

Wage slavery: A neo-Roman account

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Abstract

Abstract: The idea of wage slavery is often regarded with suspicion even among critics of capitalism. Sceptics note the dubious racial politics associated with its use, while recording many differences between the condition of waged workers and chattel slaves. However, these objections are more plausible on some conceptions of wage slavery than others. I look to the history of political thought to recover and reformulate a more defensible account, drawing on a neo-Roman understanding of slavery as subjection to another's will (rather than as ownership or social death). I demonstrate not only that a neo-Roman vocabulary was taken up by abolitionists, but recount how radical republicans used it to criticise the wage relation and call for the socialisation of property. This neo-Roman approach is shown to represent a break with more paternalistic appeals to wage slavery made by Tory radicals and Southern apologists for chattel slavery. However, in order to avoid cheapening the accusation of wage slavery, I argue that it only obtains when a worker's ability to meet their most vital material needs is dependent on the will of employers. Thus, wage slavery becomes an extreme form of economic unfreedom, which does not encompass every case of worker domination.

Keywords

Wage slavery, republicanism, neo-Roman thought, history of slavery, domination

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Among the most enduring criticisms of capitalism is that it makes slaves of waged workers. But accusations of wage slavery are controversial even among those who find fault with capitalism in other respects. Consider the philosopher Tommy Shelby's reservations:

I have an employer and lack sufficient wealth to get by financially without working for someone. But there is no meaningful sense in which I am a slave, and it would be insulting to my enslaved ancestors to suggest otherwise. (Shelby, 2022)

Such scepticism should be taken seriously. Indeed, the slave analogy has both analytical limitations and moral hazards when extended to waged workers. But close attention to the history of political thought allows a more charitable reconstruction of the analogy by foregrounding questions about how slaves are to be conceived. While slavery is now most commonly understood either as property or social death, neo-Roman thinkers have long associated it with subjection to the will of another. Reviving this approach promises to uncover significant continuities between the unfreedom of enslaved chattels and some waged workers, yet without overstating their similarity, or drawing specious moral equivalences.

My primary aim will be to demonstrate that the notion of wage slavery is most defensible on neo-Roman foundations. To this end, I begin by presenting some of the ambivalent history of allegations of wage slavery, including resistance to the very idea. We shall see that such opposition is plausible when slavery is construed as ownership of another, or as a permanent condition of violent subjugation, natal alienation, and general dishonour. But the relatively expansive account of slavery adopted by some members of the neo-Roman tradition allows for a more analytically and morally tenable comparison between waged workers and enslaved chattels. This neo-Roman understanding of the slave finds its most fulsome expression in republican political thought, but I also show how many other modern commentators on slavery take up its core vocabulary. Radical republicans would eventually turn neo-Roman ideas against the capitalist class in a thunderous indictment of wage slavery. An important addendum to the neo-Roman account is needed, however, if aligning slavery and arbitrary power is not to cheapen the charge of enslavement: namely, that the appellation *slavery*—rather than mere domination—should be restricted to uncontrolled power over the fundamental conditions for sustaining life.

The slave analogy and its limits

The idea of wage slavery is now most closely associated with the socialist tradition. However, socialists have resisted any simple identification of the condition of chattel slaves and waged workers. Take Du Bois (1998: 9–10), who insisted on the distinctiveness of the antebellum chattel slave's psychological subordination, sheer vulnerability, and status as property. In a passage worth reproducing in full, he found the extraordinary condition of chattels confirmed in slave codes:

Slaves were not considered men. They had no right of petition. They were “devisable like any other chattel.” They could own nothing; they could make no contracts; they could hold no property, nor traffic in property; they could not hire out; they could not legally

marry nor constitute families; they could not control their children; they could not appeal from their master; they could be punished at will. They could not testify in court; they could be imprisoned by their owners, and the criminal offense of assault and battery could not be committed on the person of a slave. The “willful, malicious and deliberate murder” of a slave was punishable by death, but such a crime was practically impossible of proof. The slave owed to his master and all his family a respect “without bounds, and an absolute obedience.” This authority could be transmitted to others. A slave could not sue his master; had no right of redemption; no right to education or religion; a promise made to a slave by his master had no force nor validity. Children followed the condition of the slave mother. The slave could have no access to the judiciary. A slave might be condemned to death for striking any white person. (Du Bois, 1998: 10; see also Allen, 2022)

Yet, it is telling that despite the many social, legal, and economic disabilities that Du Bois identifies for antebellum chattel slaves, he does not reject the label of *slave* for other workers in the 1930s, especially for an exploited and immiserated ‘dark proletariat’ across the world, who are not only ‘despised and rejected by race and color’ but ‘enslaved in all but name’ (1998: 15–16).

Others were thoroughly contemptuous of the comparison though—William Lloyd Garrison regarding it as ‘an abuse of language to talk of the “slavery of wages”’ (1847: 50). Labour’s complaint should instead be confined to wages being too meagre relative to the value of the work performed. Also writing in *The Liberator* that year, another abolitionist editor, Edmund Quincy (1847: 158), spoke of his disgust at attempts to place ‘the Chattel Slave and the Free Laborer for wages in the same category of wrong and of misery’, and the disastrous ‘confusion of images’ which resulted. Even the lowest free labourer could change their occupation, choose their employer, contract for wages, seek education and religious instruction, enjoy freedom of movement, and not fear forcible separation from their family. During a transatlantic tour the previous year, Douglass (1846) likewise denied that the English experienced ‘the least shadow’ of slavery—warning of the ‘awful misnomer’ in using the term *slavery* to describe the compulsion to work rather than the condition of being saleable property.

