

Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth - Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015

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In the conclusion of his book, Alex Gourevitch writes that at the outset of his research, his intention was to provide a Marxist critique of the 'republican revival' associated with authors such as John G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit or others. In the end however, the book turned out to be something fundamentally different. For the findings strongly suggest that the very concept of freedom espoused by Marx also builds on the republican tradition, in other words, that Marx himself could be considered something of a republican too. The claim in itself is quite extraordinary, given Marx's hostility to some notable figures of the republican tradition such as Cicero or others. So to prove the plausibility of his suggestion, Gourevitch draws our attention to the fact that when Marx talks about wage-slavery, alienation and so on, he apparently uses a republican political vocabulary, and in fact talks about un-freedom stemming from domination, rather than interference which is, so to speak, a distinctly republican concern.

This might need a word of clarification. Domination is a state when one's freedom is *dependent* on the goodwill of others. It need not require actual interference from the side of these 'others', no concrete form of coercion; it also need not manifest in the use of a lash or anything of the sort. Domination is something much more subtle. It only requires one to be at mercy of others, to be in an asymmetric power relation; in other words to depend on certain other's choices. For the powerful may prefer to interfere, or not to interfere, but that is not the point. The point is that freedom understood as non-domination requires one to have immunity from *any* arbitrary interference, which means that the powerful need to be barred from interfering no matter what their preferences are. A benevolent master is considered just as dangerous to freedom as an evil one, since he is what he is: a master. He can only cease to exist as a master, once his power is effectively limited, or - to be more precise - controlled by the citizens of the republic. In short: once he no longer has the power to interfere arbitrarily with others. This is at the heart of republican political philosophy. And it seems that the concerns put forward by Marx, such as wage-slavery touch on the very same aspect of freedom. For a wage-slave is unfree not because he is interfered with, but because he is in an asymmetric power relation with his employers.

Therefore, republicans and Marxists do not seem so distant from each other after all. This realization made it difficult for Gourevitch to follow up on his original intentions - namely to provide a

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Marxist critique of the republican tradition. Instead, he sets out to unfold the radical emancipatory potential *within* the republican tradition itself. He turns to the writings of nineteenth century labor republicans, most notably to those of the *Knights of Labor*. These nineteenth century unionists radicalized republican political philosophy by claiming, that freedom understood as non-domination requires the liberation of labor itself from the alienating tendencies of market capitalism. They attempted nothing less, but to transpose the republican program to the domain of private labor relationships: 'into the mines and factories, not to mention the Louisiana sugar country'. This was no easy task since in order to do so, they first needed to transcend what Gourevitch calls the 'paradox of slavery and freedom', a paradox that had haunted the republican tradition for centuries.

The paradox - analyzed beautifully in the first chapter of the book - consists of two conflicting propositions. The *first* one states that republican liberty is a condition that has certain requirements, namely social requirements. It is also not accessible to all, since no society can provide the necessary economic resources for all of its citizens to enjoy non-domination. The reason is plain and simple: the mentioned resources require the slave labor of certain segments of the population. As it happens, slave labor (and even wage-labor for that matter) by definition means that the laborer has no control over his activity. Therefore it is a specific form of un-freedom. In other words, the freedom of the few always presupposes the slavery of others, or in some versions - the slavery of the many. Indeed, it is commonplace that the most notable 'advocates of liberty in the classical republics were some of the most ardent slave-owners.' Aristotle for example famously defined slaves as people who lack deliberative reason by nature, or to put it bluntly, who cannot form independent judgements about the *common good*. They therefore naturally bear the burden of coerced labor, and there is nothing objectionable about this, because the products of their toll wins the freedom of the few deserving. Similarly, Sallust and Cicero, two key figures of the Roman republican tradition, argued that the "only real independence is that of leisured, landed wealth", and evidently 'this land would have been worked by slaves'. To sum up, ancient liberty was dependent on the domination of a large segment of the population, which means it was a highly particularistic political ideal.

The *second* proposition is the product of modernity - claims Gourevitch. It states that any political

ideal that cannot be universalizable comes into conflict with the demand of equality, which was intended to become the 'organizing principle for collective life'. Here lies the essence of the paradox. How could republicanism maintain its positions in modernity, or more precisely, how could it be modernized? The problem pushed republicans to reformulate their positions. According to Gourevitch, two relevant reactions unfolded between late eighteenth and mid nineteenth century America.

