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Document Version

Final published version

Published in:

Theoria: A Journal for Social and Political Theory

DOI:

[10.3167/th.2022.6917106](https://doi.org/10.3167/th.2022.6917106)

Publication date:

2022

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Citation for published version (APA):

Mulvad, A. M., & Popp-Madsen, B. A. (2022). From Neo-republicanism to Socialist Republicanism: Antonio Gramsci, the European Council Movements and the 'Second Republican Revival'. *Theoria: A Journal for Social and Political Theory*, 69(171), 97-118. <https://doi.org/10.3167/th.2022.6917106>

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From Neo-Republicanism to Socialist Republicanism

Antonio Gramsci, the European Council Movements and the ‘Second Republican Revival’

Andreas Møller Mulvad and Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen

Abstract: This article engages with socialist republicanism, which is preoccupied with extending freedom as non-domination, central to the neo-republican revival, from the political sphere of formal democracy to the economic sphere of capitalist production. Firstly, we discuss the transition from neo-republicanism to socialist republicanism. Secondly, we reconstruct the socialist republicanism of Antonio Gramsci, who was involved in the council movements in Turin in 1919–20. We argue that Gramsci applies the republican vocabulary of servitude to describe the capitalist workplace and analyse the workers’ councils as republican forms, allowing for popular self-determination in the economic sphere. Consequently, we contribute to the ongoing exploration of the historical, political, and conceptual affinities between republicanism and socialism and inscribe Gramsci as a key thinker in this endeavour.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci, non-domination, republicanism, socialism, workers’ councils

If democracy is justified in governing the state, then it is also justified in governing economic interests. What is more, if it cannot be justified in governing economic enterprises, we do not quite see how it can be justified in governing the state.

– Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy*



The democratic ideas of freedom, equality, and self-government are realized only when . . . the self-government of the people finds its basis in the self-government of workers in a republican economy.

– Otto Bamuer, *Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen?*, p. 199.

The opening epigraph is provided by the famous American political scientist Robert Dahl. Dahl was by no means a socialist, but as a professor in democratic theory at Yale University, the distinction between a public-political sphere in which citizens enjoy equal civil and political rights and a private-economic sphere in which employers direct their employees, who in turn have few possibilities for influencing their work, proved a logical and moral question. Why is that equality, rights, and participation is taken as the *sine qua non* in the political domain of society, whereas in the economic domain, inequality and hierarchy are perceived as natural conditions? Who draws the demarcation line between the public realm of freedom and equality and the private realm of hierarchy and domination, and on what grounds? If democracy is the all-important principle of our political systems, why not expand it to economic enterprises?

The second epigraph by the Austrian socialist Otto Bauer, who briefly held the office of Foreign Minister in Austria in 1918–19, as socialist movements had been instrumental in the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the First World War, expresses a similar belief, but in a conceptual vocabulary, which this article will seek to elucidate and expand. According to Bauer, the ‘democratic idea’ of the ‘self-government of the people’ can only be realised through the workers’ self-government in a republican economy. What is a republican economy? As a conceptual term and historical experience, republicanism is most often associated with forms of political government freed from monarchical elements and with some degree of popular involvement, most often through mechanisms of representation (Pettit 1997). What does it mean to extend this form of political government to the economy?

These questions have recently nurtured many different research agendas in political theory, comparative politics and intellectual history, and debates on the democratisation of the economy has seen a revival post-2008, marking an increased problematisation of neoliberalism. Some researchers have explored the ‘firm-state

analogy', whereby the basic organisational comparability of firms and states is demonstrated (González-Ricoy 2014; Landemore and Ferreras 2015), other researchers have argued for the normative justification of workplace democracy and new forms of cooperative ownership (Anderson 2017; Breen 2015; Hsieh 2005), while intellectual historians have re-invigorated the idea of economic democracy (Currarino 2011; Kärnylä 2021). The workplace, as it was once argued, is no longer a 'forgotten topic of democratic theory' (Ellerman 2009).

In this article, we shall engage with a contemporary strain of political theory: *socialist republicanism*, which is preoccupied with extending practices of democracy, cooperatism as well as the idea of freedom as non-domination, made highly influential by the neo-republican revival some thirty years ago, from the political sphere of formal democracy to the economic sphere of capitalist production. We are certainly not alone in this ambition, as scholars have recently demonstrated the historical and conceptual affinities between republicanism and socialism (Muldoon 2019; O'Shea 2019), between republicanism and resistance to oligarchy (Vergara 2020), between republicanism, Karl Marx and Marxism (Gourevitch 2014; Leipold 2020), between republicanism and 'the left' (Kouris 2020; White 2007), and between republicanism and the tradition of council democracy (Muldoon 2020; Thompson 2018).

