MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Republics of Production: Liberty and Power in the Modern Firm

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	UA 066 642
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree programme as it appears on the student record sheet:	Masterstudium Philosophy and Economics
Betreut von | Supervisor:	Assoz. Prof. Felix Pinkert MLitt PhD

Abstract

ENGLISH: The workplace *is* as a political arena, as such, it is open to interpretations that understand the administration of firms as "governments." Drawing on the republican conception of liberty as non-domination, the analysis shows that productive entities may *develop the capacity* to limit arbitrary power through deliberate reforms and spontaneous dynamics. Institutional developments such as the dispersion of power, codes of conduct, accountability mechanisms, and internal adjudication reduce domination and promote freedom. By focusing on processes, contradictions, and adaptation rather than fixed end-states, firms emerge as evolving *republics of production* capable of fostering autonomy and liberty in wage-based labor systems.

DEUTSCH: Der Arbeitsplatz ist als politische Arena offen für Interpretationen, die die Unternehmensführung als „Regierung" verstehen. Ausgehend vom republikanischen Freiheitsbegriff der Nicht-Beherrschung zeigt die Analyse, dass produktive Einheiten durch gezielte Reformen und spontane Dynamiken die Fähigkeit entwickeln können, willkürliche Macht einzuschränken. Institutionelle Entwicklungen wie Machtverteilung, Verhaltenskodizes, Rechenschaftsmechanismen und interne Schlichtung reduzieren Herrschaft und fördern Freiheit. Indem sie Prozesse, Widersprüche und Anpassung statt fixer Endzustände in den Mittelpunkt stellen, entwickeln sich Unternehmen zu sich stetig weiterentwickelnden Produktionsrepubliken, die in der Lage sind, Autonomie und Freiheit in lohnbasierten Arbeitssystemen zu fördern.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 The Political Workplace

Some voices in the debates on the ethical dimensions of the workplace understood as a political ground, exemplified by Elizabeth Anderson's *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Do Not Talk about It)*, often portray firms as spaces of systematic oppression. In this view, employers exercise a form of private and unregulated dictatorial rule that allows for pervasive and sometimes arbitrary control over workers.

Taking on the task to treat the workplace as a political arena, I draw on the republican conception of liberty as non-domination to explore what truly characterizes the modern firm from a political point of view. The question is whether growing and increasingly complex productive entities continue to reproduce the same "hidden abode of production" (as Marx called it, *hidden* because it is "concealed" from the open/public realm of circulation) of tyranny that has simply become larger in size and perhaps stronger in market presence, or whether the workplace has become a political space that is increasingly republican by creating limitations on domination. Do firms, therefore, possess an intrinsic capacity to reduce domination and thereby become *freedom-promoting*?

Some skeptical perspectives deny that productive entities can *structurally* become spaces of expanded freedom, instead viewing modern corporations as a quantitative intensification of Marx's "hidden abode of production": the extension of waged labor, masking a slavish condition, to ever more individuals under unchecked private authority. "To say that 'the worker has an interest in the rapid growth of capital', means only this: that the more speedily the worker augments the wealth of the capitalist, the larger will be the crumbs which fall to him, the greater will be the number of workers than can be called into existence, the more can the mass of slaves dependent upon capital be increased."[1]

Methodologically, framing corporations merely as "private governments" that are also "dictatorships" – hierarchical structures that can only function through unchecked power – risks an *overly static* or *end-state* view, as if the same structural domination identified by Marx in the 19th century had simply persisted unchanged, with these productive units

[1] Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, 1891, ed. Friedrich Engels, English translation, Marxists Internet Archive, proofed and corrected by Alek Blain (2006) and Mark Harris (2010), 19.

“calling more workers into existence” to increase the reach of the slavery they impose. On this reading, history reveals only a quantitative shift: ever larger corporations exercising greater power over an ever wider workforce. Such a view overlooks internal institutional evolution within firms, where systems of checks and balances have emerged that subject rulers and ruled alike, supervisors and supervised, to common, impersonal rules that limit domination.