Those were not idle warnings. Southern apologists for chattel slavery gleefully exploited proposals to regard waged workers as slaves. George Fitzhugh claimed that although ‘each free laborer has no particular master, his wants and other men’s capital make him a slave without a master, or with too many masters’ (1857: 49). Proclaiming the ubiquity of slavery helped blunt the abolitionist attack on chattel-holding, and prepared the ground for sophistic claims about the relative merits of each form of unfreedom. Thus, Fitzhugh deemed the nominally free labourer to be worse off than the slave, who the master supports whether or not there is work for them to do. However, it was not merely the cynical use of the notion of wage slavery by Southern ideologues that could obfuscate the distinctive harms suffered by enslaved chattels. Consider a pamphlet by the pointedly-named *New York Society for the Abolition of All Slavery*:

The poor negro must work for others, or be flogged: the poor white man must work for others, or be starved. The poor negro is subjected to a single master: the poor white man is subjected to many masters—subjected to a master class. (1842: i)

The authors were not enthusiastically seeking to uphold chattel slavery, but were led by the logic of their comparativist argument to downplay the importance of abolition, which would be a ‘mere exchange of responsible for irresponsible masters’ (1842: 4). Nineteenth-century socialists were themselves not immune to that tendency to exaggerate the relative privation of waged workers. German radicals—who were not shaped by a strong domestic tradition of abolitionism—could be particularly susceptible to this temptation, with Wilhelm Weitling (1974: 50; see Eide-Offe, 2024: 162) speaking of a new slavery ‘hidden under the shadow of contracts and laws’, through which enslavement ‘continues in what is in many respects an even worse degree’, since superfluous labourers would be abandoned by employers. Likewise, Engels (1975: 468–469) rashly claimed that factory workers were ‘worse slaves than the Negroes in America, for they are more sharply watched’.

What does it matter today, however, whether slave analogies in the nineteenth century misled some or were abused by others? Our historical understanding is a potential casualty if the flattening effects of the slave analogy mean we underestimate the radical transformation that emancipation wrought in the lives of many former chattel slaves. Another such threat has been raised by Robbie Shilliam, who argues that ‘the slave analogy preys vampirically upon real living enslaved peoples’ in Marxist accounts of world history, with the result of animating and foregrounding a European proletariat in whose story enslaved Africans become a rhetorical prop (Shilliam, 2015: 205; see also Ford, 2011). It thereby acts as an impediment to a sound grasp of the development of capitalism by occluding the colonial dimension of the operation of world markets. Moreover, the analogy’s tendency to emphasise class and deprioritise race as vectors of oppression and resistance is thought to have deleterious political implications for thinkers committed to ensuring ‘descendants of enslaved Africans take their place as contemporaneous—lively—agents in the struggle over world order’ (Shilliam, 2015: 210).

There are affinities with this approach in Frank B. Wilderson’s interrogation of the ‘assumptive logic of Marxism’, under which Blackness threatens to dissolve into class (2020: 14). Far from the concern that we might overlook a radical break inaugurated by the formal emancipation of slaves, Wilderson insists on deep continuities, insofar as ‘Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness’ (2020: 54; cf. Wacquant, 2023). His rejection of the ‘ruse of analogy’ is primarily directed against attempts to understand Black suffering on the model of supposedly less foundational sources of oppression such as class, gender, or colonialism (2020: 41). But his Afropessimist framework provides reasons to apply the prohibition on analogical thought in the other direction too: doubting the rationale for understanding the plight of workers with reference to the racialised slavery of chattels. Wilderson (2020: 12) claims to uncover an ‘unconscious consensus that Blackness is a locus of abjection to be instrumentalised on a whim’, and the racial politics implicit in the history of attributions of wage slavery offers some support for this proposition. For much of the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States,

the leading term for describing the unfreedom of waged labourers was not *wage slave* but *white slave*.¹ The emotional force of this language was doubtless derived in large part from the frisson of horror felt at the prospect of whites suffering degradations considered fitting only for enslaved blacks. The historical association formed between blackness and slavery—underscored and ontologised by Wilderson—suggests that unreconstructed claims of wage slavery could continue to express a similar racialised antipathy.

Several differences between the condition of waged workers and chattel slaves have emerged from this survey of potential limits and problems raised by the slave analogy. The waged are seemingly not property, even if their circumstances can compel them to sell their power to labour. Nor are they bound to a specific master whose service they cannot leave, despite their subordination to the capitalist class as a whole. Chattel slaves also suffer distinctive legal disabilities, in addition to being subject to harsh physical discipline, and an extreme vulnerability to separation in any nascent family life. We also saw there was a danger the slave analogy effectively downplayed the horrors and world-historical significance of chattel slavery in its attempts to dramatise the plight of the proletariat, as well as glibly instrumentalising black suffering and reproducing a racially-inflected sense of degradation. But does any of this demonstrate that the slave analogy must be conclusively rejected? Every comparison, analogy, or metaphor founders eventually. The question we face is whether chattel slavery and wage labour are so profoundly different that attempts to associate them are inevitably misleading or morally outrageous. The manifold dissimilarities between waged workers and chattel slaves need not cast decisive doubts on the wider shared slavery meant to afflict them, since whether the analogy is successful depends in large part on how that slavery is conceptualised.

Theories of slavery

The most influential definition of slavery is ownership of another person. That echoes Aristotle's classical account of the slave as a living possession (1984: 1998). So understood, slavery is quintessentially a property relationship between master and slave. To single out one of countless definitions of this kind, William Slade (n.d.: 4) presented the following pithy formulation to his fellow members of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1837: 'Here, then, is slavery. It is the holding of MAN—the *whole* of man—as PROPERTY'. That proprietary approach shaped the definition Douglass (1846) used to deny the mere compulsion to work constituted slavery, where he instead held, 'A slave is one who is to all intents and purposes a marketable commodity'. Recent scholars have also adopted property-based definitions in characterising contemporary debt-peonage and human trafficking as forms of modern slavery (Bales, 2012). For them, slaves become those over whom any power attached to the right of ownership is exercised (Research Network on the Legal Parameters of Slavery, 2012).

How does the notion of wage slavery fare on property-based specifications of slavery? As has been noted, waged workers do not initially seem to be another's property. The formal legal capacity to exchange their ability to labour for payment appears to implicitly presuppose that neither this labour nor their person is already owned by someone else.

