Review Essay

Exploring domination: Rousseau's Second Discourse and 'wage-slavery'

Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse

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From Slavery to Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century

Alex Gourevitch,

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Although of different genres, both of these engaging and scholarly works represent contributions to republican scholarship. Neuhouser offers a highly systematic and textually sensitive reading of an exceedingly complex work by a canonical republican – albeit one who, given his traditional association with a ‘positive’ ideal of individual liberty (Berlin, 1990), has tended to be downplayed by contemporary ‘neo-roman’ republicans – while Gourevitch seeks to identify a common republican thread in debates over workers’ rights and the socio-economic structure of production. Indeed, these works represent contributions to republican scholarship not merely in the sense that they concern ‘republican’ thinkers, but additionally in that they engage recent work on this school of thought’s central putative good (Pettit, 1997; Lovett, 2010) – a good whose contradictory is most often termed ‘domination’ (although both authors designate this individual circumstance using a range of terms as synonyms, including ‘dependence’ and ‘slavery’ in the case of Gourevitch, and ‘unfreedom’ and ‘servitude’ in the case of Neuhouser). When Neuhouser says that Rousseau’s chief criticism of inequality is that it threatens ‘freedom’ (pp. 168–175), he means that it threatens non-domination, and when Gourevitch claims to identify a tradition of thought, he does so not on the basis that prescriptions converge, but rather, seemingly, on the basis of a common concern for personal independence. Yet I suspect that a more thorough treatment of this concept would have provided both authors with opportunities for even greater insights, a suggestion I return to after surveying each text.

In *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality*, Neuhouser reconstructs the Second Discourse in such a way as to impressively counter common misperceptions concerning this work. The *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* is often criticised on the basis that Rousseau's 'state of nature' – a state not only lacking government, but also property norms, notions of right and wrong, reason, language, and even, to an extreme extent, any human interaction whatsoever – is neither plausible nor desirable. Even were we biologically undispensed to associate with one another, the unlikely prospect that we could meet more than our most basic material needs (at most) without positive assistance or cooperation casts doubt on Rousseau's apparent claim to have identified individual autarky as, at the very least, the starting point in our collective evolution. And the obvious deficiencies of such a state make Rousseau's seeming admiration of it, which contrasts with his aversion to modern society, puzzling at best.

In response to the first of these worries, Neuhouser emphasises two related points. First, Rousseau does not set out to recount, in the Second Discourse, an *actual* history – regardless of what its structure might suggest (pp. 33–37). In other words, the state of nature is not meant to represent human experience at any point in time, and hence concerns about its improbability – given man's sociability and the usefulness of assistance and cooperation – are irrelevant. In contrast – and this is the second point – Rousseau's state of nature is intended as a hypothetical that abstracts from *all* 'artificial' influences (with Rousseau using 'artificial' to designate anything entailed by, or resulting from, 'society' – even those dimensions that are seemingly unavoidable given our pro-social biology and material wants (pp. 53–54)). In contrast to Hobbes and Locke, then, Rousseau does not set out to envisage a society that *merely* lacks government, and the objection that the hyper-individualistic state he depicts would be unlikely even were government absent misses the point.

Of course, Hobbes and Locke are often read – albeit simplistically – as contrasting the state of nature with a state of government in order to establish whether government is *beneficial*. Seen in this light, Rousseau might appear to be resisting – indeed contradicting – the insights of his own method, as it is not difficult for the reader to perceive the relative deficiency of the former despite the corruption of modern society with all its inequalities. How unfulfilling would life be without anything approaching a genuine human relationship! Yet Rousseau's aim, in drawing a contrast between his state of nature and modern society, is not to establish which is preferable. As Neuhouser effectively argues, Rousseau's aim is rather to establish those human dispositions and capabilities that are *immutable* (p. 54). This is necessary, in Rousseau's view, both to (i) determine what counts as good (given the teleological presupposition that our good consists in fulfilling our immutable nature) (pp. 150–163), and (ii) exclude as inapt objects of evaluation those inequalities that necessarily follow from these characteristics of human nature given their corresponding inevitability (pp. 22–23). Thus, Rousseau is not committed to thinking that the state of nature is preferable, no matter how revealingly it serves his methodological purposes.