Substantially, I argue that viewing the growth of contemporary firms as merely a scaling up of the same oppressive structures overlooks decisive qualitative transformations, both *technical*, in how production is carried out, and *political*, in how power and its organization shape the productive apparatus. Firms have the *capacity* to limit domination not only through responsiveness to external regulation but also through planned and unplanned internal dynamics. Understood as polities, firms have undergone and continue to undergo political transformations along a republican trajectory, reshaping both their institutional frameworks and their labor relations.

Politically, productive units have not only adapted to external pressures and regulations imposed at the state or supra-political level, revealing their general responsiveness to the context in which they operate, but have also undergone internal transformations shaped by both deliberate top-down efforts to rationalize administration and by unplanned organizational dynamics. These forces have set in motion processes of *dispersion* (or *separation*) of power, compartmentalization, and the development of more transparent and predictable codes, guidelines, rules, and court-like bodies. Together, these developments have produced institutional arrangements that increasingly limit domination. In parallel, they have generated a citizenry capable of sustaining the political and technical framework required by this increased sophistication.

These transformations have shaped the workforce-citizenry, which increasingly sees itself less as a unified working class and more as autonomous agents or entrepreneurial bearers of human capital, performing work increasingly marked by creativity, autonomy, and self-reliance rather than repetition and strict adherence to instructions.

Central, then, is the defense of the *capacity* of productive units (under specific circumstances) to create their own institutions that *separate* and *check* power and reduce domination from within. For this endeavor it is convenient to set aside any purist view that studies the things of the world as realized end-states, and instead adopt a perspective centred on adaptation and change.

1.2 Clarifications and Caveats

Before proceeding further, a few clarifications are in order. First and foremost, this project is not a defense of any particular corporate structure, nor of corporativism *per se*, nor of hierarchy for its own sake – as if these were desirable *ends* in themselves. Rather, the normative *end* I put forward is *liberty understood as non-domination*, while particular institutional arrangements are all *means* to pursue it. The central concern, therefore, is the *capacity of polities to develop institutions that promote freedom*.

In this context, I examine how productive units (entities that are as economic as they are political) possess the capacity to generate institutions that reduce domination and thereby expand liberty, not only by adapting to *external* pressures but, more importantly, by developing such institutions *internally* through processes that are both planned and spontaneous. Thus, I do not uphold a particular institutional arrangement in a specific firm, I rather am interested in the ways in which the *capacity* of promoting freedom is *attained*, and *actualized*, and I apply the conceptual framework of the republican tradition of liberty to do so.

Secondly, I contest what I call the *skeptical tradition*: an articulation born of a certain analytical disappointment with how the realm of production has changed since the Industrial Revolution. This tradition sees with discomfort the increasing concentration of market power in fewer, ever-larger corporations – measured essentially by the number of employees – at the expense of an economy once composed of self-employed proprietors.[2]

This tradition holds that the modern firm is politically unfree: structurally despotic and rigid. Drawing on Marx's view of waged labor as inherently slavish and alienating, it often bases many of its criticism by emphasizing on particular managerial abuses while overlooking the *structural* gains in liberty since the 19th century and the firm's capacity to limit domination through both deliberate and spontaneous republican governance. At its core, it rests on a utopian tendency to treat technical/*poietic* and political structures as fixed *end-states* rather than transformative entities.

[2] Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1–36.

Thirdly, a focus on processes rather than end-states is essential. This study does not aim to describe an ideal or perfected firm but to examine ongoing institutional and political transformations over time. Firms, as evolving polities, are continually reshaped by tensions between authority and accountability, ownership and participation. Treating them as static and perfected obscures the living, adaptive processes through which domination is both exercised and limited. The key question is not whether corporations *are* wholly free or unfree, but how they *become* more or less so in practice.