This article, hence, contributes to an ongoing debate by focusing on two specific elements. Firstly, we discuss the transition from neo-republicanism to socialist republicanism, as we introduce the idea of a 'second republican revival'. Secondly, we reconstruct the socialist republicanism of the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci, who was briefly involved in the socialist council movement in Turin in 1919–20 – during Italy's so-called *biennio rosso*. He later became an influential Marxist and died in prison, sentenced there by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. We do not claim that Gramsci represents a distinct branch of socialist republicanism; the ambition is instead to augment the ongoing 'second republican revival' by adding a socialist republican reconstruction of Gramsci's thought to the already existing analyses of key socialist intellectuals and activists of the early twentieth century, such as Karl Kautsky (Muldoon 2020: 99–130), and Rosa Luxemburg (Vergara 2020: 168–183) as well as Karl Marx (Leipold 2020: 172–193).

The article proceeds in the following manner: Firstly, we introduce the idea of a ‘second republican revival’ by documenting the turn from neo-republicanism to socialist republicanism, by stipulating the way contemporary proponents of socialist republicanism argue for the feasibility of the neo-republican idea of freedom as non-domination as a viable critique of capitalism and a well-suited starting point for what Bauer called a ‘republican economy’. Secondly, we introduce the historical context for Gramsci’s political thinking by turning to the European council movements during and after the First World War, where workers’ councils acted as key actors in the Russian, German, and Hungarian Revolutions. Thirdly and lastly, we reconstruct Gramsci’s thinking by focusing especially on his ‘pre-prison’ writings, which are more practical and political than the philosophical *Prison Notebooks*, and where Gramsci sought to establish the political, conceptual, and historical links between the Russian *soviets* and the Italian factory councils that appeared during the *biennio rosso* in 1919–20.

The ‘Second Republican Revival’: From Neo-Republicanism to Socialist Republicanism

Socialist republicanism, or what is otherwise named labour republicanism (Gourevitch 2014), radical republicanism (Leipold et al. 2020) or plebeian republicanism (Vergara 2020), is a product of what we call the ongoing ‘second republican revival’, which extends the insights from the highly influential neo-republican research programme inaugurated by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner thirty years ago from the political sphere and into the economic sphere. To elucidate this ‘second revival’, we need to situate socialist republicanism within the broader landscape of republican political theory.

Republicanism is an ancient political philosophy, originating from the political system of the Roman Republic. Its mixed constitution and vehement conflict with monarchy informed Renaissance city states and political thinking and influenced English seventeenth-century revolutionaries and political philosophers like Algernon Sidney and James Harrington. In addition, republicanism also influenced the French and American confrontations with

monarchy and colonialism (Honohan 2002) by criticising the denigration of the common good and civil liberty by the arbitrary power of royal and colonial overlords. The overarching political principle of the republican tradition is that of freedom – that is, to be a free human being, a citizen, is to live in a free state, where power is not exercised arbitrarily (Hammersley 2020).

Neo-republicans refer to an idea of freedom as non-domination. Through a meticulous reconstruction of the republican tradition from ancient Rome to modernity, and focusing especially on the political thought of Machiavelli, Quentin Skinner has famously argued – in what could be called the ‘first republican revival’ – that beyond the two concepts of liberty compared in Isaiah Berlin famous essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1958), that is, negative liberty as non-interference and positive liberty as self-realisation, a third republican concept of liberty could be excavated from centuries of republican thinking (Skinner 1998; Pettit 1997). While the liberal notion of negative freedom as non-interference argues that people are simply unfree to the degree that someone (a public power, a feudal lord, or a monarch) directly interferes with their actions, the republican concept of negative freedom as non-domination claims that citizens are only free when they are not subject to the arbitrary power of a master.