But might nominally free workers be forced by their material needs to effectively reduce themselves to property which they must sell, or at least rent, to another for much of the working day?² Marx holds that someone whose only property is their capacity to labour is necessarily ‘a slave to those who have become the owners of labour’s material prerequisites’ (1989: 81). He had earlier claimed that ‘labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce’ (1976a: 490), and elsewhere emphasises that such a labourer ‘sells at auction eight, ten, twelve, fifteen hours of his life, day after day’ (1976b: 203). This does not constitute a wilful refusal to recognise any distinction between proletarians and enslaved chattels, given the proviso that the chattel slave is already owned as another’s commodity, whereas the wage-labourer can and must sell themselves bit by bit. Thus, unlike the chattel bound to a specific owner, such a wage-labourer ‘does not belong to this or that capitalist, but to the capitalist class’ (1976b: 203). But even if the enslavement of the wage-labourer is diffuse and ‘veiled’, while that of the chattel is ‘pure and simple’, each is slavery nonetheless (1996: 747).

However, diagnoses of wage slavery made solely on the grounds that workers are reduced to property are not wholly convincing.³ Firstly, it remains contentious whether labour agreements are best understood as contracts of sale for an item of property rather than contracts of service that apportion limited reciprocal responsibilities. Similarly, employers do not thereby acquire, whether in degree, kind, or at all, the same *de jure* rights or *de facto* powers of ownership which characterise slaveowners. Turning to the classic traits of ownership (Honore, 1961), an employer lacks the slaveholder’s right of security of property, since waged labourers can terminate employment, even if they would then need to secure other work. Likewise, employers do not share the power of transmissibility belonging to slaveowners, who can transfer ownership of the chattel slave to others. So too, other than in the most egregious cases of workplace despotism, the ability to exert physical control over waged workers falls well short of the power of command, restriction of movement, and violent coercion that slaveowners could usually impose. Working for wages also presupposes a capacity to own property, if only fleetingly, whereas chattel slaves have often been denied this as objects of property themselves (the ancient *peculium* aside). Waged workers can spend that wage as they see fit rather than being beholden to whatever food and shelter a slaveowner provides. Each of these factors weakens the claim that the waged worker is the mere property of another, or even the capitalist class as a whole, and so advancing the slave analogy on this basis alone is of limited plausibility.

The main rival conception of slavery in recent years has been the account of slavery as social death developed by Orlando Patterson. On his wider definition, ‘*slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons*’ (1982: 13). These conditions are not commonly found together among waged workers. For instance, even if there is economic pressure to migrate in ways that separate families, the typical waged worker is not subject to the profound natal alienation of the chattel slave displaced from any recognised community and culture. Violence has sometimes been used to discipline workers, with early critics of wage slavery being particularly exercised by attacks on working children. Some socialists have also argued that violent force

is the foundation of the control over property that keeps workers in servitude (e.g. Blanqui, 2018: 50). But the nature and extent of this violence is typically very different to the routine whipping, beating, and branding that chattel slaves have often endured. Similarly, waged workers may be bullied and shamed by employers, while being of low status and esteem in their wider society. But the acute degradation and sustained social contempt directed towards chattel slaves, which sought to blot out their very humanity, has been incomparably greater. From a more general vantage, waged workers can be subordinated, exploited, and marginalised, but a verdict of comprehensive social death would strain credulity. Therefore, the slave analogy is even harder to sustain on this conception of slavery.

There is another tradition of thinking about slavery, however, which emerges from antique legal and political thought, and is much better placed to justify the slave analogy. This is a neo-Roman conception of slavery, which has been taken up most consistently by republican thinkers. Consider in this respect the characterisations of slavery in the *Digest* of the Roman law, which tells us that slaves are 'subjected to the hand and power of another' (Ulpian in Watson, 1985: 2, §1.1.4). They are said to be under another's jurisdiction and within the power of a master, with slavery being described as a legal institution by which a person falls under the dominion of someone else (Gaius in Watson, 1985: 17–18, §1.6.1; Florentius in Watson, 1985: 15, §1.5.4).⁴ What does it mean to be within the power of another in this way? Seneca described slavery as a condition in which certain bodies were 'at the mercy of their masters' (Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, §3.20, translated in Skinner, 1998: 43). Likewise, Cicero observed that the most miserable aspect of slavery is that 'even if the master happens not to be oppressive, he can be so should he wish' (Cicero, 1926: 374, translated in Skinner, 2002: 10) For the slave, their fate turns on the will of their master.

This recognisably Roman analysis of slavery had a significant impact on English political life through its deployment by seventeenth-century critics of the monarchical power of Charles I. For instance, commenting on the practice of forced loans, Dudley Digges was to claim a king 'not tied to the laws', who did 'whatsoever he will', was a 'king of slaves' (Johnson and Cole, 1977: 66). Algernon Sidney (1704: 9) was later to offer a more formal definition:

Liberty solely consists in an independency upon the Will of another, and by the name of Slave we understand a man, who can neither dispose of his Person nor Goods, but enjoys all at the will of his Master.

The character and disposition of the master makes no difference to the status of those subject to his power:

he is a slave who serves the best and gentlest man in the world, as well as he who serves the worst; and he does serve him if he must obey his commands, and depends upon his will. (1704: 319)

In an echo of Cicero, the principal mark of a slave becomes dependence upon the will of another, irrespective of whether actual ill-treatment takes place.

While by no means confined to republican thinkers, neo-Roman accounts of slavery continued to have a long afterlife in republican thought. Both colonial and metropolitan writers brought such ideas to bear in defence of the grievances that were to culminate in the Declaration of Independence. In a sermon delivered in South Carolina in 1769, Hugh Alison took up the cause of colonists with the claim that slavery ‘is to live at the mere mercy and caprice of another’ (1769: 4). On the other side of the Atlantic, Joseph Priestley’s arguments in support of the colonists exhibited that same logic, whereby the problem was not over-taxation so much as the arbitrary power to so tax (1993: 140; see also Pettit, 1997: 33–34). Thus, even if the British parliament happened not to be oppressive, it could have been so should it have wished. It is by following the career of this conception of slavery, I contend, we can arrive at a more sympathetic reading of the charge of wage slavery.

