimately underpins our view of the economy, the observation that pubic economic dependence on states shares much in common with private economic dependence on core institutions of capitalist economies is surely enough to give pause to reconsider the even-handedness of the critique of ‘welfare dependency’.

5. Applications

Applying this framework to discourses on ‘welfare dependence’ allows us to see just how selective these discourses are. The Centre for Social Justice in the UK provided (as noted in the Introduction) the clearest articulation of a view that links economic dependence to the welfare state: ‘If someone is economically dependent it means that they rely on welfare payments from the state to meet their basic needs’ (Centre for Social Justice, 2013: 19)**.** The sense of dependence here is ‘structural’ and ‘impersonal’. But the normative conclusion that this is a bad state of affairs is maintained by suppressing concerns with ‘personal’ and ‘practical’ dependence. Unlike proponents of welfare states based on a social democratic ideology of equality and solidarity, what is missing here is a sense of trade-offs between varieties of dependence. In fact, the design of Universal Credit in the UK (which is being rolled out to replace a number of other forms of welfare benefit) appears to promote (or at least provides no defences against) the personal and practical dependence of family members on a ‘head’ of the household. Universal Credit is paid to one person only within a household, and this has stoked fears of the potential this opens up for the abuse of this economic power within families (Butler, 2020).

Although the name may suggest otherwise, Universal Credit is not in any way an unconditional basic income, and receiving it depends on meeting specific criteria. Like changes to welfare provision in the US in the 1990s, Universal Credit is designed to taper off as recipients enter paid employment in the labour market. This is what makes it attractive for those who are worried about 'welfare dependency': recipients are gradually transferred from a position of dependence on the state to a reliance on the labour market for income. In the terms set out here, this is not a transition from 'dependence' to 'independence', but rather from dependence on state redistribution[9] to practical dependence within the labour market.

This redescription may be jarring for a number of reasons. The most obvious is that it disavows the connection between markets and economic independence. Like feminist political theorists in the 1970s domestic labour debates, it refuses to take the boundaries of the market economy as either ontologically defining – limiting the sphere of 'real' value production and exchange – or as marking a normative watershed – between dependent and independent economic actors.[10] It also moves between senses of 'economic dependence' in a way that might prompt accusations of shifting the moral problem in the course of the discussion. But this is point: dependence on state redistribution *is* different from dependence in a labour market, but retaining the concept of 'dependence' to describe both cases helps us to focus on the fact that the moral and political problems do not disappear as we move from one social and practical context to another. Rather, these problems are transformed. The concept of 'economic dependence' helps us to track that transformation.

As suggested in the previous section, a more radical development in our uses of the concept of 'economic dependence' looks to the lives of the economically powerful in society.

I use the term 'economically powerful' to describe those actors in an economy whose social and economic advantages are preserved by the present set of legal rules and economic institutions. This advantage can take various forms. The most obvious is the ability for above-average consumption, or put more simply, the advantages of being wealthy. But just as important is the ability of the economically powerful to pursue economic strategies that are closed to others in society: for example, using investment as a means of generating unearned income. Private rental contracts for housing are just one example of the way in which property and contract law function together in capitalist societies to transfer value from non-owners to owners of resources. Legal realists have long described these kinds of powers as imposing a form of private taxation (Cohen, 1978: 160). The exertion of state power through the defence of property rights allocates powers to owners to use existing legal infrastructures to establish life-modes that rely on the systematic transfer of value between sections of society.[11]

Outside of theoretical work in political theory and radical political economy, the economically powerful in society tend to enjoy immunity from the accusation of economic dependence because the institutional structures that maintain their dependence and power lie beyond the limits of common political debate. Ironically, to see what is problematic about this, we can look to the arguments made by critics of welfare dependence, and extend those arguments to their proper conclusions. Critics of 'welfare dependency' such as Murray in the 1980s often point to a counterfactual scenario to explain the problems of economic dependence: what if state redistribution was removed, how many people would be thrown into poverty? This question is meant to identify the problem of 'latent poverty' (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1985). But why limit such a counterfactual test to one set of socio-economic institutions? This question is central to our views of economic dependence. The view of economic dependence as something exceptional, and uniquely related to welfare provision, is only plausible when our counterfactual scenarios – where we imagine parts of our social world away, such as welfare policies, in order to show the 'artificiality' of the economic lives of some section of society – find their limit at the core institutions of liberal capitalist economies. In other words, it is our ability to imagine a world without welfare states, and our difficulty in imagining a world without, for example, private property in productive assets, that keeps our views of economic dependence damagingly selective.