The vital distinction between interference and domination is sometimes clarified with reference to slavery. In the liberal account, a slave is claimed to be free to the degree that he has a benevolent slaveowner, who never directly interferes with his movements. Consequently, the liberal concept of freedom has disjointed the question of freedom from the question of the form of government. Citizens can theoretically experience the same amount of freedom in a tyranny as in a democracy – it depends on the concrete extent of interference from the state or the tyrant. According to the republican account of freedom as non-domination, however, the slave would never be free, even living under the most benevolent of slaveowners, as the slaveowner always has the possibility to hypothetically intervene arbitrarily in the slave’s life. The mere possibility of arbitrary intervention would reduce the slave to an unfree life in the republican account. As maintained by Skinner (2008: 86), ‘the master’s power is said to be arbitrary in the sense that it is always open to him to govern his slaves, with impunity, according to his

mere *arbitrium*, his own will, and desires'. Consequently, neo-republicans have joined together freedom and form of government, as citizens are only free in a free state; that is, when the citizenry has political channels of participation, influence, and representation, hereby rendering the domination and interference existing in every polity unarbitrary (Pettit 2013: 187–238).

This republican idea of freedom as non-domination has been incredibly successful in pointing to various domains of political and social life where arbitrary domination exists and could thus be understood as domains of unfreedom. But in some ways, the idea that socialists have and should embrace the republican tradition and its concept of freedom as non-domination might sound peculiar. The republican tradition has often been labelled aristocratic, and the freedom enjoyed by male citizens during the Roman Republic, and all the way to the foundation of the American Republic has often come at the cost of the subjugation of slaves and women (Gourevitch 2014; McCormick 2018). Beyond the aristocratic heritage of republicanism, political theorists and intellectual historians have argued that a popular, plebeian and radical tradition of republicanism can be identified, emanating originally with the political practices and constitutional offices of the Roman plebs (McCormick 2011), re-articulated by Machiavelli (Lefort 2012; Vergara 2020) and re-emerging with the French Revolution (Breugh 2013; von Eggers 2016) as well as with the Paris Commune (Breugh 2013; Leipold, 2020). The central claim of the 'second republican revival', hence, is that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialism is the inheritor of a non-aristocratic, popular tradition of republicanism.

Socialist republicanism, accordingly, emerges as an extension of republican freedom into the economic realm, to relations in the workplace and as a critique of capitalism itself. The 'second republican revival' – as phrased in the introduction to a newly published, edited volume on the subject – 'seek to extend the concept's [i.e., freedom as non-domination] application from political domination (historically the main focus of republicanism) to social and private forms of domination' (Leipold et al. 2020: 2). Whilst neo-republicanism has been interested in relations of domination and dependency in the political realm, it has often stopped short of investigating and criticising such relations in the economic sphere – to

such a degree that the workplace has been deemed ‘a forgotten topic in democratic theory’ (Ellerman 2009). This is where the opening epigraphs by such different figures as the American Ivy League professor Robert Dahl and the Austrian Marxist Otto Bauer become relevant: If living under arbitrary power has detrimental effects on freedom, arbitrary power in all social domains must come under scrutiny and critique. As also highlighted by Nancy Fraser (2014: 64), a ‘division that is constitutive of capitalist society’, and reified ideologically by liberalism, we might add, is ‘that between polity and economy’. Such a constitutive division is part of the explanation why one crucial site of arbitrary domination in contemporary Western societies is the workplace, where conditions of inequality, hierarchy and domination are taken as natural conditions, even though such relations have long been formally abandoned in the political sphere (Anderson 2017). Neo-republicanism’s ‘blind spot’¹ towards economic relations of domination and unfreedom testify to the fact that many republican thinkers incorporated in Skinner’s and Pettit’s genealogy of republicanism (thinkers like Aristotle, Cicero, Rousseau, Madison, Tocqueville) often displayed an aristocratic or elitist attitude, whereby constitutional design ought to tamper the passions of the plebs and the popular classes. In short, while republicanism is a staunch critic of monarchy and arbitrary power, it is not inherently democratic, or at least not inherently in favour of a popular understanding of democracy. Socialist republicanism, instead, holds that freedom as non-domination is, firstly, an adequate concept of freedom to combat contemporary relations of domination and exploitation (Anderson 2017; O’Shea 2019); secondly, this concept of freedom has actually animated working-class struggle since the emergence of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Domènech 2004).