Neo-Romanism and chattel slavery

Where is the chattel among all this heady rhetoric of slavery? In the writings of republicans narrowly concerned with the political independence of themselves or their peers, slavery sometimes threatens to collapse into a flimsy metaphor. But their neo-Roman vocabulary was to find wider purchase among commentators on chattel slavery. For example, in 1788, the House of Assembly of Jamaica sought to defend slavery on the island from charges presented in petitions to the British parliament, including the allegation that slaves were ‘exposed to the arbitrary will of avaricious and unfeeling taskmasters, without any protection, or means of redress’ (Fuller and Jamaica Assembly, 1789). Likewise, in 1792, the Scottish minister Niel Douglass condemns the sexual vulnerability of enslaved women, whom he says are ‘made to feel all the tyranny of arbitrary power under the direction of unbridled passion’ (1792: 49–50). That same language is found across the next three decades, with talk of the ‘cruel and arbitrary wills’ of masters (Hicks, 1814: 12), and slaves who are ‘shackled by the arbitrary and uncontrolled will of another’ (Unknown, 1824: 3).

A telling example comes in 1824 from another cleric, T. S. Winn, in his book on *Emancipation*. There we see him recapitulating the idea we met in Cicero and Sidney that slavery obtains even when masters choose not to immiserate their slaves. As he puts it:

Why, a slave might justly say, even to a kind and liberal master, who can and does take proper care of him—‘You forcibly hold me in Slavery, subjected to your uncontrolled will and power, and then boast that you do not use me so ill as you might, and many do their slaves, making a merit of any forbearance from oppression’. (1824: 75)

This neatly expresses the modal nature of dominating power that republican philosophers have emphasised (Pettit, 1997: ch. 2). Being poorly treated is worse than being treated well, but unfreedom does not consist in being ill-used, but is rather a matter of sheer vulnerability to uncontrolled power.

Similar claims about arbitrariness would also become prominent in the black abolitionist press in the 1830s. Cornish (1837) noted that a slave could be beaten and abused according to the arbitrary will of his master, without legal redress. Writing in the *Liberator* under the name A Colored Lady in Memphis (1831), one author confidently asserts that slaves will eventually be free, even if they now subsist under the arbitrary will of their masters. When a column in the *Colored American* asked, 'what is American Slavery?' then the answer came, 'Tis the absolute subjection of the life and liberty of the slave, to the arbitrary will of the master' (Justicia, 1839). The *Freeman's Journal* of Dublin (1841) likewise tackled the thorny question of comparisons with other forms of oppression by stressing that the evils most nations endured paled to insignificance when considering the extent of the arbitrary power to which chattels were subject. These are, of course, each neo-Roman formulas once more.

Abolitionism in both Britain and the United States showed the explicit influence of wider republican sentiment too (McInerney, 1994). Opposition to slavery was taken to be a direct implication of republican commitments. Thus, in 1842, Gerrit Smith would deny the possibility of being a republican without abjuring slavery (1842: 164). A decade later, Frederick Douglass (2014: 371) believed that it should be possible to take the wrongfulness of slavery for granted among republicans. William Lloyd Garrison (1971: 224) would even describe Algernon Sidney himself as the father of modern abolitionism when faced with proponents of slavery who sought to put him in service to their own cause. That republican heritage would leave its mark on how abolitionists themselves spoke of slavery. For instance, in an 1859 letter to Garrison, Henry Wright claimed, 'Subjection to an outward, arbitrary authority is the basis of chattel slavery, and of all oppression', such that slaves were left 'no will of their own' insofar as they had been brought into 'submission to that arbitrary, bloody power that enslaves them' (1859: 30). So too, despite his early proprietary understanding of enslavement, Douglass also made use of a neo-Roman vocabulary in characterising the slave as a person 'under the arbitrary and despotic control' of another, where the 'will and the wishes of the master are the law of the slave' (2014: 357, 330).

Wage slavery in radical republicanism

Slavery, as we have already seen, was not a designation confined to chattels. There is a long tradition of talking about political slavery, such as that which finds expression in discussions of the American Revolution and the demands of taxation (Roediger, 1991: 27–31; Nyquist, 2013). Slavery to the passions was a common theme in religious sermons on both sides of the Atlantic during the nineteenth century (Shain, 1996: ch. 8). The impressment of British sailors was compared to slavery, often with reference to the harsh physical discipline imposed on them (e.g. Francklyn, 1778: 17). Imprisonment for debt had likewise been described as slavery, and prostitution was frequently dubbed a white slave trade. During the 1830s, there is a notable rise of a discourse about the poor in Britain and the United States that describes them as slaves. While that last way of speaking has a much older history—Cicero (1913: 153) had talked about the wage itself as a pledge of slavery long before the rise of capitalism and the mass immiseration of an industrial

proletariat—it acquires a new prominence in this period. Particularly significant in this respect was Richard Oastler’s famous campaign against ‘Yorkshire slavery’, which he attributed to children working long hours in the worsted mills of Bradford and exposed to the indiscriminate violence of the over-looker. That language of slavery was often dismissed by both abolitionists and industrialists alike—the *Leeds Mercury* calling it ‘a mere empty jingle of words’ (see Driver, 1946: 46–7).