Fourthly, the focus is on *contradictions* rather than *absolutes*. Every political body contains opposing tendencies: domination and emancipation, command and accountability, dependence and autonomy. These mere existence of these contradictions do not signify an absence of liberty. To consider a particular firm as *wholly unfree* (let alone the entire system of productive units structured around private ownership of capital and waged labor) because it retains some elements of domination, while ignoring its historical evolution in limiting such power, is to judge the world by impossible standards.

Fifthly, I describe the tradition I contest as *skeptical*. This is not skepticism in a strict metaphysical sense, as if questioning the existence of the object of study, but a tradition marked by ethical unease and *disillusionment* with the historical development of organized production. Prominently with intellectual foundations in the Marxist critique, it has served to cast light on many aspects of firms, labor, and ethics. Yet by focusing on perceived structural domination within productive units, this tradition often overlooks the firm's potential to create republican institutions capable of limiting domination internally. Many of its criticisms have the utopian tendency to treats firms as fixed end-states rather than adaptive, evolving entities, emphasizing shortcomings while downplaying transformative dynamics that shape their political character.

Sixthly, I understand freedom as non-domination, following Philip Pettit's formulation in *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997). To be free, in this sense, is not merely to be unimpeded (that no person or institution exercises *actual interference* over me), but to live beyond the reach of another's arbitrary power or mastery (that no person or institution has the *potential of arbitrary interference* with me). Domination arises whenever an agent or collective possesses a standing capacity to interfere arbitrarily with another's choices, whether or not that power is exercised. The mere presence of the *potential* to exercise arbitrary interference may effectively deprive the subject of its liberty and render them a *slave* (as opposed to a *citizen*), depending on its intensity, even without it being *actualized* in any way.

Thus, republican liberty demands not only the absence of interference but institutional safeguards ensuring that power, when exercised, tracks common or public interests rather than private will. It is an idea of freedom consistent with non-arbitrary forms of interference and authority.[3] Within this framework, the firm, like any other political space, has a potential to become more or less republican, depending on whether the relations of subordination may be transformed into interactions mediated by a law-like framework.

Finally, this analysis adopts a political lens to reconsider the distinction between "private" and "public." Calling the firm "private" does not imply it lacks a *public realm* within or a notion of common good amongst its constituents. Here, *private* denotes *non-state*, but certainly not *non-political*. Authors like Elizabeth Anderson describe firms as "private governments," highlighting their relevance as objects of political and moral analysis. My approach follows such methodology and language closely, and draws analogies between *state* and *non-state* institutions, not to equate them, but to show that both organize power, structure authority, and can either limit or promote freedom.

In sum, this work seeks to portray the firm as a political arena capable of internal republican transformation. By emphasizing processes, contradictions, and the inherently political character of productive activity, it explores how modern workplaces can evolve into spaces where freedom becomes an increasingly shared *good* among their stakeholders.

1.3 Overview

I first outline the broader debate by examining what I refer to as the *skeptical* or *disillusioned* tradition, exemplified by Marx and Anderson, which portrays the firm respectively as a despotic "hidden abode of production" and a "private government." By reconstructing this perspective, I highlight both its useful insights and its limitations, the latter mainly concerning its neglect of institutional evolution. I also analyze the workplace

[3] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1–41. Against Berlin's opposition between negative liberty as non-interference and positive liberty as self-mastery or collective self-rule, Pettit advances a third way: republican liberty as non-domination. Freedom is defined not by the absence of interference but by the absence of subjection to arbitrary power. Domination may exist without interference and interference may occur without domination. Law therefore need not diminish freedom. On the contrary, when law is properly constituted, constrained by checks and balances and responsive to the common interests of those subject to it, it secures liberty rather than undermines it. This is why Pettit quotes Locke: "The end of Law is not to abolish or restraint, but to preserve and enlarge Freedom" (40).

as a political arena, drawing on analogies with governments to understand how power and authority are structured within firms.

I next examine how external legal, political, and social pressures can transform productive entities. Labor reforms and managerial theory translated public or state-level ideals of accountability into private corporate structures. I show that firms are *adaptive*, constantly evolving entities capable not only of compliance but also of *learning* and *internalizing* insights from their environment.