One of them could be associated with the southern élites, including figures such as James Henry Hammond who famously rejected universal equality in favor of republican liberty. They intended to hold on to the classical particularistic position of Cicero and Sallust, and effectively spoke against the abolition of slavery. For slavery, be it natural or not, was a 'necessary convention to uphold the common interest in republican institutions.'

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The other reaction, associated with the late Abraham Lincoln and others, took a very different path. They proposed a solution to accommodate republican liberty with the demand of universal equality. This solution - called the 'agrarian ideal' by Gourevitch - would envisage a commonwealth of free small scale agricultural producers, each owning a small patch of land that ensured their ability to control their own labor, and where 'the independence of each citizen is guaranteed through their own, self-developing efforts.' To meet the most urging demand of equality, the proponents of the agrarian ideal fought for the abolishing of slavery - in this they eventually succeeded.

The viability of their proposition rested of course on the delicate balance of land and population. According to Gourevitch, Lincoln believed that the 'new world' had plenty of unused land for the settlers and the former slaves as well, so therefore the question of reform was only of a technical kind. In other words, the natural resources were given, they only had to be distributed justly. However, Lincoln's plan was never put to the test. The reason lies not in the failure of the United States' government to act, but in the massive social and economic transformation of the second half of the nineteenth century - industrialization. Factory production rapidly extended, thus creating a large number of 'permanent wage-laborers', who had no reasonable chance ever to 'own productive property, be it land or tools and raw material, which appeared to mean that they could not be independent' - at least from the point of view of the agrarian ideal. Some tried to oppose

industrialization - among them republicans too, namely Thomas Jefferson -, but their efforts were futile. The times had irreversibly changed. After industrialization, America would never be the same again. Similarly, republicanism would never be the same again either.

For with the transformation of the social reality, an 'intellectual crisis' hit the defenders of republican freedom. It became unrealistic to cling to the agrarian ideal, therefore the position needed to be reformulated once more. The question was no longer whether every citizen could attain economic freedom stemming from land ownership. Instead, it was *what to do with the masses of factory workers?* What were the requirements of universal freedom in the age of industrialized America? One possible answer - dealt with in chapter two - was provided by the so called 'laissez faire republicans'.

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Their idea - associated with William Lloyd Garrison and others - was that the freedom of any laborer requires nothing more but the freedom of the labor contract itself. Chattel slavery was gone, no human being could be coerced into working for another according to law - everybody had the right to choose with whom they wished to step into contract with. Unlike slaves, wage-laborers could now decide to leave their jobs at any time they wished. According to laissez faire republicans, this effectively guaranteed liberty for all. But what followed from all this? To answer the question, Gourevitch makes two illuminating remarks. *First*, by equating non-domination with the right of free contract, 'laissez faire' republicans became undistinguishable from modern market liberals. In other words, there was nothing specifically republican about them, except for the rhetoric. *Second*, the defense of freedom of contract 'contributed to a rejection of many attempts to regulate or control through various types of collective actions' but on the other hand gave employers full freedom to put workers into certain new forms of dependence through the contracts and the labor process as well.

Thus the laissez faire position in the end resulted in the defense of asymmetric power relations between workers and employers, the latter being the more powerful of course. For the 'weakness' of the workers lie precisely in the fact that they could not bargain successfully over the conditions of the contracts, and consequently these contracts, despite their legal legitimacy, bore the marks of the power of the employers. Once again: this was not considered to be a form of domination by the laissez faire republicans.

But it was considered to be just that by others, namely the labor republicans. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with them, and this is where Gourevitch is at his best. Using the debates published in American periodicals such as the *Journal of United Labor*, the *Knights of Labor*, or *The Liberator*, books, pamphlets and novels published, and speeches given by notable, and less notable members of the movement, he reconstructs the honorable intellectual heritage of labor republicanism. Its ideas come to life on the pages of the book, and it soon becomes evident that Gourevitch intends not only to give an antiquarian account of a long lost tradition. On the contrary, the stakes are much higher. Namely, the question is whether labor republicanism has something relevant to say about contemporary emancipatory struggles? I shall come to answer this shortly.