Indeed, Neuhouser makes clear that Rousseau provides a basis, in the Second Discourse, to recognise the relevant merits of *any* social condition. Hence, even if it's true that Rousseau would indeed opt for the state of nature if forced to choose between that state and the corruption of modern society, it would only be because the state of nature was preferable *on balance*. This is because, while the *dispositions* to see one's own material needs met (*amour de soi-même*) – as well as, subsidiarily, the needs of others (pity) – are, if Rousseau is right, satisfied in the state of nature, the capabilities of perfectibility and free will remain, absent any social intercourse, unfulfilled (pp. 70, 142–143). Yet I think Neuhouser could have flagged more overtly that one does have to read the Second Discourse generously, or take arguments from Rousseau's other works, to vindicate his ultimate preference for a reformed society. On Neuhouser's account, Rousseau's social ideal, which is positively outlined only in *The Social Contract*, is justified on the basis that it secures for individuals the goods of recognition (as an equal) (pp. 144–150; Neuhouser, 2008) and freedom (in the sense of non-domination) (pp. 120, 124–137). Yet the fact that these two are indeed goods cannot be easily inferred from mankind's immutable capacities. Perfectibility and free will would seem to require that humans develop their distinctively human cognitive faculties and exercise genuine choice respectively (pp. 43–51), but *how* those capacities are to be developed and *between which options* choice is to be exercised (and/or to what end) cannot be so easily deduced (pp. 153–160). In this context, it is somewhat unclear why, for example, the desire to see oneself recognised as *superior* to others ('enflamed' *amour propre*, to use Neuhouser's modifier) – the artificial sentiment to which Rousseau famously attributes modern inequalities in wealth, standing, power and authority – is not itself an appropriate development of our faculties and legitimate arbiter, via its distributional impacts, of our options.

In *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, Gourevitch traces a historical trajectory in Western political thought and practice that ultimately encompasses both the ancients and the present day, but whose chief span traverses the nineteenth century. Gourevitch's central claim is that, *contra* Pocock (1975), the last great act of republicanism in North America was not the American Revolution. During the nineteenth century, both labour advocates – in particular those associated with the Knights of Labour – and, to some degree at least, their *laissez-faire* opponents, applied the ideas that the American founders had inherited from their republican forbears to a new domain: the newly industrialised economy and its wage-labour sector. In doing so, they perpetuated the republican tradition, a development that Gourevitch notes has gone unnoticed by scholars of republicanism, given their tendency to focus on the constitutional domain to the exclusion of political economy.

Gourevitch begins *From Slavery* by outlining what he calls the 'paradox of freedom and slavery' (pp. 18–46). The idea here is that, from the perspective of the ancients, as well as their antebellum progenies in the American South (pp. 32–8), personal independence (or 'freedom' as non-domination) and transpersonal equality invariably conflict. For at least some people to be independent requires that some

others be dependent – which, for the ancients, meant being chattel slaves. Subsequent sections of the book then present attempts by nineteenth century American thinkers to show that this tension is an illusion, thus enabling them to avoid having to relinquish or seriously downplay the very American value of independence to maintain their commitment to the very modern value of equality.

Antebellum opponents of chattel slavery – including, notably, Lincoln – argued that a socio-economy of small asset-owning farmers and artisans – with perhaps, some limited wage-labour – would enable all citizens to be ‘free’, and hence that chattel slavery was unnecessary (pp. 38–40). Then, subsequent to the abolition of slavery, and as industrialisation advanced, proponents of *laissez-faire* and their labour opponents came to the fore. The former concurred with Lincoln in a way, but went further, arguing, in the words of William Graham Sumner, that *any* society ‘based on contract is a society of free and independent men, who form ties without favour or obligation, and cooperate without cringing or intrigue’ (p. 53) – even if the majority ended up as wage-labourers. Their opponents vociferously countered this view, however, maintaining that the tension between independence and servitude need not be eliminated by contract. Indeed, at least in the right circumstances, wage-labourers, or people who would standardly become wage-labourers, were themselves dependent (that is, they were *wage-slaves*) (pp. 67–96) – and that independence could only be achieved in a socio-economy composed of collectively owned and operated producer and consumer cooperatives (pp. 97–137).

