Adam Smith famously described modern commercial society as the system of “natural liberty.” An important liberty-making feature of this new economic order was the way it dissolved feudal relations of personal servitude. In a well-known passage, Smith describes the historical process by which the aristocracy, entranced by the illusionary advantages of new objects of wealth, unintentionally freed their servants. Merchants selling objects of foreign wealth gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus produce of their lands, and which they could consume themselves without sharing it either with tenants or retainers...For a pair of diamond buckles perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged the maintenance...of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them...they gradually bartered their whole power and authority.¹

Unlike some, Smith did not believe “natural liberty” required absolute independence but rather an intensification and expansion mutual interdependence. As Smith goes

on to explain, the wealthy still indirectly maintain workers by buying the objects the workers are employed to produce. But the prices of those goods, and the labor services that go into them, are determined not by one wealthy individual but by the general level of demand. Smith concludes that, “though he [wealthy former patron] contributes, therefore, to the maintenance of them all, they are all more or less independent of him, because generally they can all be maintained without him.”

For Smith, then, liberty depended on the generalization of the dependence of all those involved: “Each tradesman or artificer derives his subsistence from the employment, not of one, but of a hundred or a thousand different customers. Though in some measure obliged to them all, therefore, he is not absolutely dependent upon any one of them.”

We might as well consider the mutual interdependence of exchange relations as a condition of independence because there is no direct, personal dependence.

The thought I would like to trace in this paper is that the very thing Smith thought commercial society might abolish – personal domination – was reconstituted in a new form. Consider, for instance, the following passage from an anonymous late nineteenth century American critic of industrial relations:

Is there a workshop where obedience is not demanded – not to the difficulties or qualities of the labor to be performed – but to the caprice of he who pays the wages of his servants?

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2 Ibid. III.iv.11
3 Ibid. III.iv.12
4 “Chapters on Labor: Chapter VIII (Continued),” The Journal of United Labor, December 25, 1885, 1153.
It is worth observing that this little piece was written in 1885, during the period usually thought to be the peak of economic liberty in the United States. Importantly, this critic used just the same terms that Smith used to describe feudal relations of domination: direct personal relations of servitude. Nor, as we shall see, was this anonymous critic alone.

I have not chosen Smith as my starting point lightly. I believe that Smith was self-consciously appropriating a republican form of argument, or at least styles of argument familiar from a certain kind of republicanism, in order to defend political and economic relationships that many republicans would have rejected. I can only sketch that point here because I want to move quickly to trace the more general concern about how modern capitalism did not dissolve but rather reconstituted relations of personal dependence and domination. That is to say, I am not interested in somehow criticizing Smith ahistorically for economic developments he could not possibly have foreseen. Rather, I propose to take seriously the standard of liberty he adopted to defend a commercial society. And, more to the point, I want to show in broad contours how seriously many others took that self-same standard as a basis for judging modern capitalism.

Smith and the Discursive Appropriation of Republicanism

We have learned from scholars like Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit to recognize an early modern way of thinking about liberty as the ‘republican’ or ‘neo-
Roman’ view. On this view, to be dependent on another’s will just is a condition of unfreedom, regardless of whether or in what way that person exercises that will. It is the sheer fact that the master can interfere with the servant’s choices in an uncontrolled way that makes that person dominated and therefore a kind of slave. This is the thought lying behind Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous indictment of modern commercial society. The unequal dependence generated by the division of labor and private property produced a fear of domination that, in turn, became a will to dominate (amour propre). In contrast, the economic conditions of a free republic were ones in which “no citizen be so very rich that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is compelled to sell himself.” What matters here is not absolute economic equality, but the elimination of any inequality that can put one individual under another’s will.

As we know, Smith was a close reader of Rousseau. Smith was familiar with the broad line of republican argument that came directly from the Genevan as well as from that Anglo-republican set of views that traveled from the Levellers up through the commonwealthmen. For instance, it has repeatedly been observed that Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments is a response to the challenge that a commercial

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society poses for sociability and morality. Recent commentators have less frequently observed that Smith's political economy is also a kind of internal response to and appropriation of republican lines of thought.