While Oastler was an active abolitionist, the comparison between industrial labour and chattel slavery proved attractive to pro-slavery ideologues in the American South, like the aforementioned George Fitzhugh (1857: 29). It allowed them to hit back at the hypocrisy of British critics claiming that the American republic was forsaking its ideals of freedom. So too, it enabled them to take the fight to Northerners, who were said to exploit their workers more intensely than chattel slaves. Those workers stood outside the supposedly paternal protection of a master, who would care for his slaves even when they were unproductive. But in neither case is the language of neo-Roman liberty prominent. It is not uncontrolled power but exploitation and low levels of welfare that tend to take centre stage. In particular, for Tory radicals like Oastler and Southern champions of chattel slavery like Fitzhugh, the problem with industrialists was not their control over their workers, but that their power was not united with a paternalistic concern for the interests of those under their charge. What they believed needed to be remedied was a heartless commercial system that encouraged the strong to forsake their duties to the weak.

Labour republicans who later compared poor workers and chattel slaves were, by contrast, explicit in their use of neo-Roman ideas. Gourevitch (2014) has shown how the Knights of Labor adapted Sidney’s account of slavery to attack wage slavery. For them, formal emancipation was not sufficient for complete abolition, with the Knights warning that ‘it must not be supposed that the proclamation of emancipation liberated mankind from slavery’ (Anon, 1886: 2098). Ira Steward had remarked that ‘the laborer instinctively feels that something of slavery still remains’ (1873: 412), with George McNeill later denouncing a waged-labour system which ‘makes the employer a despot, and the employee a slave’ (1892: 455). On the basis of a republican analysis that rejected dependence on the will of bosses, the Knights developed a positive vision of economic emancipation centred on workers building a cooperative commonwealth. When productive property was in the hands of workers who no longer needed to subject themselves to the alien jurisdiction of bosses who purchased their labour, freedom could begin to come into reach.

Socialist republicans like Eugene Debs extended that labour republican analysis into the twentieth century (see O’Shea, 2022). He supposed the auction block and the labour market differed only by degree, with the great mass of workers subsisting in ‘abject slavery’ (Debs, 2020: 456; 2021: 490). What was it that rendered them ‘wage-slaves of a plutocracy’? (2020: 515) Debs’ answer combines neo-Roman and socialist concerns:

No man is free in any just sense who has to rely upon the arbitrary will of another for the opportunity to work. Such a man works, and therefore lives, by permission, and this is the present economic relation of the working class to the capitalist class. (2021: 303)

This analysis results in an even more ambitious understanding of emancipation than the Knights, which demands a democratic socialism premised on genuinely public ownership of productive property (rather than such property being restricted to cooperatives or worker organisations).

Socialist and labour republicans would have been able to sympathise with Oastler's revulsion towards the miserable conditions of industrial work, which they each oppose using the rhetoric of abolition. But where Oastler sought shorter hours and fairer wages, he shared with many slavemasters a patriarchal ideal of governance nominally pledged to the protection of subordinates—hence his singular horror at the realities of child labour (see Persky, 1998). A much more fulsome commitment to self-government, whether political or industrial, was absent. The republican ethos of the Knights and Debs was instead opposed not simply to overwork or exploitation but the attack on the freedom of workers that was represented by the discretionary authority of capitalists. That would find positive expression in advocacy of cooperative or public ownership in which power over workers was blunted, since they no longer had to sell control over their labour to an independent capitalist class. Those measures were expected to improve the welfare of workers, but more fundamentally still they would undermine the relationships of economic dependence that were thought to keep those workers enslaved.

Reformulating a neo-Roman approach

Why prefer a neo-Roman conception of wage slavery to rivals based on property or social death? These alternatives make wage slavery such an exacting notion that it would never, or only exceptionally rarely, find purchase in the capitalist labour markets which its proponents seek to analyse. This threatens to make the concept almost useless for social investigation and normative appraisal. On a neo-Roman account which avoids the claim that slavery consists in property—whether legally recognised property or effective powers of ownership—parallels between chattels and workers will be free from the temptation to contort the control attributed to managers, proprietors, or capitalists. Tremendous power over workers, yet which does not mirror the abilities to use, abuse, destroy, transfer, or securely possess which have been associated with property, can still qualify as wage slavery. Nor does a neo-Roman approach require that wage slaves encounter social death, where the absence of this highly demanding standard—combining permanent violent domination, natal alienation, and general dishonour—allows the category of slavery to be extended more widely. Aligning slavery with arbitrary power is not some artificial theoretical construct, however, insofar as we saw it being widely used to characterise chattel enslavement: from the lawyers and moralists of the ancient Roman world to a range of modern abolitionist writers.

Neo-Roman conceptions of wage slavery can also contribute to our understanding of economic domination. Many republican philosophers and fellow-travellers have found such dominating power throughout contemporary labour markets and workplaces, including subjection to the unaccountable will of others in recruitment, wage-setting, scheduling, and termination of employment (Anderson, 2017; Arnold, 2017; O'Shea, 2019). Furthermore, the domination of workers can encompass discretionary patronage

in granting promotions and permanency, distributing much-needed overtime, or assigning favourable leave. Some of the most profound domination of workers will count as wage slavery, with the category identifying a particularly intense subordination to employers. But there are reasons to resist the conclusion that worker domination always constitutes outright wage slavery, since this risks coarsening the language of slavery: inviting the objection that the harrowing atmospherics of the term are being exploited for cheap rhetorical effect without sufficient sensitivity to the enormity and particularity of chattel slavery. Similarly, an account of wage slavery articulated solely in terms of arbitrary power over workers appears to render the category implausibly broad—failing to sustain the moral gravity of the charge of enslavement. Ideally, our construction of the concept would be neither so demanding that it was effectively never instantiated, nor so loose that it loses its normative bite.

Looking to the history of accusations of wage slavery offers a clue of how to respond to these objections, insofar as this history often foregrounds power over life itself. When Douglass finally admitted the possibility of ‘a slavery of wages only a little less galling and crushing in its effects than chattel slavery’, he stressed this same feature:

The man who has it in his power to say to a man you must work the land for me, for such wages as I choose to give, has a power of slavery as real, if not as complete, as he who compels toil over the lash. All that a man hath he will give for his life. (1886: 13 and 15)

Engels likewise denounced the slavery of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie who can ‘decree his life or death’, which arises from a ‘monopoly of all means of existence in the broadest sense of the word’ (1975: 376). In this, Douglass and Engels echo the Roman law’s observation that ‘among all nations masters have had the power of life or death over their slaves’ (Gaius in Watson, 1985: 18, §1.6.1). Debs thought a worker compelled to work for the wages offered by a master was ‘enslaved by his material wants and by his economic necessities’ (2021: 130). These glosses on wage slavery suggest a narrowing of focus to control over our most vital material needs.