But first, who were these so called labor republicans? According to Gourevitch they were a loosely knit movement that included individuals - for example Langdon Bylesby, William Heighton, Stephen Simpson and Thomas Skidmore -, parties, and labor unions as well. As for the latter, the most extraordinary case is that of the Knights of Labor, a biracial (white and black) union that was active between the 1860s and early 1890s. At their height the *Knights* numbered possibly up to 700 000 members, with assemblies active all over the United States. They believed in the idea that 'everyone should have not just higher wages, shorter hours, or better conditions, but full economic independence. A life spent working should not be a life spent working under someone else's will.' Furthermore, they were the first labor union 'ever to organize black workers together with whites on a mass basis - an effort not meaningfully duplicated in the United States for nearly a century'.

Their eventual downfall was brought about by the horrors of the 1887 Thibodaux massacre, when white citizen-vigilantes, called the 'Peace and Order Committee', unleashed a three-day 'torrent of killing' on the protesting black sugar cane workers, led by the Knights. Although no body counts were done, the news of the killing quickly spread around the country and discouraged workers from any further participation in strikes and union activity for some time. This effectively ended the career of the Knights.

But what did they want? What is their legacy? Before answering these questions in detail, we need to make two preliminary remarks. *First*, the movement was far from homogenous - as Gourevitch himself admits it. But this does not mean

that we cannot find certain common motives and ideas, therefore it might not be an exaggeration to call it a tradition. *Second*, it was highly political in the sense that it was always articulated *in opposition* to the aforementioned laissez faire republicanism. In other words the movement can only be understood in a political context, in the very struggles fought over the rights of workers, the structuring of economic production and so on.

Let us enumerate the key ideas and motives of labor republicanism, as identified by Gourevitch. The *first* is their theory of value, from which important conclusions can be drawn with regards to freedom understood as non-domination. In short, the claim is that wage-laborers are on the one hand dependent on employers - for they *must* find work, if they are not starve, whereas propertied employers are not in danger of starving -, and on the other hand they are exploited by these same employers. For 'if a worker received a lower wage than the value he created, the employer unfairly acquitted (...) the value of that worker's labor'. This meant that 'the labor market was not defined by relations of equal independence, but rather by relations of unequal dependence and thus domination. The employers' regular extraction of profits was a sign of their arbitrary power over employees.'

The *second* idea follows from this. If un-freedom stems from the unequal power relations, the unequal dependency relations within the labor market itself, a republican position requires much more than the formal 'freedom of contract'. Namely, labor republicans proposed the concept of *cooperative production*, which was 'broadly understood as a form of associated production in which property was held in common, all able-bodied members of the community worked, in exchange for which they received a guarantee that they would be provided all necessities'. In other words, workers should take over ownership of the means of industrial production, they should cease to work under the will of employers, and thus they should cease to be dependent on their current masters. For cooperative production means that workers have the opportunity to live and work on their own terms, exercising *full* control over the process of production, over decisions concerning working hours and leisure time, and of course control over the products of labor as well.

Two points need to be noted here. For one, labor republicans demanded that it should be the workers who shall be provided with all necessities

in exchange for their toll, and no one else. Second, they demanded that these workers should have full control over the products, in other words, they should be able to enjoy the 'full fruits' of their labor. Now any old Marxist would of course object to these points - as does Gourevitch himself in the conclusion of the book. As for the first point, it could be argued that 'it is hard to accept the justice of a society that links consumption *exclusively* to the ability to work', for this would leave the weakest groups of society - the unemployed, the sick, the old, the mentally or physically disabled - completely at the mercy of the powerful. They would depend on private donations of various sorts, and this of course would mean complete and utter un-freedom. This stands in clear contrast with the concept of universal liberty, understood as non-domination. 'There are some needs that people should be able to satisfy without being able or even willing to work.' As for the second point - the one regarding the enjoyment of the full fruits of labor -, it might be argued that if 'workers received the full value of what they produced', the political community would be left without means to finance the realization of certain common goals, such as the building of roads, energy supply or whatever.