For instance, when describing the “wages of labour,” Smith introduces the labor theory of value, but only to identify it with an original, primitive condition of independence, immediately recognizable as a kind of republican ideal: “In that original state of things, which precedes both the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock, the whole produce of labour belongs to the labourer. He has neither landlord nor master to share with him.” Importantly, though, the labor theory of value does not explain prices in a modern commercial society. In those, class differentiated societies, “When the price of any commodity is neither more nor less than what is sufficient to pay the rent of the land, the wages of the labour, and the profits of the stock...according to their natural rates, the commodity is then sold for what may be called its natural price.” Price is here a composite of wages, profits and rents, not determined directly by the labor required to produce it.

Although the details of Smith’s economic argument here are complex and debated, it is fair to make one specific point. The labor theory of value is part of the moral economy of a republican society, in which each independent proprietor controls the full value of what he produces. The political economy of a commercial society is rather different and, from one perspective, appears unfair because the

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9 Smith Wealth of Nations I.viii.2.
10 Ibid. I.vii.4.
worker does not control the full value of the commodity he participates in producing. This might make it appear as some republican critics thought: based on force and fraud, rather than on freedom and fair exchange. After all, the major portion of that commodity's value comprises profits on capital and rent on land. However, it was important to Smith that, under normal, long-run conditions, the natural price of the commodity was equal to the natural price of the land, labor, and capital that went into producing it. Those natural prices just are the (long-run) values of the wages, profits and rents. And – this being the crucial turn – the value represented in those wages amounts to a claim on more of others' labor and therefore more goods than the value of the goods that a republican citizen might control as a self-sufficient proprietor. The modern laborer controls more of other's labor in a commercial society than he controls of his own labor in a republican one. And this claim is reciprocal. In other words, the seemingly narrow and technical analysis of natural prices and the comparison with a society in which producers control the full value of their product, is, at least in part, an intricate defense of commercial interdependence against the moral economy of a free labor republicanism.

The passage with which I began this paper can therefore be read as a complement to the theory of wages and prices just outlined. Both are a defense of the extensive interdependence of a commercial society in direct contrast to the image of a free republican producer. The analysis of the commodity shows that modern commerce potentially provides the workers with higher standards of
living while the passage on the producer's independence is meant to suggest that this relative improvement in well-being comes at no significant sacrifice of personal liberty. Commercial interdependence was consistent with and even promoted economic independence. This, in broad outlines, is the sense in which Smith sought to defeat a republican critique of commercial society by appropriating the language of independence.

**Slavery, wage-labor and the agrarian solution**

If we move a little ahead in time, and across the Atlantic, we find very similar concerns reappearing in the contest over slavery and the status of wage-labor. It was evident to everyone that the slave was unfree. But it was unclear which forms of non-slave labor left the worker without a master. Consider the following episode.

On January 1, 1831, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of *The Liberator*, which opened with his epoch-making demand for the

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11 It is important to note that Smith was worried workers would nevertheless get a raw deal because they had more trouble organizing for their interests, employers were constantly in tacit combinations against workers, and because merchants found it easier to pursue their class interests politically than either workers or landed proprietors. Consider, for instance, statements like “it is not, however, difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in the dispute, and force the other into a compliance with their terms… In all such disputes the masters can hold out much longer… Many workmen could not subsist a week, few could subsist a month, and scarce any a year without employment. In the long-run the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him, but the necessity is not so immediate.” As Smith further argued, “Masters are always and every where in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination.” In a world in which economic necessity couples with employer collusion, workers have little choice: “Such combinations [by employers], however, are frequently resisted by a contrary defensive combination of the workmen; who sometimes too, without any provocation of this kind, combine of their own accord to raise the price of their labour.” All of these quotations are from I.viii.12. Some have taken these statements by Smith to suggest he was a radical egalitarian would have sanctioned dramatic redistribution. I am doubtful that this fits with other aspects of Smith’s view, but it clearly has some textual foundation. For the redistributive reading of Smith, see Deborah Boucoyannis, “The Equalizing Hand: Why Adam Smith Thought the Market Should Produce Wealth Without Steep Inequality,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 11:4, 2013, 1051-1070.
“immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.”\(^\text{12}\) A reader who made it to page three of the inaugural issue would have discovered an editorial entitled “WORKING MEN,” in which he attacked the attempt to “inflame the minds of our working classes against the more opulent... to array them under a party banner; for it is not true, that, at any time, they have been objects of reproach.”\(^\text{13}\) Garrison was not wasting his time on side-questions regarding northern labor relations. Just as militant abolitionists were making the immediate eradication of Southern slavery their celebrated cause, workers across the country were forming “workingmen’s parties,” aimed at criticizing industrial “wage-slavery.”\(^\text{14}\) Garrison found them threatening because they too spoke the language of slavery. For some years they had been using epithets like “bondage” and “oppression” to criticize the way northern workers were “consigned over to eternal toil and never-ending slavery.”\(^\text{15}\) Garrison was anxious to police discursive boundaries, especially when it came to the language of freedom, so as not to dilute or distract from his cause.