Wage slavery, as opposed to other forms of worker domination, would arise when someone is subject to arbitrary power with respect to their means of existence. That includes subsistence, shelter, health, and physical integrity, but not other important human needs which are not crucial for sustaining life. Thus, waged work will not constitute waged slavery when it does not grant uncontrolled power with respect to vital needs, even if workers are subject to arbitrary power in other respects. For example, the salaried worker who owns their home outright, and has enough savings to fund a frugal but secure retirement, is not a wage slave. They no longer rely on their job to avoid immiseration, even if bosses who have unaccountable power to prevent them satisfying a richer set of social and material needs will still dominate them. So too, someone with a physical impairment who receives strong, sustained, and reliable welfare support is not a wage slave. Their vital needs will be securely met outside of the wage relation, even if they are vulnerable to the discretionary authority of bosses in decisions about hiring, retention, and promotion upon entering the labour market. When someone’s ability to meet their vital needs is less secure but feasibly satisfiable from more than one source—for instance,

depending on the goodwill of a welfare bureaucrat *or* the indulgence of an employer—then the dominating vulnerability to the power of others they face may be intense, but is only wage slavery in a correspondingly attenuated sense. The addition of other routes to the fulfilment of needs, such as the aid of family, friends, or charities, will further dilute the degree to which *wage* slavery can be ascribed, even if it does not eliminate dominating dependence on the wills of others.

Yet, there remain those without private wealth and state support, in communities unable or unwilling to sustain them, whose most fundamental material needs will go unmet without the patronage of employers who possess momentous control over their lives. These people are wage slaves. In contrast, even without continued employment, tenured academics at Harvard University who have been in receipt of a full professorial salary over many years are unlikely to find themselves unable to feed, clothe, or shelter themselves to a rudimentary level, especially if other familial and social support, pension options, or unemployment entitlements are forthcoming. Thus, Shelby and many comparable salaried members of the professional-managerial class will be far from being wage slaves, despite being vulnerable to workplace domination in other respects.

Does it make sense to speak of wage slavery at all though when workers can leave their jobs—unlike chattels unable to leave their masters? Consider in this respect the lessons that radical republicans have drawn about structural domination (Bryan, 2023; Gourevitch, 2013). While workers are rarely obliged to work for a fixed employer, their social position compels many to sell their labour to at least some boss in order to meet their needs. Leaving one employer would simply lead them into the hands of another with much the same powers over them. Many workers are thereby structurally dominated by employers as a whole, which in contemporary mixed economies effectively means domination by the combined power of the capitalist class and state bureaucracies. Similarly, if a worker's ability to meet their most vital needs is utterly dependent on the will of some disjunction of those employers, then they remain a wage slave. This wage slavery is not rooted in exclusive power possessed by any one individual or organisation but rather the diffuse control of employers as a whole that arises from their ability to mediate access to the means of existence. But it compounds the dominating power of individual employers by reducing the benefits of exit for those workers who will have to urgently secure a job with a comparable employer in order to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

Criticisms

I have been outlining a neo-Roman account of wage slavery rooted in arbitrary power over vital material needs. But another way of thinking about slavery might be thought not only to have a stronger pedigree in Roman law, but to provide substantive support for the objection that slavery is being understood too expansively on our account. Republican inheritors of Roman legal thought have often been inclined to draw a strong dichotomous contrast between freedom and a slavery characterised by subjection to the arbitrary will of another. But the *Digest* recognises those who are within the power of others without being counted slaves: its primary example being the lawful children of

Roman citizens, who are subject to the heads of households (Watson, 1985: 18, §1.6.1). The category of those under another's power, yet not slaves, becomes wider still when this section of the Roman law is taken up in the English juridical tradition of Henry de Bracton and his successors, where it encompasses wives, wards, and eventually servants, such as apprentices (Bracton, 1997: 35–36; Smith, 1906: 137–138).⁵ What then, other than subjection to the power or jurisdiction of another, makes a slave? Quentin Skinner has recently argued that the fuller answer found within the Roman law is subjection to the arbitrary will of another *in virtue of* being their property (Skinner, 2021). So understood, to be a slave is to be under another's power in the distinctive mode of ownership. To the extent, already explored above, that even highly precarious workers are not exactly property, then they would not be slaves, and therefore not wage slaves.

We can, however, tread a path which weaves between the neo-Roman republican tendency to describe any subjection to another's arbitrary power as slavery and the neo-Roman juridical notion that slavery must always be grounded in arbitrary power over someone insofar as they are reduced to property. The distinct neo-Roman vital needs approach to wage slavery does not operate with a strict binary between freedom and slavery, but is rather ternary in structure: distinguishing freedom, domination, and slavery. Not all infringements on the economic freedom of workers are substantial enough to warrant a verdict of slavery—only those where arbitrary power ensures another's means of life may hang in the balance. Like the neo-Roman juridical account, this creates conceptual space between slavery and full freedom, which counters some of the inflationary proclivities of classical republican rhetoric. But this can occur without shrinking the extension of the notion of wage slavery so much that it becomes effectively useless for social analysis. Instead, we have a conception of the wage slave that can emphasise some of the continuities between chattel slaves and workers subject to such profound power that, *in extremis*, their very lives can turn on the unaccountable favour of others. This reformulated conception of wage slavery speaks to the intuitions which fuelled socialist and anarchist critiques of capitalist unfreedom in the nineteenth century, while avoiding the more implausible excesses of accounts which would simply conflate economic domination and wage slavery.