A more radical form of counter-factual reasoning would ask: should rentiers be included in the latent poverty rate because their life-modes would collapse by legislating against rental and lending contracts? More generally, if the channels maintaining structural dependence were closed – through strike action, legal reform, the collapse of global supply chains, or something else – the economic and social lives of these economically powerful members of society would be altered in proportion to the part of their income or wealth made up by these transfers of value. In the extreme case, life-plans would collapse just as fully as they would for the welfare dependent whose flow of non-market income is stopped. If a person may be described as ‘dependent’ because their life-mode relies on the transfer of value through taxation and state redistribution, then why wouldn’t we extend this label to life-modes that rely on similar transfers channelled through the core economic institutions enforced by states? The economically weak welfare recipient, and the economically strong financial investor share this much: their claim to a portion of society’s resources is as legally robust as the institutions that have been designed to support it. This is a truism, but it is a reminder that neither claim is self-justifying, and that they should be weighed together in the moral balance of public debate. What this comparison reveals is that dominant senses of ‘economic dependence’ are closely related to prevailing views on which parts of our economic institutions are open to dispute and which are not. But it is exactly *these* assumptions that an expanded discussion of ‘economic dependence’ may help us to challenge.

The *personal* dependence of the economically powerful is also important to consider. For example, economists’ and sociologists’ work on the intergenerational transfer of wealth through inheritance (Beckert, 2007; Piketty, 2014), has shown both how important this is for maintaining inequality and how unpopular measures to prevent it are. Inheritance tax rates have been declining across the world since the 1980s, and untaxed inheritance allowances have been growing. But framing the issue as a question of ‘economic dependence’ opens new avenues of normative critique, and new possible lines of empirical inquiry. On the normative front we can ask how outraged anyone should be by ‘welfare dependence’ when intergenerational economic dependence is such a prominent feature of large sections of society. In many countries housing markets are so inflated that inheritance (i.e. intra-family dependence) is the only realistic basis for home ownership. In the UK, for example, the last 10 years has seen the government recognise that the housing market is ‘broken’ (Department for Communities and Local Government 2017) and at the same time raised inheritance tax thresholds (i.e. taxing less), seemingly to compensate for this fact. This is to value personal dependence over impersonal dependence, and I would suggest that it is conceptually and politically cogent to point this out in these terms. On the empirical front, we can ask whether the *personal* dependence between generations is negatively correlated to the *impersonal* dependence of welfare recipients on state redistribution; it seems highly likely that those who have depended privately are much less likely to have to depend publically.

7. Possible objections

There are a number of possible objections to the analytical strategy illustrated here and the proposed conceptual framework for analysing economic dependence that it rests on. Three, in particular, stand out as reasonable worries that need to be addressed.

Firstly, there is a conspicuous lack of reference to 'basic needs' in my account of structural and practical dependence. Most discussions of economic dependence assume that a state of dependence exists only where what is at stake is access to some resource that is *fundamental* to the life of the recipient. Clearly *some* normative issues connected to economic dependence are most acute where the resources in question are required to meet basic needs for food, shelter, and minimal social reproduction (care, rest, health, and so on). But this approach also rules out by definition that we can find economic dependence amongst sections of the population that have no trouble in meeting their basic needs. The result is that middle-class students are not 'economically dependent' on their parents when those parents pay university tuition fees; first-time house buyers are not 'economically dependent' on their parents or their mortgage lender when they inherit and borrow money to buy a property; protected domestic industries are not 'economically dependent' on the states that give them tax breaks and subsidies. This result seems wrong. And to guard against it, we must decouple the concept of 'economic dependence' from the concept of 'basic needs.' The discussion of basic needs rightly remains central to many concerns about economic dependence, but it should not define other kinds of economic dependence out of the analysis.

This takes us to the second potential problem with the present proposals. The 'varieties of dependence' framework developed here is not meant for labelling persons, but only specific relationships in which they stand. A person may be both structurally dependent and practically dependent, both personally dependent and impersonally dependent. It also has the consequence that economic dependence must be treated as a *ubiquitous* social phenomenon. This is a serious problem if what we wanted from the concept of 'economic dependence' was a label only for those forms of economic life-mode that can be, and should be, escaped. The thought would be this: 'Surely we can't *all* be economically dependent, since that takes away the very point of labelling people as "dependent" in the first place.' But here we have an ethical choice to make: are we willing to ignore the analogies and similarities that the present analysis has drawn out in order to preserve normative clarity in using the concept of 'economic dependence' as a label of condemnation? The strategy here, which ultimately rests on an ethical commitment to understanding commonalities within the human condition, broadens our view of dependence in order to de-weaponise it.