Later that January, a certain ‘W’ took exception to Garrison’s ‘working men’ editorial:

there is a very intimate connexion between the interests of the workingmen’s party and your own. You are striving to excite the attention of your countrymen to the injustice of holding their fellow men in bondage, and

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\(^{14}\) I discuss these workingmen’s parties in Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Chapter 3.  
depriving them of the fruits of their toil. We are aiming at a similar object, only in application to another portion of our fellow men.\(^\text{16}\)

'W' put the slavery of the workingmen in decidedly republican terms, "those working classes, which, though nominally free, still are in Europe and America, to a great extent, dependant [sic] on the power and will of the wealthy, educated and exalted."\(^\text{17}\) A worker "dependant on the power and will" of another was the republican definition of a slave.

Garrison quickly and vigorously rejected W's assertion that workingmen were unfree, going so far as to blame them for their poverty: "where the avenues to wealth, distinction and supremacy are open to all; it must, in the nature of things, be full of inequalities... If our mechanics do not retain their due proportion of power and influence, theirs is the fault."\(^\text{18}\) Though over time Garrison would come to accept that there might be some injustice that poor workers faced, he consistently rejected that this injustice could be considered in any way servitude. Wage-labor was free labor because it was based in a voluntary contract. If free, then workers were as much to blame for their condition as anyone else.\(^\text{19}\)

Garrison was not alone. For many leading abolitionists, this voluntaristic conception of freedom stood in opposition to the republican view, in part because of its ability to recognize the special evil of chattel slavery. For instance, William Jay,

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{19}\) In arguing for the working men’s responsibility for their own condition, Garrison pointed to their penchant for alcohol and the theater rather than temperance and prudence. e.g. Garrison, “The Working Classes;” “Wants of the Working Men,” The Liberator 1, no. 8 (February 19, 1831).
drafter of the constitution of the American Antislavery Society, described the prospects for an emancipated slave in the following terms:

He is free, and his own master, and he can ask for no more. Yet he is, in fact, for a time, absolutely dependent on his late owner. He can look to no other person for food to eat, clothes to put on, or house to shelter him. His first wish therefore is, to remain where he is, and he receives as a favor, permission to labor in the service of him whom the day before he regarded as his oppressor. But labor is no longer the badge of his servitude, and the consummation of his misery: it is the evidence of his liberty, for it is voluntary. For the first time in his life, he is a party to a contract.20

In clear and vivid contrast to republican critics of wage-slavery, Jay thought economic dependence, even (somewhat atypically) “absolute dependence,” was not unfreedom. Legal self-ownership was enough to guarantee the individual’s freedom, a freedom the slave would immediately value.21

This early contrast between abolitionist and republican perspectives on free labor set the tone for decades to come. Though the workingmen’s parties faded from the scene, the arguments over wage-slavery did not. It remained a thorn in the side of abolitionists who attempted to police the language of freedom so that only the chattel slave could be considered a true slave. This conflict reproduced at the level of thought the tensions between working class critics of slavery and the

abolitionists. In the 1840s and 50s the National Reform Association (NRA) demanded breaking up of land monopolies and distribution of land to all citizens to eliminate “wage-slavery,” reigniting an intellectual battle that ranged across *The Liberator* and the NRA’s *Young America*. The editor of *Young America*, George Henry Evans, made sure that its pages ardently and repeatedly promoted the argument that propertyless wage-laborers were slaves. The landless worker “must ask leave to live... he is liable to be driven away at the will of another—at the caprice of avarice, selfishness, pride, or unbridled power.” Another National Reformer argued in 1845 that wage-workers are, “hemmed in and made dependent on the non-producing classes...[an employer] can purchase the bones and sinews of the working men, and the laborers are practically dependent upon him.” Nearly every issue deployed the familiar republican language of economic dependence and employer “caprice” to argue that landless workers experienced a servitude as bad or even worse than the chattel slave.