Socialist republicanism hinges on the idea that wage labour in a capitalist society is a form of wage slavery. In privately owned, capitalist corporations, workers are exposed to the arbitrary domination of managers and superiors without the right to participation (Hsieh 2005), and such domination is structural, as workers deprived of productive assets might reject one workplace, but such workers cannot refrain from selling their labour power if they seek to uphold their livelihood (Anderson 2017; Fraser 2014: 57; Wood 2002). Capitalism, as seen through the eyes of a socialist republican,

is consequently a modern form of slavery, as ordinary workers, in their attempt to survive, live under the arbitrary will of their managers. Such argument was aptly phrased by the nineteenth-century American trade unionist Georg E. McNiell, who argued that ‘there is an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labour and the republican system of government’, and that it was thus essential ‘to engraft republican principles into our industrial system’ (McNiell in Gourevitch 2014: 6, 116). Distinctive methods to ‘engraft republican principles into our industrial system’ have been investigated by current socialist republicans stemming from ‘workplace constitutionalism’ (i.e., state regulation), ‘workplace democracy’ (i.e., giving employees formal influence in the corporation), and forms of cooperative ownership (i.e., worker co-ownership and co-direction of the business) (Leipold et al. 2020: 10–14).

Gramsci’s European Context: A Brief Overview of the Interwar Council Movements

To situate the reconstruction of Gramsci’s socialist republicanism in historical context, it is necessary to introduce the European council movements as they appeared from 1917–1921. After the Russian Revolution, workers’ councils emerged across multiple European countries. Countries across Europe developed comparable organs of economic self-management, and workers’ control such as the Russian *soviets*, the German *arbeiterräte*, the British factory committees, and the Italian *commissioni interne*. Moreover, the council movements were a vital force in the dissolution of the large empires of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, and would be the leading actor in creating revolutionary transformations (Anweiler 1974; Carsten 1972; Gombin 1978). Even though the council systems across Europe seldom existed more than a couple of months,² a rather similar institutional structure emerged across countries. Firstly, the workers’ councils operated as self-managing institutions, taking decisions on several questions (factory councils on economic production and organisation of the workflow, army regiments on political and military support to the revolutionary movements, neighbourhood councils on food supply and infrastructure in local districts). Secondly, the councils chose their own delegates

from the factory shop floor, the neighbourhood, the army regiment to represent them in municipal, regional, and national councils. Thirdly, the relation between the local councils and the central council was often structured by instant recall and imperative mandate. These mechanisms of instruction, delegation, and recall, which also in some form or another were established in clubs and popular societies during the French Revolution, and in the Paris Commune, were instruments through which the local councils could retain power at the bottom of the federal council systems (Tomba 2015).

In Italy, which was Gramsci's immediate political-historical 'raw-material' for his socialist republicanism, factory councils appeared in many northern cities during the *biennio rosso* in 1919–20, most forcefully in Turin, Milan, and Genoa. The *biennio rosso* was characterised by intense social conflict due to the economic crisis after the First World War. As a result, the entire associative network on the Italian Left – trade unions, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), the anarchist movement and syndicalist groups – experienced popular support. In this political environment, especially influenced by the strong Italian anarcho-syndicalist movement associated with Errico Malatesta, workers in the Fiat automobile plants around Turin in particular began to occupy the factories and established internal councils that ran the factories and established links to councils of other factories. In the weeks after the establishment of the first factory council, councils were created across whole industries, quickly representing approximately 50,000 workers (Di Paola 2011). Instrumental in disseminating information about the practicalities of the council form, its historical significance, and political principles was the newly created journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order), headed by Gramsci himself, the later founding member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) Angelo Tasca, and long-term leader of PCI Palmiro Togliatti. The factory councils in northern Italy never developed into a nationwide structure as in Russia and Germany, and never acquired the political power as their Russian and German counterparts. Eventually the socialist activity of the *biennio rosso* ebbed out, as another political force appeared on the Italian national scene – the fascist Blackshirts and their rise to power. They were eventually led by Benito Mussolini in the 1922 March on Rome.