The *third* key idea in labor republican thought is that those participating in emancipatory struggles for the establishment of a system of cooperative production should effectively form a community, which means they should foster a sense of solidarity and an attachment to the common good. Labor republicans formulated this 'way of thinking about virtue as something neither absolutely counterposed to self-interest nor simply assimilated to it. (...) In all, they identified the politics of virtue with the practices of self-organization and self-education through which workers acted collectively to transform society.' Now this is no mere radicalization of the standard republican theory of virtue - which of course has taken many forms in the course of the centuries -, but something profoundly different. Namely, labor republicans break with the traditional idea that civic virtue should be linked to the potentially coercive state, and that it is in a way conservative. Instead, they proposed that it can be used to give normative arguments for participation in emancipatory struggles, and that it need not involve the active interference of any kind of state authority. In Gourevitch's words: 'Labor republicans sought to transform not preserve institutions, to cultivate virtue in themselves rather than have virtue coercively inculcated'.

To sum up the noted points, labor republicans found that the masses of factory workers were in a state of domination precisely because of the structure of the labor market, and this led them to focus their attention not on state institutions, but on the institutions of the market and the economy in general. They argued that universal freedom could only be acquired by radically transforming the mode of production, founding it on the cooperation of workers, rather than the self-interest of capital holders. To achieve this transformation, emancipatory struggles were needed with the active participation of virtuous worker-citizens.

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We are now in a position to ask what salience these ideas have in our age. According to Gourevitch, when Facebook comments, the holding of political views to which bosses object to or the support of unionization may lead to the loss of jobs, when employers may force employees to attend rallies, or when after-hours activities are monitored on a regular basis, it seems all too apparent that domination is here to stay in the labor market. 'Controversies over power and control in the workplace remain a part of our economic and political experience.' Moreover, 'liberty is most frequently invoked to argue against worker attempts to exercise collective control over their labor', and *in favor* of increasing managerial domination over the workforce. In other words, labor republicanism may yet provide a useful political vocabulary, since the very power relations that were its target remain intact.

However, a few theoretical objections may be raised - objections that are not, indeed, voiced by Gourevitch. First of all, by focusing on the transformation of economic institutions, labor republicans fall short on providing a coherent theory of the state. They argued for some sort of a minimal state that would only institute the most basic regulatory limits, such as a maximum-hours law, 'some' public schooling and so on. But - according to their concept - it would be the worker-citizens who would 'provide the actual content, through their own institutions'. Now this claim is highly problematic from a republican point of view. For according to most republicans it is precisely the state that should be seen as the defender of liberty - as long as it is effectively controlled by its citizens. This means that a strong and democratic state that actively interferes in the life of the citizenry is not seen as dominating, but rather as a necessary tool to forward the

common good. Second, the minimal state opens the doors for potentially over powerful worker institutions - a problem that could be tackled with the republican concept of the mixed constitution. The danger seems even more apparent if we take into account the fact that bottom-up institutions may organize on a variety of bases other than class, such as culture, religion or the like. A minimal state has no power to effectively limit cultural institutions that are potentially oppressive towards their membership. This leads to the third problem, which is that labor republicans saw class conflict as the only relevant political cleavage, and therefore completely neglected others. The truth of the matter is that domination may arise from a variety of power relations that of course may nevertheless be connected with the economic aspect, no question about that. Fourth, there is an apparent problem with the labor theory of virtue as well - a problem not quite separable from the labor theory of the state. Namely, it seems quite implausible to trust the cultivation of civic virtue solely on bottom-up institutions, for they may prove to be volatile in doing the task. Why the state - provided it is effectively controlled by the citizenry - should not be entrusted with this? It is the state that has both the resources and the legitimacy to effectively cultivate civic virtue, not to mention it is only through central/common institutions that inter-group solidarity can be easily forwarded, solidarity that would encompass the entire political community.

Apart from these objections, it is safe to say, that Alex Gourevitch is right when he claims that labor republicanism indeed *does* have relevant things to say about contemporary theoretical debates and political struggles as well. The picture of an ever changing, ever adapting republican tradition arises, a tradition that has succeeded many times to reformulate its position on liberty and its requirements. It is truly an eye-opening book, beautifully written, that challenges contemporary history of political thought and political philosophy as well, drawing our attention to certain neglected aspects of the republican tradition. Most notably, it shows two things. One is that republican liberty has not always had a universal scope - on the contrary. The other is that it can be successfully radicalized even in opposition to the institutions of the capitalist market economy. This is a claim that should be kept in mind - for it may still be used in the struggles 'for a freedom that is yet to come'.