Thirdly, the consequence of all of this is that many economic actors should now be described as 'economically dependent' who otherwise would escape this label. Rentiers, share-holders, and heirs to wealth are three examples of classes of economic actor that contemporary capitalist societies benefit by enforcing laws of property and contract that facilitate the transfer value from one set of actors to another. Labelling these actors as 'economically dependent' does not in itself carry any implications about the justice of these arrangements; all it does is to propose that there are some aspects of these practices – most notably the generation and transfer of unearned income – that deserve comparison to more commonly stigmatised forms of dependence such as 'welfare dependence.' In fact, far from being a drawback of the proposed conceptual framework, shining an analytical spotlight on the massive array of channels by which wealth and income actually flow in capitalist economies is one of the principal benefits of the approach.

7. Conclusion

As political animals we commit ourselves using language, and we often commit ourselves to something more and different than that which we intended. Sociologists of critique have produced brilliant studies of how this happens in our world of economic practices (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Boltanski, 2011) and philosophy has a long tradition of immanent critique, wherein the task of theory is to expose the suppressed premises and conclusions to which a theory commits us (with most famous example being: Marx, 1990). My proposal here is that once we start using it, and examining its meanings, we will see that the concept of 'economic dependence' commits us to more than we usually admit.

The present account of 'varieties of dependence' is meant as an intervention into the political vocabulary of debates about economic justice. It is motivated by the fact that the concept of 'economic dependence' has not only been *used* in a variety of ways that have not been clearly distinguished and related to one another in social and political theory, but because the term has been so clearly *abused* in political rhetoric where its application is limited to social actors who depend on state redistribution. This is deeply ironic in societies where economic dependence is ubiquitous. The distinctions between 'personal' and 'impersonal' dependence, on the one hand, and between 'practical' and 'structural' dependence on the other, aim to add precision to theoretical discussions of economic dependence, and also to recapture an important point: it is possible and sometimes desirable to analyse the dependence of the powerful. The implication of the present argument is that the important questions on the topic of economic dependence are not all about how we can achieve independence. At least some of our most important dilemmas are about which forms of dependence are preferable to others, and whether and how they can be instituted in our economies and societies. This debate is not currently happening.

Notes

[1] On the conceptual history of 'parasites' see Musolff (2014)

[2] Analytical political theory (particularly political philosophy) has thrived on the division of the world into *problems*, and the examination of political controversy as the clashing of alternative *propositions*. Swift and White even suggest that '…we need to engage in conceptual analysis, but we [normative political theorists] have no interest in claiming one use of a concept better or worse than another' (Swift and White, 2008: 65). The present argument disagrees with this position: the political *language* of 'dependence' raises a number of different 'problems', and it is only by engaging with the real discourses on economic dependence that we can see how public reasoning is going wrong in the selective use of the concept of 'dependence'. The methodological commitments of the paper owe a debt to philosophical works like Gallie (1955), Berlin (1969), and Lukes (2002), and sociological works like Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) that engage with, rather than bracket, actual language use. It is an intentional result of this broadly pragmatist position that the paper does not supply a general definition of 'economic dependence'. The reasoning proceeds by developing analogies between examples that should affect our political and moral reasoning about economic relationships; it does not build a 'theory' of economic dependence.

[3] For an overview of this morally paternalistic but economically liberal political trend in theoretical and public debates on the family, see Arlie Hochschild (2013).

[4] Including Prime Minister (2010 – 2016) David Cameron and Secretary for Work and Pensions (2010 – 2016) Iain Duncan-Smith (founder of the Centre for Social Justice).

[5] It is, for example, one of the core ideas in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, illustrated in the opening chapters with reference to consumption (the provisioning of food) and production (the division of labour in pin production). See Adam Smith (1986 [1776]: 109 – 121).

[6] As noted above, see the contrast between Esping-Andersen (1990) and Mead (1998).

[7] For unparalleled analyses of the economy as a system of bargaining and coercion, see Hale (1943).

[8] For a discussion of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's use of these rhetorical devices, see [*removed for review*]

[9] Which may be 'practical' or 'structural' (or somewhere on a spectrum in between) depending on the institutional design of the welfare programmes concerned.

[10] On the domestic labour debates see Bubeck (1995:45 – 82).

[11] On life-modes in the context of socio-economic analysis, see Højrup (2003).

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