After the council movements were dissolved everywhere in Europe during the first years of the 1920s, the organisational form

and political principles of the councils were broadly discussed in the socialist movements across Europe. The councils developed into a hallmark for those socialist activists and political thinkers, who sought to advance alternative ideas of democracy than the parliamentary version and who wanted to democratise the capitalist economy, but simultaneously sought to distance themselves from the development of state communism and planned economy in Soviet Russia. Deliberations on council democracy created an alternative strain of left-wing political thinking, which placed the councils beyond the distinction of social democratic parliamentarianism and Leninist one-party rule. Council communists, as advocates of workers' councils were called to distinguish themselves from Bolshevik-style party communism, specifically attacked the hierarchisation of the social democratic parties, the trade union movement and the communist leadership, the absence of real participation of workers and peasants, and the social democratic and Bolshevik obsession with the power of the state. In contrast, council communists rejected the parliamentarianism of social democrats as well as the elitism and discipline of the Bolshevik vanguard, and instead, in the apt phrasing of Geoff Eley, 'they defended democratic values that socialists ... tended to forget – local control, direct participation, small-scale community, and federative corporation' (Eley 2002: 95). Rather than democratising the economy through the power of the state, advocates of the councils cherished the ordinary workers and shop floor activity; rather than respecting the parliamentary process they preferred direct action and strikes; and rather than a vanguard of professional revolutionaries, they stressed mass insurgency. This, we believe, is the appropriate historical-political context necessary for reconstructing Gramsci's socialist republicanism.

Gramsci's Socialist Republicanism

Today, Antonio Gramsci stands out as one of the key Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century. His most vital contribution to the analysis of capitalism is his concept of hegemony developed in the *Prison Notebooks* (1947), that is, the cultural and ideological underpinnings of capitalist economic exploitation. Whereas orthodox readings of Marx's historical materialism privileged

the economic base, Gramsci's concept of hegemony pointed to the ongoing 'superstructural' function of ideology in maintaining capitalist relations of production. Such a reorientation had lasting influence on Western Marxism, as thinkers associated with the first generation of the Frankfurt School as well as thinkers like Louis Althusser repeatedly analysed how bourgeois culture and the 'ideological state apparatuses' contributed to the ongoing hegemonic renewal of the capitalist status quo. The success of Gramsci's concept of hegemony positioned him throughout the twentieth century as something resembling a master strategist for Western communist parties, which fought for communism in the distinct condition of capitalist, bourgeois cultural and ideological hegemony. Such a condition required a special role for the 'organic intellectuals' of the labour movement who were responsible for creating and disseminating a cultural counterhegemonic narrative during a gradual and clandestine 'war of positions' before an eventual direct 'war of manoeuvre' could be undertaken. The suitability of these Gramscian concepts to analyse the strategic situation of twentieth century, Western European communist parties, though, have also to some extent obscured the historical context and acute political conflicts, which influenced Gramsci's thinking (Bellamy 1994: ix). Therefore, by returning to his pre-prison writings, especially to the writings in *L'Ordine Nuovo* during the emergence of workers' councils and factory committees during the Italian *biennio rosso*, we can reconstruct Gramsci's concrete political programme of socialist republicanism during the years of trans-European revolutionary upheaval.

Central to such a reconstruction of Gramsci's socialist republicanism is (a) his critique of capitalist factory production as a form of despotic rule, (b) his critique of the liberal division between a public, political sphere and a private, economic sphere, (c) his critique of parliamentary democracy and trade unionism as central enforcers of this distinction between politics and economics, (d) his understanding of freedom as political autonomy and economic self-management, and (e) his insistence on workers' councils and factory committees as pivotal organisational forms of what Otto Bauer in the opening epigraph called a 'republican economy'. Before surveying each of these elements of Gramsci's socialist republicanism, it is worth stressing how they together provide an exemplary

illustration of what we have called the ‘second republican revival’, insofar as Gramsci seeks to extend the historical legacy of a republican imaginary focused on political domination, arbitrary government, and freedom into the economic realm of capitalist relations of production, in order to qualify the ideal of republican freedom beyond the liberal divide between politics and economy.

The Despotism of the Modern Factory and the Liberal Divide between Politics and Economics