I then unfold the core of my argument, showing that firms not only respond to external pressures but also generate internal processes that *intrinsically develop* their capacity to limit domination. Key institutional developments have fostered more republican workplaces: the *dispersion* (or *separation*) of power, arising from the division of labor and the distinction between *ownership* and *management*; the growing autonomy and increasingly non-repetitive nature of labor; and internal control mechanisms such as HR departments, codes of conduct, and managerial accountability structures. Together, these dynamics reduce arbitrary interference, enabling employee-citizens to operate progressively under predictable, law-like rules.

I move onto considering the distinction between *democracy* and *liberty* in firms. Freedom rests on the absence of arbitrary mastery, not on voting rights. Democracy is not required for a regime of freedom, and the republican developments I discuss resemble more an aristocratic rather than democratic/popular construction. Yet democratic mechanisms might offer additional checks and balances, whose effect depends on context.

I conclude that productive units can become "republics of production," capable of fostering liberty, even in the face of growing *relative income or wealth inequality*.

2. The Problem of the Political Workplace

2.1 The Skeptical Tradition: No structural room for liberty

The realm of production, understood by Aristotle as *poiesis,*[4] is a central concern of economics. Questions of optimal output and cost have long shaped the study of productive processes, both in theory and in practice. From classical political economy to contemporary neoclassical models, production is typically framed as a problem of efficiency: how to best allocate scarce resources to maximize output, minimize costs, and meet consumer demand.

Efficiency must also coordinate with a key resource underlying all production efforts: human labor. Yet the workplace cannot be reduced to a mere calculation of labor's quantity and quality. It is a *living* arena in which human beings enter into power relations, guided by authority, norms, and expectations. Production is therefore not only an abstract function of goods and services but also an institutional and social order where questions of justice, freedom, and power are inescapable, and where considerations of the Good Life inevitably arise. *Poietic* spaces are also *ethical* and *political* battlegrounds.

Crucial in the understanding of productive processes is the theorization about the *essence* and use of the Labor factor, which is specifically tied not only to productive processes (or the activity of *making*) but human interactions, which transcend the mere problem of economic calculus into the realm of ethics and politics. The rest of the upcoming political analysis has an implicit but key premise; that, unlike machines or natural resources, labor is *inseparable* from the person, the social animal, who performs it.[5]

Considering labor as a mere factor in an equation may lead to abstracting it away from its human character; in reality, the deployment of labor always involves the governance of people, the imposition of rules, and the distribution of decision-making power. As I will examine later, *dividing or specializing labor* implies *dividing or specializing power*.

That is, whereas the deployment of other factors of production can be treated as a technical matter (a *poietic* question of how to simply *make* things in the best way possible by using *instruments*) the use of labor cannot be reduced to this technical dimension alone.

[4] Hernán Borisonik, "Pensando el trabajo a través de Aristóteles," *Astrolabio. Revista internacional de filosofía*, no. 12 (2011): 1–8, 1.
[5] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 125–7.

For this reason, my fundamental assumption is that labor is a distinctive factor of production precisely because it is at once *technical* and *political*.[6] Questions such as who commands, who obeys, and under what conditions such authority is justified therefore belong as much to ethics and political philosophy as to economics as discipline.[7]

One of the most forceful analyses of the social nature of labor comes from the Marxist tradition, whose central concept in critiquing capitalism is the *structural antagonism* between capital and labor, and the resulting alienation of human beings under the abstract, seemingly timeless force of capital.[8] For Marx, this antagonism is not limited to unequal distribution of income or resources, but runs deeper: workers become *estranged* from the products of their work, which are the actualization of their *labor-power*, and ultimately from their own humanity. He emphasizes that even if material conditions improved, and poverty were alleviated, the structural distance between workers and the agents of capital would persist, masking, but not eliminating, forms of enslavement.[9]