Prominent abolitionists like Garrison and Wendell Phillips were quick to attack Evans and his fellow Reformers. In September, 1846, *The Liberator* reprinted a debate between Phillips and Evans from *Young America*, prefacing it with an editorial from Garrison saying “who either cannot discern, or willingly attempts to

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23 The best intellectual and political history of the National Reform Association is Mark Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

24 “From the New England Farmer,” *Young America* 2, no. 14 (June 28, 1845).

25 “Great Mass Meeting of the Working Classes at National Health: Comments of Alvin Bovay,” *Young America* 2, no. 12 (June 14, 1845).
confound, the distinction between Slavery and Poverty...shows ignorance of the first elements of natural morality.”²⁶ Poverty was bad, but it was not slavery. Phillips’ abolitionist remarks then followed, expressing some sympathy for the free poor, but also rejecting their republicanism. Phillips claimed that Evans was on the way to “sacrificing the rights of one race in the vain hope of more easily securing those of another.”²⁷ In response, Evans reasserted the validity of the concept “wages slavery” on the grounds that landless workers were subject to the will of their employers. Only land redistribution could guarantee true freedom for chattel and wage-slave alike: “The National Reform measures would not merely substitute one form of slavery for another, but would replace every form of slavery by entire freedom.”²⁸ Abolitionist and land reformer continued to spar throughout the decade. I have, of course, simplified this history considerably, but we can the basic outlines of the debate over a society based not just on free exchange of goods but of labor itself. As with Smith, we see that a central question was whether a commercial society truly eliminated the personal dependence of the typical worker, and we find a familiar property-owning, agrarian republicanism presented as the competing vision.

The temporary and ambiguous fusion of these two positions appears in a well-known speech by Abraham Lincoln, given in 1859 to a gathering of Wisconsin farmers. In it, Lincoln defends labor from the view, presented on the floor of the Senate the year before by pro-slavery Senator Henry Hammond, that workers should be seen as an undignified “mud-sill” who create the conditions for the

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²⁶ “Wendell Phillips and ‘Young America’,” The Liberator 16, no. 36 (September 4, 1846), 143.
²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ Ibid.
leisured class to enjoy culture. Lincoln, having endorsed the view that there is dignity in work, then gives his famous description of free labor: “the prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while...[This] is free labor.” It is clear on this account that free labor is more than just a condition of self-ownership. The crucial contrast here is not chattel slavery but “working for wages awhile.” Wage-labor is consistent with a free republic so long as it remains a temporary condition, from which everyone in principle can escape, and so long as everyone understands the truly free laborer is fully independent: a proprietor of land or materials who controls his own activity. The point to note here is not just the persistence of a republican anxiety about wage-labor but also the predominantly agrarian character of its alternative conception of economic liberty.

**Labor republicanism and liberty in an industrial society**

The story so far is probably familiar to some. It is well-known that the agrarian republican ideal remained popular through the nineteenth century. We can even find vestiges of it today. However, there is a further and less familiar chapter to this story. This is the move from a criticism of the condition of dependence associated with general, commercial exchange to a more specific critique of the forms of personal dependence arising in the modern workplace. Though I focus here

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on the American experience we find similar intellectual tendencies in other
industrial countries of the period. In other work I have followed a convention of
calling this thought-tendency “labor republicanism.” One of its distinguishing
features was to deepen the older republican argument about the dependence of
propertyless workers on employers. The latter tended to criticize the broad
dependence of workers on employers for forcing workers to make ‘unfair’ labor
contracts. The distinguishing move of labor republicanism was to deepen that view
by pushing the critique of servitude into the modern workplace itself. The problem
with the labor contract was not just its terms but with the very personal relations of
power and authority that it brought into being on the shop floor.