A key starting point is the text ‘Red Sunday’ published in *L’Ordine Nuovo* in September 1920, on the Sunday following the largest factory occupations in Turin during the *biennio rosso*. The text begins with Gramsci’s proclaiming the significance of the events, insofar as ‘social hierarchies have been smashed, historical values turned upside down. The “implementing” classes, the “instrumental classes” have become the “managerial classes”: they have become their own bosses’ (Gramsci 1994j: 198). The factory occupations and creation of workers’ councils entails a reversal of hierarchies, insofar as workers are no longer ‘instruments’ that ‘implement’ the orders of distant bosses but are instead their own bosses capable of managing the production circuits of a modern factory. The reason such a reversal of hierarchy is significant relies on a distinct republican analysis of the modern factory system. ‘The factory’, according to Gramsci, ‘under the capitalists, was a miniature State, ruled by a despot. The ruler enjoyed a singular suffrage – a single man with a single vote ... The factory was a despotically organized State, with all power resting in the hands of proprietor’ (Gramsci 1994j: 199). Although the transition from a pre-capitalist to capitalist economy entails the formal-juridical liberation of labour from direct forms of extraction (Wood 2002), Gramsci argues that the capitalist factory is still ruled like a despotic state, where the capitalist enjoys absolute power over his subjects. Everywhere throughout his *biennio rosso* writings, Gramsci uses the language of unfreedom, slavery, and tyranny so central to republicanism to describe the social relations of capitalism: the factory is permeated with the ‘tyranny of private ownership’ (1994b: 113), as ‘the salaried worker [is] the slave of capital’ (1994c: 117), and the entire working class is subjected to ‘industrial servitude’ (1994h: 172), as they toil ‘in the darkness of the factory’ as part of ‘the countless multitude that

capitalism subjects to its laws' (1994g: 164) via the power of 'the new and pitiless feudal lords of capitalism' (1994a: 89). Once we leave the so-called free sphere of market exchange, and enter into the 'hidden abode' of capitalist production (Fraser 2014), the lives of the working masses, according to Gramsci, are permeated with arbitrary power, slave-like conditions and tyrannic commands – in short, with unfreedom.

What idea of freedom can be excavated from Gramsci's early writings during the *biennio rosso* period? In the short text 'The Sovereignty of the Law', published in the daily newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party *Avanti!* in 1919, Gramsci discusses the kind of freedom enjoyed by the Italians since the first liberal constitution, the so-called Statuto Albertino of 1848. At first glance, Gramsci argues, the Italians have since 1848 'no longer been at the mercy of the irresponsible state. Rule by whim, by arbitrary decree, have disappeared from our social scene: our society has become a society of 'citizens', equal in their rights and duties, which are equally watched over and protected by the founding Charter of the realm' (1994a: 87). Gramsci's description of the Italians' liberty entails many elements of the classical republican understanding of freedom as non-domination. As the state is now governed by standing laws, and in accordance with a basic constitution that treats and protects citizens equally, arbitrary decree – the cornerstone of republicanism's critique of monarchical government – has been substituted for a 'society of citizens', that is, by free men, who cannot be governed by an alien, arbitrary will. But according to Gramsci, the constitution's liberal instantiation of an equal and free 'society of citizens' hides the fact – or rather justifies it ideologically – that unfreedom exist in the economic sphere due to the sanctity of private property, as 'this "freedom" immediately turns into the disadvantage of the proletariat', insofar as 'the conditions of the salaried worker become worse than those of the slave or the serf' (Gramsci 1994a: 89). The central divide between the 'free' political sphere and 'unfree' economic sphere has overall detrimental effects on society, as collectivities are broken up, and – in the phrasing of economic historian Karl Polanyi (2001: 136–140) – and economic activities are 'dis-embedded' from social bonds and communal practices. According to Gramsci, 'society is cut loose from any kind of collective bonds and reduced to its primordial

element of the citizen-individual. And society begins to dissolve, eaten away by the corrosive acids of competition' (Gramsci 1994a: 88). As such, the modern liberal divide between politics and economics reifies the ongoing capitalist domination, despite the civil liberties inscribed in a liberal constitution, insofar as 'on the terrain of production, in the factory, where relations are those between the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited, where there is no such thing as liberty for the worker and no such thing as democracy' (Gramsci 1994g: 164).

This also means that the working-class organisations, which have emerged under conditions of capitalism, such as for example trade unions, are inherently insufficient, because they themselves contribute to the division between politics and economy. The trade union 'organizes workers not as producers, but as wage-earners: that is, as creatures of capitalist private ownership' (Gramsci 1994e: 128). Trade unions might provide a 'constitutionalisation' of the workplace, but they accept the basic premises of capitalism, namely wage labour (Domènech 2004: 248). Instead, Gramsci looks to the newly established workers' councils in the factories of Turin, Milan, and Genoa for his institutional socialist republicanism.