For Marx, the workplace was where the contradictions of capitalist society became most visible. Workers, though formally free to sell their labor, were bound by relations of dependency that deprived them of control over the products of their work and subjected them to the *domination* of capital. He famously called this the "hidden abode of production," a structural domain of exploitation and unfreedom, set apart from the relative equality and freedom of market circulation. Concepts such as surplus value, alienation, and class conflict framed labor relations not as cooperative contributions to a collective good,

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[6] Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* (London: Verso, 1985), 1–20. Without endorsing Burawoy's normative commitments or his class-conflict framing, this work draws on *The Politics of Production* for two limited insights. First, political analysis need not be state-bound: power also operates within production sites through what Burawoy calls "political apparatuses of production" or "factory regimes," a formulation adopted after abandoning the equivocal notion of the "internal state." Second, Burawoy offers a concise definition of the labor process as "the social relations into which men and women enter in order to produce useful things" (p. 13), underscoring the irreducibly social character of production.
[7] Daniel Hausman, Michael McPherson, and Debra Satz, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy*, 3rd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin; Stanford: Spencer Foundation, 2016), 337–51. The appendix supports the view that economics cannot be value-free. Against the standard separation between positive and normative inquiry, it argues that economic analysis presupposes ethical commitments and engages questions of authority, justification, and institutional power. Ethics therefore informs not only policy evaluation but also the framing and interpretation of economic inquiry itself.
[8] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *The Process of Capitalist Production* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1909), 383-4. Here are two important things to consider. The first is that Marx considers the antagonism of capital and labor as exemplified by the antagonistic relations of classes, not individuals; "when we consider the capitalist class as a whole and its antagonist, the working class, instead of the individual capitalist and the individual labourer" (383). The second, is that Marx describes *capital* as "accumulated wealth" that is employed to produce more surplus-value throughout time in a cyclical manner (hence its *abstract* and *atemporal* properties), whereas the *capitalist* is merely the owner of the surplus-value (384).
[9] Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, 18-9.

but as mechanisms of dispossession and domination driven by the accumulation of capital, happening in the site of production.[10]

I see the Marxist critique as forming part of a broader *skeptical* tradition that views organized labor relations as permeated by structural relations of domination. In this tradition's view, the historical growth of productive entities, whether the factories of the 19th century or the corporations of the present, did not *mitigate* but instead *magnified* the structural domination of workers to their masters and to abstract capital. According to several authors associated with this tradition (such as Thompson, Burawoy, Braverman, and, notably, Anderson, amongst others)[11], the structural domination of workers as pertaining productive units has been maintained, or even aggravated by a growth in the dimension and market power of mightier corporativist structures.

As we move beyond the 19th-century factory (the primary object of Marx's analysis) and enter into the 20th and 21st centuries, we encounter corporations whose size, complexity, and geographical dispersion far exceed any single industrial plant or workhouse of the sort which Marx would have been acquainted with. Mass production, Fordist ideals, and global expansion created entities capable of coordinating the labor of tens or even hundreds of thousands of workers.[12] A large part of the subsequent skeptical tradition has emphasized that larger corporations simply reproduce or even intensify the structural domination that Marx identified: more *masters* exercising authority over more *slaves*.

2.2 The "Communist Dictatorship" view

There have been several contributions to this skeptical vision of the contradictory relations between capital and labor, seeing it through the lenses of political philosophy. Amongst

[10] Ibid., 120–141.

[11] E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* 38, no. 1 (1967): 56–97. On his account of the rise of wage-based productive units replacing task-oriented labor in the 18th and 19th centuries: "Enclosure and growing labor surplus at the end of the 18th century tightened the screw for those who were in regular employment. Their alternatives were partial employment and the poor law, or submission to a more exacting labor discipline" (78). On the political and structural dimensions of alienation in workplaces, see Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, paraphrasing Braverman: "Labourers were therefore brought together under a single roof and paid a daily wage for their 'labor power'. But in reducing one form of uncertainty a new form was created: the uncertainty in the realization of labor power in the form of labor. This new problem inaugurated capitalist management" (27). For a contemporary perspective linking the growth of corporate structures and the suppression of autonomy to Marx's depiction of wage dependence as a form of structural subordination, see Anderson, *Private Government*, 1–36, especially regarding the concentration of workers under employer authority and the erosion of republican liberty, which resonates with Marx's claim in *Wage Labour and Capital* that "the greater will be the number of workers than can be called into existence, the more can the mass of slaves dependent upon capital be increased" (19).