This labor republicanism was the intellectual product of a group of reformers
from the late 1860s to mid 1890s whose main project was the use of the republican
theory of liberty to argue that wage-labor was a form of servitude. These ideas were
most commonly found around a political organization of skilled and unskilled
workers known as the Knights of Labor who, in their heyday in the mid-1880s,
claimed nearly a million supporters. That they worked with a republican theory of
liberty is undisputable. For instance, on the front page of the June 1882 issue of the
*Journal of United Labor*, the Knights’ national journal, one finds the following
definition of slavery:

**SLAVERY.**—The weight of chains, number of stripes, hardness of labor, and other
effects of a master’s cruelty, may make one servitude more miserable than
another; but he is a slave who serves the gentlest man in the world, as well as he

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31 Gourevitch *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* Chapter 4.
who serves the worst; and he does serve him if he must obey his commands and depend upon his will.\textsuperscript{32}

As it turns out, this definition is taken directly from Algernon Sidney’s \textit{Discourse on Government},\textsuperscript{33} and it rings with all the familiar claims that servitude can take many forms but is always unfreedom. This is but one example. However, we can find the equation of servitude with domination \textit{throughout} labor republican writings, pamphlets, and speeches. For instance, in the \textit{Labor Leaf}, the Knights’ local Detroit paper, we find this definition of slavery:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“What is it to be a Slave?... It is to be a person consciously capable of self-government, and to be, at the same time, subject to the will of another person.”}\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

These are the telltale features of the republican complaint. What matters is that a potentially self-governing person is subject to the uncontrolled power of another. Whether that dominating power is exercised benevolently or malevolently is a secondary matter. It is the very fact of subjection that the author strikes at.

From the standpoint of this theory of liberty, the modern workplace was not much more than a modern despotism. While labor republicans recognized the enormous advance made by the abolition of chattel slavery, they saw wage-labor as a way of forcing property workers to make contracts the central feature of which was to subordinate workers to the will of their employers. Here are just a few examples of this worry

\textsuperscript{32} “Slavery,” \textit{The Journal of United Labor} 3, no. 2 (June 1882), 248.
\textsuperscript{34} “What is it to be a slave?” \textit{Labor Leaf}, September 30, 1885.
The land, the tools and materials of labor are still the exclusive property of the privileged few, and the worker cannot produce without giving himself a boss or master. It must not be supposed that the proclamation of emancipation liberated mankind from slavery. The most odious, because the most subtle form of slavery—wages slavery—remains to be abolished.35

“Labor is inseparably bound up with the laborer... This purchase of labor gives control over the laborer—his physical intellectual, social and moral existence. The conditions of the contract determine the degree of this rulership.”36

Liberty consists in being able to satisfy all one’s wants, to develop all one’s faculties, without in any way depending upon the caprice of one’s fellow-beings, which is impossible if man cannot produce upon his own responsibility. So long as the workman works for a boss, a master, he is not free. ‘You must obey,’ the master will say, ‘for since I assume the responsibility of the undertaking, I alone have the right to its direction.’37

the degrading influence of the wages-slavery system... To be dependent upon an employer who frequently merits disdain and inspires disgust, and yet be compelled to execute his commands and submit to his caprice; to have no thought

but that which is filtered through the brain – less powerful than his own – of a boss, an employer, a master.  

Note the use of familiar republican rhetorical tropes, like “depending on the caprice” or “submit to his caprice” and linked to conceptual trains like “a boss, an employer, a master.” Here we have the Smithian overlords and their servants but this time as an industrial nightmare, not an aristocratic tragedy. This was a relationship of dependence constituted and maintained by a commercial society via its signature institution: the voluntary contract.

It should be noted that the complaint here was at once legal and more than legal. The legal dimension was straightforward. As a matter of law, the employer enjoyed enormous discretionary power over the terms of employment: hiring and firing, plant location, work rates and workplace conditions, production decisions and schedules, and so on. This arbitrary authority was constituted and sanctioned by the contract. As one of the passages above notes, “the worker cannot produce without giving himself a boss or master.” That was no random description: to make a labor contract just was, as a matter of law, to end up someone with large swaths of legal power over you. That is to say, the contract is a voluntary act, but it is an act by which one voluntary alienates a mass of authority over one’s own activity.