The 'Proletarian Republic', Workers' Councils and Republican Economy

In the same article – *Red Sunday* – in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, published after the huge factory occupations in Turin in 1920, where Gramsci at length discussed the despotism and tyrannical unfreedom of the capitalist factory, he also described the newly occupied and self-managing factories as 'proletarian republics' (Gramsci 1994j: 199). Such 'proletarian republics' were governed by a general assembly – 'the organ of power and sovereignty of the proletarian factory-republics' (Gramsci 1994j: 201) – which would decide on overall matters relating to the inner life of the factory. As also argued by Antoni Domènech (2004: 248), such 'proletarian factory-republics' would introduce republican practices of deliberation, collective decision-making, and contestation into the productive sphere. The general assembly, moreover, would also elect representatives to administer the factory's daily affairs, but unlike parliamentary representatives, who are only bound by their own conscience, the daily administrators of the 'proletarian republics' would be under

imperative mandate and subject to instant recall by the sovereign general assembly. Through these institutional mechanisms – which were also found in the other socialist republican institutional formations such as the Paris Commune and the Russian *soviets* (Gramsci 1994i: 180; Popp-Madsen 2021) – political power would (theoretically) be retained at the popular level, and delegates would not turn into a new bureaucratic elite as was the case of trade unions and parliamentary parties (Gramsci 1994j: 201; 1994e: 128).

In addition, the self-governing workers' councils would socialise the economy, as the popular take-over of factories 'eliminated all masters' and based 'a new order of production ... on the collective interests of the social community' (Gramsci 1994f: 144; 1994d: 124). Crucially, these institutional innovations are by Gramsci continually cast in the language of freedom – not equality, emancipation, or justice. With the emergence of workers' councils and 'proletarian factory-republics' across northern Italy, 'the "citizen" is displaced by the "comrade"; social atomism by social organisation ... the worker wins a degree of autonomy for himself, a degree of *real, effectual freedom*' (Gramsci 1994a: 89). What Gramsci here displays is a distinctively republican meditation on the meaning of freedom. It might be case that Enlightenment understandings of individual rights and citizenship, emanating from the more moderate strains of the French Revolution, provide an abstract, formal ideal of freedom – the type of freedom, which like the liberal, negative freedom of non-interference is divorced from concrete forms of government. The preambles of the late eighteenth-century declarations of the rights of men and declarations of independence speak of natural, self-evident freedom and equality, separated from the concrete, material realisation of such freedom. But in the 'proletarian republics', this abstract freedom is substituted with a 'real, effectual freedom', grounded on the one hand in the worker's autonomy (the condition that the worker, not an external master, gives himself his own laws – *auto nomos*), but on the other hand that such 'real, effectual freedom' can only attained in common through 'social organisation'. We regard this second requirement for the realisation of republican freedom as a distinct contribution by the 'second republican revival' of socialist republicanism. Crucially, for neo-republicans such as Skinner and Pettit, freedom as non-domination refers predominantly to a legal-constitutional status, which is acquired

through the individual status as a citizen of a free republic. In the phrasing of Pettit, for republicanism ‘enslavement and subjection are great ills, and independence and status the supreme goods’ (Pettit 1997: 132). Once we extend the republican ideal of freedom as non-domination into the economic sphere, which we have argued is the key ambition of socialist republicans, this type of freedom requires collective, social organisation and concrete institutional mechanisms. As such, ‘the Factory Council’, which according to Gramsci is ‘the only proletarian institution, which, springing up, as it does, in a sphere *outside* the political relations of one citizen to another, a sphere in which freedom and democracy for the working class do not exist, where all that does exist in all its harshness and cruelty, is the economic relation between the exploiter and the exploited, the oppressor and the oppressed, represents the endless striving for freedom that the working class is engaged in’ (Gramsci 1994h: 174).

Conclusion: Antonio Gramsci and the ‘Second Republican Revival’

In a recent, important intervention in the debate on workplace democracy, the philosopher Elisabeth Anderson has shown the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the historical emergence of capitalism on progressive political thinking. Her argument, in short, is that progressive, pre-nineteenth-century political thinking to some extent looked to the market as a model of free and equal social organisation. The market, by dispensing with earlier hierarchical relations of serfdom, apprenticeship and tenancy associated with estate-based society, provided in eyes of pre-capitalist progressives ample opportunity for small-scale property ownership, and self-employment – in short, the market was thought to be one main road for gaining the independence associated with being ‘masterless men’ (Anderson 2017: 7–17). The market – in Anderson’s narrative – for pre-Industrial Revolution progressives, hence, was thought to be integral for the realisation of republican freedom (i.e., to be an ‘independent masterless man’). Thomas Jefferson’s radical republicanism is founded upon small-scale, agrarian self-ownership, and Thomas Paine’s influential advocacy of popular sovereignty during