It is clear then, that pinning down ‘independence’ and ‘dependence’ – or, equivalently, the conditions entailed by being non-dominated or dominated – are crucially to appreciate these claims. What, then, are we to take these terms to mean? Both Gourevitch and Neuhausser gloss the adverse variant of this pairing by saying that to be dominated means to be *subject to a foreign will* (Gourevitch, p. 103; Neuhausser, p. 122). I’m not sure this expression is particularly helpful, however. How is it even *possible* for anyone’s will to govern me but my own, at least outside of cases of physical compulsion? Doesn’t my will still operate even when I decide, for example, to hand over my wallet in response to the threat ‘your money or your life’? Given that it’s clear these authors do not intend domination to be limited to cases of physical compulsion, it might be thought helpful to take the three distinct criticisms of labour advocates that Gourevitch identifies – criticisms which he takes to exemplify three different *instances* or ‘moments’ of domination – and abstract from these.

Workers are *structurally dominated*, on Gourevitch’s reading of his labour activists, when they have no other option – or no other option that would enable them to satisfy their needs – but to sell their labour to an employer (pp. 106–109). Even putting to one side the possibility that labour power is strictly unalienable, there are various ways of construing what is problematic here: perhaps the problem is that persons in such a condition are denied the additional option of satisfying their needs autarkically (by hunting and gathering, farming common land or subsisting on private plots) (p. 108), or of others positively providing for them without their having

to do anything in return (which might be thought valuable in providing an opportunity for genuinely ‘consensual’ cooperation with others subsequently (pp. 106–107)). Or perhaps what is problematic about finding oneself in such a circumstance is that one is denied the additionally opportunity to satisfy one’s needs by providing others with something *other* than one’s labour power – such as one’s productive assets as a capitalist, and/or one’s input to a less hierarchically organised cooperative venture (pp. 108–109).

If it is the first possibility that designates this condition as objectionable, then what Gourevitch calls ‘structural domination’ is an example of a more general condition for which Neuhausser – in contrast to Gourevitch, as well as my usage here – reserves the term ‘dependence’. On Neuhausser’s account, ‘dependence ... refers to a condition in which one relies on the cooperation of others in order to get one’s needs, or what one takes to be one’s needs, satisfied’ (p. 168), and one of Rousseau’s purposes in the Second Discourse is to show that there is nothing immutable about such a condition. Dependence is rather an artifice of society, notably the division of labour (which enfeebles our ability to gather or produce in isolation), inequitable property rights (which deny free access to the external assets necessary to meet our needs by gathering or producing autarkically), and inflamed *amour propre* (which leads us to wrongly believe that we need more than what we could procure for ourselves autarkically).

Workers are *dominated in contract*, in contrast, only when employers *leverage* what Neuhausser called dependence to get workers to agree to work under substandard contractual conditions (pp. 109–111). (Again, this appears to correspond to a more general worry that Neuhausser discusses – see pp. 168–169.) The thought is that workers who are denied the fair and/or full value of their labour are dominated even if they consent to such terms (pp. 82–86, 186–188) – or that such terms, although legitimate if genuinely consented to, cannot be genuinely consented to from a position of structural domination (pp. 106–107). (As an aside, one might even think that, absent genuine consent, a worker is dominated in contract regardless of the substantive terms of their contract.) Thus domination in contract either presupposes structural domination as a likely causal antecedent or as an analytically necessary condition, but structural domination does not presuppose domination in contract: a worker who chooses to die rather than sell his labour power is not dominated in contract no matter how limited his initial options.

Finally, workers are *dominated in the workplace* to the extent that they are under a boss’s command (pp. 111–116). (Presumably, this requires not merely that orders are explicitly or implicitly communicated, but additionally that workers face some kind of pressure to comply with those orders, and actually do so comply.) Although it is possible that a worker might find themselves commanded in contravention of their contract – or without ever having signed a contract – Gourevitch rightly focuses on the more usual case in which employers respect the terms of labour contracts, but those terms themselves grant the employer managerial licence (pp. 113–115). Rather than concretely specifying what the worker must do in each and every possible

circumstance (in which case, one might say that the *contract* commands, rather than the boss), the boss is granted the authority to decide what the worker should do if and when any circumstance in some range actually arises.