But this was not just a legal complaint, it was also about the social culture and material facts of a commercial society. Note, for instance, that a further grievance was about the cultural expectation of subjection that came with the labor contract: “‘You must

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38 “‘Industrial Ideas Chapter VI,’” *Journal of United Labor* VII, no. 10 (October 25, 1886), 2169–2170.
obey,’ the master will say, ‘for since I assume the responsibility of the undertaking, I alone have the right to its direction.’”39 The form of sociability associated with modern work belied the otherwise egalitarian ethos that was supposed to characterize the free exchange of commodities. This was, as another labor republican noted, because in the case of labor, the contract made a person appear like a thing to the employer, while the laborer continued to conceive of himself as a self-governing subject. These two views were incompatible, and prevailing norms favored the employer:

Labor is activity of the various mental and physical powers which are inseparably connected with the person who sells it. A sale of labor is a transfer of the use of this bodily and mental activity during the hours of labor, and consequently a dominion over it during that time.40

Given the nature of the contract, it was natural for an employer to relate to the worker’s body as a thing to be commanded, and to relate to the worker’s will as something to be subsumed under the employer’s. In this instance, said these labor republicans, commercial exchanges only served to reinforce the habits and attitudes of domination, rather than erode them.

What is more, the material facts of poverty and inequality only reinforced the legal authority and cultural standing of the employer. As Ira Steward, one of the most important labor republicans, noted, the poverty of most laborers forced them into these contracts in the first place: “It is their poverty, destitution, and consequent dependence that compel them, every day of their lives, to make the best terms possible with those

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40 “Review of Cherouny,” John Swinton's Paper 2, no. 87 (June 7, 1885).
who hold in their possession the surplus wealth of the world.” Poverty here stood not just for absolute indigence but for the lack of any reasonable alternative to finding an employer. Workers were forced to make labor contracts. These contracts were therefore voluntary but not free. As George McNeill, a leading labor journalist and member of the Knights, put it, the workers “assent but they do not consent, they submit but do not agree.” Or, as one ‘Meddlesome’ put it, “freedom of contract is not free, but only seeming free.”

To summarize, then, for labor republicans the workplace was a site of republican domination not economic freedom. It was a domain in which some individuals were directly subject to the arbitrary power of a specific individual, his or her employer. This power included the legal authority to make a wide range of decisions, coupled with the de facto cultural and economic power to make other decisions even outside the scope of his legal authority. Workers were forced into these relationships by their lack of economic alternatives. The consequence was that a commercial society, based on free exchange, had in fact served not to dissolve but produce legal and normative sanction to the creation of extensive conditions of personal dependence.

The further step was to argue that employers tended to use this power in an exploitative fashion, to earn outsized profits, keep workers from earning even reasonable wages, and sometimes to engage in simply arbitrary abuse. But, notably, that was only part of the complaint. Of equal concern was that regardless of how this dominating power was exercised it was in itself wrong, an offense to the liberty they all deserved.

42 Quoted in Oestreicher, "Terence V. Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," 42.
Where labor republicans then finally departed from their agrarian forbearers was in their solution. They rejected, on the whole, the hope of petty proprietorship, instead turning to collective solutions. Ira Steward argued that “a republicanization of labor, as well as a republicanization of government,”\(^\text{44}\) required the formation of worker and producer cooperatives. The Declaration of Principles of the Knights of Labor included the demand “to abolish as rapidly as possible, the wage system, substituting co-operation therefore.”\(^\text{45}\) This was a way of recovering the independence that all deserved, but collectively, in an industrial setting, without rejecting the benefits of wealth and human productivity.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to trace, all too quickly, the rise and fall of an economic promise. There was a Smithian hope, that independence could be won in and through a commercial society, rather than by rejecting it outright or by taking the oath of agrarian republican poverty. This hope ran aground against the realities of the labor market and, more specifically, in the depths of the modern workplace. Though a story now more than a hundred years old, it is with us all the same. Employers still enjoy a wide range of managerial prerogatives and arbitrary powers, from the ability to force employees to engage in employer-preferred political activities to sudden changes in work hours and production speeds,\(^\text{46}\) from the authority to fire employees for their political views or

\(^{44}\) Steward, "Poverty," 434.


sexual orientation to, in some cases, the power to force employees into certain religious practices or uses of their recreational time.\textsuperscript{47} It remains a question why the human epoch that has so fully celebrated the idea of economic liberty finds so much domination and dependence in that same economic sphere.