both the American and the French Revolutions went hand in hand with the promotion of small-scale independent producers³ (Anderson 2017: 22–33). Although, critiques of the market as a place of domination and exploitation were already present in the eighteenth century (in particular during the French Revolution), Anderson’s central argument (2017: 33–36) is that the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century completely shattered the centrality of the market for progressive thinking. Instead of being a model of free and equal social exchange, the market became the central site of domination and exploitation. The reason being that economies of scale and the amount of capital and labour needed for industrial production, along with the closing of the American frontier, made the progressive ideal of small-scale independent producers impossible for the many. As highlighted continually by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels throughout *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), industrial capitalism inaugurated a descent of the small artisans, craftsmen, and petty bourgeois shopkeepers into the proletariat. In short, self-employment became a rarity for the masses, wage labour the norm.

What happened to the ideal of republican freedom as non-domination, independence and ‘masterlessness’ under these new conditions? The argument that is gradually emerging from what we have called the ‘second republican revival’ is that the socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century inherited and further developed the republican ideal of freedom as non-domination under these markedly new conditions of capitalist production.⁴ The ambition of this article has been, firstly, to substantiate the recent turn from neo-republicanism to socialist republicanism; that is, to demonstrate the recent theoretical preoccupation by political theorists and intellectual historians by extending the neo-republican concept of freedom as non-domination from the formal, political sphere to the sphere of economic life. Many recent interventions on workplace democracy, common ownership, and cooperativism as ways of taming – or transcending – capitalism is directly applying the political language of republicanism to understand and challenge domination and hierarchy in the economic sphere. Secondly, and as a way of amending and contributing to this ‘second republican revival’, we have aimed at inscribing the influential Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci into the tradition of socialist republicanism. By discussing his pre-prison writings in the historical context of Italy’s

biennio rosso, where workers' councils and factory committees partly managed the heavy industry in major northern cities, we have highlighted how Gramsci applies a distinctively republican conceptual vocabulary in his critique of the despotism, tyranny, and lack of freedom in the capitalist factory, as well as how Gramsci envisioned the workers' councils emerging throughout Europe from the Russian Revolution and onwards as the basis of the new institutional form of proletarian republics. In these proletarian republics, freedom as non-domination could be enjoyed due to novel institutional mechanisms such as imperative mandate and instant recall, as well as due to the socialisation of production through common ownership and factory democracy – or what Otto Bauer called a 'republican economy'. By stipulating how republican freedom can be realised under industrial conditions, where the traditional republican ideal of small-scale, independent producers is unviable, Gramsci also puts forward a distinct socialist republican understanding of freedom as non-domination. Whereas neo-republicans like Skinner and Pettit understand republican freedom as a legal-constitutional, individual status, Gramsci highlights how social organisation, class solidarity and ongoing deliberative practices are necessary conditions for a free state. If one wants to be a republican, Gramsci could be taken to argue, one must be a socialist.

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Notes

Epigraphs: Dahl 1986: 134–135; Bauer 1936: 199.

1. Pettit sometimes discusses the relationship between republicanism and economic domination, for example, in relation to universal basic income. See Pettit (2007).
2. In Berlin, during the German Revolution of 1918–19, the councils were in power from November to December 1918 (Hoffrogge 2011: 84–103), in Hungary the councils only exercised power from March to August 1919 (Carsten 1972: 50–59), and in countries such as Austria, Italy and Britain, the various council formations never reached considerable power in national politics (Di Paola 2011: 130–147; Gluckstein 1985; Haumer 2015: 120–156). In Russia, where the workers' council first appeared, a system of workers' councils shared power with the Provisional Government – the 'dual power' situation – from February to October 1917, after which the Bolsheviks seized power. See also Muldoon (2020) and Popp-Madsen (2021).
3. In addition, Thomas Paine also argued in the pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* (1797), that those owning land through self-ownership ought to pay a rental fee for the land to the general community, in order for the community to fund old-age and disability pensions and basic income for all adult citizens. Hence, Paine was aware that the non-universal spread of self-ownership would necessitate economic redistribution.
4. For further historiographical documentation of this argument, see Domènech (2004), Gourevitch (2014), and Roberts (2017).

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