As they stand, do these three supposed instances help us pin down 'domination'? To my mind they do not, chiefly because it is difficult to work out what, conceptually, they share in common. The first type appears to be an *unfreedom* in the pure negative sense – specifically in the sense of a conjunctive option denied (Carter, 1999; Kramer, 2003) – while the second appears to identify a form of *treatment*, and the third an interpersonal *relation*. Further, at least on first impression, it would seem that the normative considerations in each instance diverge. Regarding the first type: surely we can at least say that Rousseau was right to think, as Neuhouser reads him, that there is nothing worrisome about depending on the positive cooperation of others *per se*, and, indeed, that achieving important goods *relies* on us being so-dependent (p. 175). And while domination in contract and in the workplace strike one intuitively as more troubling, the former seems to contravene procedural or substantive *fairness* (isn't this 'exploitation'?), while the latter contravenes something like *standing*.

The slippery character of domination is not a problem for comprehending the arguments discussed by Gourevitch, as he does an admirable job of elucidation. It is a problem, though, for his claim to have identified a tradition, and further, a republican tradition. If it is difficult to identify a common thread in the three specific objections offered by labour advocates, how much more difficult would it be to find a common thread uniting them with their *laissez-faire* opponents, particularly given that the latter would seem to be axiomatically committed to rejecting the notion that *any* of these 'moments' constitute 'domination'? In this context, it's tempting to think that labour advocates and their opponents simply used words like 'independence' and 'slavery' to pick out categorically different phenomena, and hence that, absent common reasons, we should stick to classifying them on the basis of their prescriptions.

Having said that, I think that Gourevitch's rich analysis does point to a strand of common reasons, and hence that the suggestion is rather, perhaps, that this strand could have been more explicitly signalled. Unsurprisingly, given the liberal and socialist connotations of the first and second of Gourevitch's instances, this strand concerns the third of these – or, more precisely, its likely impact. This instance is, of course, the relationship of command: an instance that, in fact, Gourevitch admits is most indebted to 'specifically republican thinking' (p. 111). On this account of the republican tradition, the widely divergent perspectives discussed by Gourevitch in fact all shared a commitment to the proposition that citizens must not have servile *characters*, because persons with such characters do not even have the minimal resources to fulfil their public duties. Their only sticking point then – on this front at least – was *empirical*. Proponents of a cooperative commonwealth – and, indeed, small proprietorship (p. 39) – maintained that being under another's command socialised one into servility, whereas *laissez-faire* republicans strictly denied this. Indeed, even many apologists for chattel slavery seem to have concurred with labour

republicans on this point; they just doubted that servile characters could be rehabilitated, or – seeing no loss in the inequity of continuing to deny citizenship to chattel slaves – were prepared to bite the bullet of the ‘paradox of freedom and slavery’.

Indeed, I have a suspicion that this idea of the relationship of command might help to clarify Rousseau’s conception of freedom as non-domination too. In further clarifying this notion, Neuhouser says that, for Rousseau, a person is dominated to the extent that another agent or agents ‘regularly succeeds’ at getting that person to ‘obey’ them (pp. 126–127). Yet, as Neuhouser notes, this might be thought to impugn *any* social cooperation (p. 200) – even cooperation that is standardly one-off (picture trade rather than employment), and/or more importantly, I think, cooperation that is not obviously inequitable in distributive terms. After all, can’t strategically providing another person or persons with a good or service whose receipt they have made clear is required for them to reciprocate *always* be described as their succeeding in getting you to obey them? This is a worry, of course, because Rousseau maintains that his social ideal, which remains a cooperative one given the modern fact of dependence (in Neuhouser’s sense), nevertheless tackles domination. In this context, then, it might be that it is the relationship of command that demarcates those cases of cooperation that are genuinely or particularly troubling from those that are not, and, indeed, seems to be the reason behind the democratic interpretation of Rousseau’s social ideal offered by Neuhouser (pp. 127–128).

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