[12] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 150.

these is the critique made by Elizabeth Anderson, provokingly calling the contemporary corporation a "communist dictatorship."[13] Anderson's depiction of the workplace as a political domain, drawing on analytical tools from political philosophy and frequently comparing it to the state, is, I contend, not only her most significant contribution to the skeptical tradition but also a point of convergence with the arguments advanced in this project.[14]

Elizabeth Anderson has recently advanced this tradition by reframing the corporation in the very political concept of a "private government." In her view, the workplace operates as a kind of communist dictatorship because it is a corporativist structure where employers exercise centralized authority over production, reward compliance, punish dissent, and at times extend their reach into the intimate lives of workers.[15] This authority is largely unchecked and unaccountable, leaving employees *formally free* to exit but unfree in the republican sense as in subject to the *arbitrary will* of their superiors. This is similar to the Marxist paradox of having formally free workers who freely sell their labor-power in the sphere of circulation, only to be reduced to slavery inside the realm of production.[16]

For Anderson, the big historical *disappointment* is the immanent failure of the ideas of Smith, the promise of markets would serve as liberating mechanisms so "every man could be his own master"[17] when instead they have allowed for the proliferation of corporativist dictatorial hierarchies which have unfreedom in their core. The masterless self-proprietors dream of the 17th century Levellers has instead turned out to be a nightmare populated by dictatorial firms.[18]

The concept of *private government* highlights the political nature of the employment relationship. By "government," Anderson highlights that firms are inherently political spaces – composed of governors and governed – where authority is continuously exercised.

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[13] Anderson, *Private Government*, chap. 2, 37–71.
[14] Ibid., 38.
[15] Ibid., 68.
[16] Marx, *Capital*, 120–141. This is found in a passage where Marx describes the leaving of the sphere of circulation, which is "a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham," (127), into the "hidden abode of production," (127).
[17] Anderson, *Private Government*, 64.
[18] Ibid. For Anderson, the Industrial Revolution marked the expansion of production organized around "private governments" that increasingly incorporated more employees, replacing the Levellers', Smith's, and early labor radicals' ideals of self-employment and equality. Large-scale wage-based enterprises supplanted small property ownership with coercive hierarchies, creating relations of dependence that suppressed republican liberty: "Preindustrial egalitarians had no answer for the challenges of the Industrial Revolution. Their model of how to bring about a free society of equals through free markets via near-universal self-employment was shattered" (36).

By “private,” she refers not only to their separation from the public realm of the state but, more crucially, to their non-republican character: power is treated as a prerogative of a few rather than a service to the common good. Unlike constitutionally constrained governments that allow for participation and contestation, firms, as Anderson conceives them, rule through unilateral and unaccountable mechanisms of control. In contrast to the *res publica* (where authority must be justified and accountable) the firm represents a polity in which the governed cannot contest their rulers, rendering workers as subjects or slaves under a master rather than citizens under a law.