Other objections which hold that the net is being cast too wide remain though. For instance, the control ordinarily possessed by a constellation of employers might seem to be too fragmented to subject workers to wage slavery unless it can be exercised in a concerted and intentional fashion. This additional criterion seems implicit in Pettit's discussion of wage slavery, which obtains when 'the employers in any area are collectively capable of blacklisting someone who displeases them', and 'unemployment effectively means destitution' (1997: 141). Such a collective capability is open to two interpretations: that the combined effect of each employer individually exercising their capacity to refuse to employ someone would be their unintended destitution; or that, through collusion, employers are capable of acting together to intentionally keep someone out of any work and therefore destitute. Given Pettit (1997: 52–3) claims that domination depends upon a capacity to interfere, and that the interference which figures in this capacity must be intentional, then the latter interpretation is the most likely.⁶

If a capacity for deliberate collective blacklisting is necessary rather than merely sufficient for wage slavery, this narrows the concept's extension, since it now depends upon a social infrastructure for coordination among employers. This reduction in scope may be appealing in tracking a form of mastery seemingly implied by attributions of slavery: the ability to control another through enforcing punishment at will.⁷ When wage slavery presupposes an ability to act in conscious unison, the deprivation which employers can visit upon disfavoured workers is not contingent and accidental but foreseen and potentially intentional. It becomes a form of invigilation, underpinned by an ability to sanction those who depart from their collective will. On this approach, wage slavery more closely resembles the power to dispense calculated punishment which an individual master undertakes through whipping or branding chattels, only now devised and enforced through a cartel of employers, albeit less violent in its most immediate effects. If wage slavery does *not* depend upon collusion among employers, then the mastery it presupposes is dispersed rather than localised in a single person or a recognisable group agent. The question then arises whether the power held by this looser agglomeration of employers is truly sufficient to ground wage slavery.

There are good reasons to affirm that conclusion. Someone completely dependent upon the discretionary patronage of employers remains profoundly insecure, whether they can be collusively blacklisted or spurned by each employer individually. In each scenario, they face enormous pressure to conform to the wishes of one or more employer, while remaining powerless if those employers are disinclined to purchase their labour-power. Admittedly, the union organiser who knows they are subject to collective punishment by a united front can differ in their experiences from the organiser subject to case-by-case punishment by individually hostile employers. Likewise, being punished for union activity will likely not feel quite the same as simply being abandoned when one's labour is deemed surplus to requirements. But the satisfaction of vital needs hangs on alien wills nonetheless in all these scenarios—whether or not a group agent can intentionally ensure those needs go unmet.⁸

We might insist a salient difference is that collusive blacklisters have a dispositive power which transforms the nature of their mastery: that, acting as a group agent, they can enforce their will as dominators, in ways that a less coordinated set of agents who have not agreed a common policy with their peers cannot. But that change in the quality of mastery need not undermine a claim to be subjected to a form of slavery. Indeed, the default approach to slavery and domination—from ancient Roman law to contemporary neo-republicanism—has long been to conceptualise it in terms of the status of those enslaved or dominated rather than those who master or dominate them. From a wage slave's perspective, the pertinent consideration is that they lack control over the means to satisfy their most fundamental material needs, and this control rests in the hands of others whose favour must be maintained. Whether their extreme vulnerability arises from an orchestrated cabal or the implacable indifference of many scattered employers, the upshot for the worker is much the same.

However, can employers be intelligibly cast as masters at all when subject to market pressures and not engaging in grossly anti-competitive practices? If owners

and managers are corralled into doing whatever it takes to pursue profits, lest their firms go out of business, it may appear misplaced to ascribe them the arbitrary power characteristic of a dominating wage slavery. That point is not confined to proponents of the emancipatory potential of markets (e.g. Taylor, 2017: ch. 3) but can also be found among critics of capitalism (e.g. Vrousalis, 2017: 381). Most prominently, Marx claims that ‘competition subordinates every individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production’ (1976c: 990), and that ‘the capitalist is just as enslaved by the capitalist relationship as is his opposite pole, the worker’ (1976c: 739). While this did not prevent him from describing proletarians as wage slaves belonging to the capitalist class, it complicates any simple division between unfettered masters and prostrate slaves. But taken soberly, Marx’s specific claims are overhasty, since propertyless workers are typically far more personally vulnerable if they lose the indulgence of employers than if those employers find their profits falling. The capitalist’s purported slavery is attended by no immediate danger of destitution, even if sustained or catastrophic failure might put some at risk of proletarianisation. The imperatives to which capitalists are subject are not like the invisible threads which bind workers to them, but rather stem from their own desires to maintain their superior property and status. Whatever magnetic pull these interests exert, this is no slavery.

A neo-Roman approach can also partially address concerns about the implicit racial politics of the slavery analogy. The Roman legal tradition’s definitions of slavery were not themselves racialised; nor was much of the actual practice of slavery in the Roman world, despite some preconceptions about people of certain origins being particularly suited to slavery or performing particular tasks as slaves (Bradley, 1994: 42–43). The strong association between Africans and chattel slavery forged by the transatlantic slave system was absent in the ancient world. That provides some armature against the complaint that the language of slavery is inevitably a proxy for racialised abjection and anti-blackness in particular. Nevertheless, our own world continues to be deeply shaped by Atlantic slavery, and it would be naïve to believe we could avoid its imprint on our political concepts through sheer stipulation or historical reconstruction alone. Some audiences will inevitably hear invocations of wage slavery as attempts to downplay the horrors inflicted on enslaved chattels, exaggerate the sufferings of a white working class, and overlook the continued racialised impact of this history. That should prompt some caution in using the unvarnished language of wage slavery in popular political rhetoric when the necessary qualifications and clarifications are not sufficiently established in the public consciousness. Any polemical advantages to this fiery mode of speech also ought to be weighed against the potential for misunderstanding, especially given a poor background grasp of the history of chattel slavery and the cynical distortions of this history common in racist societies.

Nor is the implication of speaking of wage slavery in this neo-Roman sense that the harms involved are the same as those inflicted by chattel slavery. Instead, the aim of the slave analogy is to identify continuities in the mechanism of unfreedom, which rests on a shared vulnerability to uncontrolled power in securing one’s vital needs. The range,

directness, and intensity of that vulnerability will not be identical across the two conditions. So too, the influence of highly developed social structures centred on extreme racial subordination is a transformative dimension of transatlantic chattel slavery when compared to much workplace domination. But those occupying the position of chattel slave and waged worker can display a formally similar subordination to the unchecked power of another that generates related psychological dispositions towards servility and anxious insecurity. Wage slaves and chattel slaves are dependent on another's will for their means of existence, so it should be no surprise that homologies in their respective conditions leads to some shared responses. This can include common strategies for managing their relations to superiors: for instance, docility of mind and obeisance of body when observed, so as not to attract additional displeasure; false compliance and foot dragging when unobserved, so as to avoid exhausting overwork. But the main function of our neo-Roman approach to wage slavery remains to emphasise affinities in the unfreedom which members of each group encounter, whereby the unaccountable power held over them is so momentous that their very lives could be imperilled if they cannot maintain sufficient goodwill from others. The degree of such unfreedom differs in many respects but its form endures. The neo-Roman account of slavery articulated here keeps us focused on this crucial continuity.

If wage slavery does not imply harms of the same magnitude as chattel slavery, why should we feel obliged to introduce the criterion of arbitrary power over vital material needs, which restricts its application to the most serious cases of economic domination? Among the dangers of narrowing a neo-Roman understanding of slavery, in ways that depart from classical republican tendencies to use the term liberally when faced with arbitrary power, will be that critics of capitalism unnecessarily deprive themselves of arresting rhetoric when confronted with less extreme cases of worker domination. So too, those whose means of life are secure, but nevertheless find themselves enduring the petty tyranny of their boss in order to do more than merely eke out an existence, might well endorse the metaphorically resonant language of enslavement to describe their plight. But there are limits to how far it is wise to bend a concept like slavery, especially when the legacy of chattel slavery remains so understandably raw. At the risk of antagonising those on both sides, I have traced a line which affirms the radical tradition of condemning the unfreedom of capitalist societies in strong and historically suggestive terms, while being sensitive to some of the reservations which critics of chattel slavery expressed about deploying the term 'slave' too loosely. Compared to a more permissive usage, the extension of the resulting conception of wage slavery should also have a better continuity with its original application in the nineteenth century, when conditions for proletarians were often dire enough that threats to their ability to meet their vital needs could be taken for granted.

Conclusion

Wage slavery remains a compelling diagnosis of the unfreedom encountered by some of the most precarious workers in market societies. But the concept should be reframed with reference to neo-Roman concerns about arbitrary power, rather than workers being

reduced to property or being subjected to social death. In developing this neo-Roman account, I have situated it within the intellectual history of both chattel slavery and wage slavery. This history shows how attention to the arbitrary power of masters over slaves was not simply some abstract preoccupation of republican thinkers removed from the realities of chattel slavery, but was enthusiastically taken up by abolitionists, and sometimes even treated as the defining trait of slavery. That not only classical English republicans but leading abolitionists adopted such vocabulary adds further weight to the proposal that slavery can plausibly be understood in neo-Roman rather than Aristotelian or Pattersonian terms. Furthermore, we have seen how the use of a neo-Roman account of slavery transformed the significance of accusations of wage slavery. When deployed by radical Tories, the core concerns cluster around poor wages, long hours, and casual violence meted out on behalf of rich industrialists failing to uphold their paternalistic social duties. But in the hands of labour republicans and socialist republicans, the problem of wage slavery became a lack of control over one's labour and means of life, to be remedied by a socialisation of wealth and democratisation of the economy.

When set against alternative accounts of wage slavery, the radical neo-Roman tradition provides the most suitable home for the notion. Some readers may agree without taking the further step of actually endorsing a neo-Roman conception of wage slavery. However, I have also sought to show such a neo-Roman approach is not simply the best of a bad bunch, but has some independent appeal as a contribution to understanding the varieties of economic domination that can emerge within capitalist societies. This account aligns wage slavery with the economic unfreedom which radical republicans took to emerge from vulnerability to arbitrary power in the labour market and the workplace. Wage slavery becomes a particularly extreme form of economic domination, where someone's access to the means of existence is dependent on the will of others. This analysis provides a granular approach to economic domination, which recognises the possibility of worker domination that falls short of wage slavery when arbitrary power does not threaten our most vital needs. As such, it contributes to the conceptual apparatus of a resurgent socialist republican project within political theory (see Muldoon, 2022; O'Shea, 2020). Supplemented with an account of structural domination, this analysis does not have to suppose that active collusion among employers is required to institute wage slavery; nor does the existence of competition entail that employers themselves do not occupy the correlative position of masters. Nevertheless, I suggest the need for some initial caution in using the language of wage slavery outside of the narrow confines of political-theoretical discussion, given its febrile history and the potential for the necessary qualifications for its use to be ignored. In sum, however, there is a viable path to the recuperation of the notion of wage slavery.

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Notes

1. For instance, take Cobden (1854) or McEnnis (1888). See also Cunliffe (1979: ch.1) and Roediger (1991: ch. 4).
2. On rented labour's relation to slavery, see Ellerman (2021).
3. Marx's own discussions of wage slavery go beyond a narrow focus on property, with recent interpretations even stressing a neo-Roman dimension: see Leipold (2022).
4. Watson renders *dominio* narrowly as ownership, but the more capacious sense of dominion is a more neutral reading for our present purposes.
5. On this point, I am very much indebted to Skinner (2022).
6. His account of markets is also more consistent with this reading (Pettit, 2006).
7. To which we might add discretionary reward if not for Pettit's stipulative exclusion of this from dominating relationships—see Pettit (1997: 52).
8. For further grounds to suppose domination need not always turn on intentional action within a dyadic relationship, see Krause (2013) and Coffee (2015).

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