Anderson’s characterization of the workplace as a “communist dictatorship” is meant to highlight two distinct yet complementary dimensions of domination. It is “communist” in the sense that within the firm, coordination is not governed by markets but by an almost absolute central planning: managers allocate tasks, set schedules, and direct production without resorting to voluntary exchange. Also evident is that by labeling it as “communism,” Anderson seeks to create a paradoxical – ironic, even – contrast with the expectation, held by many classical liberal thinkers like Adam Smith, that markets would serve as instruments for expanding freedom into a self-proprietor-driven economy.[19]

At the same time, it is a “dictatorship” because the authority of managers is *unchecked* and *arbitrary*: they can assign tasks, set conditions, monitor behavior, and impose sanctions without democratic accountability or reciprocal oversight. By combining these two terms, Anderson depicts the modern firm as a both centrally-planned economic unit with a top-down hierarchical despotism, thereby intensifying the concern that employment relations systematically place workers under conditions of domination. While they cannot imprison or execute workers, they exercise effective exile by terminating employment, a sanction often devastating enough to discipline behavior. Compliance is sustained not only by threats but also by incentives: promotion, prestige, or identification with the firm’s values.

Anderson’s account extends the skeptical tradition by offering a contemporary critique of the workplace. Through the notion of “private governments,” she uses political philosophy to expose the contradictions within organized production. By likening firms to “communist dictatorships,” she argues that market growth and organizational complexity have not eliminated domination but *entrenched* it. Rather than realizing the Levelers’ ideal of ending arbitrary power in both state and non-state spheres, historical development has produced

[19] Ibid.

corporatist institutions where unfreedom persists, yet disguised as autonomy and fiercely shielded from public accountability.[20]

The parallel between Marx's depiction of the workplace as a "hidden abode of production" and Anderson's account of the firm as a "communist dictatorship" hints a common thread: both see the employment relation not merely as an economic contract, but as a form of *political subjection*. Where Marx described the structural dependence of workers (whom he even calls waged *slaves*) on capital, Anderson speaks about the authoritarian constitution of the workplace as a government that intends to remain as *private* as it may.

2.3 The Workplace: Moral and Political Relevance

Anderson distinguishes negative liberty (*freedom from interference*), positive liberty (*capacity to act*), and republican liberty (*freedom from domination*).[21] So does Pettit.[22] I find these distinctions useful for framing liberty understood in republican terms, of absence of mastery. Governments that are "private" (that is, power is understood as a privilege or prerogative of *some*, and not as a means to ensure the *common* good) undermine republican liberty: workers may enjoy pockets of negative or positive liberty, because employers might choose not to exercise/actualize their full authority, but they remain under the *power* of management to impose their arbitrary will.

In Anderson's firm, consent to enter an employment contract does not dissolve this problem, just like emigration *per se* does not have the power to dissolve a state dictatorship.[23] Nor does the efficiency rationale of the "Theory of the Firm" explain why employers require such sweeping, open-ended authority; although she does grant that some degree of discretionary power in command is necessary to conduct the firm's operations.[24] To leave matters unchanged, Anderson argues, is to tolerate a sphere of unchecked domination at the core of modern life.[25]

Advancing this debate matters. I intend to contribute in it by challenging a core assumption of the skeptical tradition, namely that productive units operating largely under market logic cannot structurally transform into spaces of greater republican liberty. If it can be shown

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 45.
[22] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 18-27.
[23] Anderson, *Private Government*, 55.
[24] Ibid., 67.
[25] Ibid., xii.

that these same institutions are, under certain conditions, capable of generating their own freedom-promoting mechanisms (by adapting from without and generating them from within) then the workplace emerges as a key element for contemporary political analysis. It allows us to examine the formal, material, and efficient causes of liberty as a political condition.

For a sizable chunk of the world's working population,[26] productive units are not distant abstractions but immediate social environments where they spend a large share of their lives. The firm thus operates as a concrete political space in which individuals experience authority, subordination, and – *potentially* – freedom. From an ethical standpoint, if being able to be *increasingly free* is central to the Good Life, as I consider it to be, then the persistence of or increase in domination (understood as the antithesis of freedom) even amid material prosperity, marks a profound moral failure of any form of social organization. Conversely, material inequality may coexist with liberty when arbitrary power is effectively constrained. The key question, then, is whether the institutions that structure daily working life can sustain freedom as non-domination, in the republican sense.

[26] International Labour Organization. *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2025*. Geneva: International Labour Office, 2025. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/WESO25_Trends_Report_EN.pdf. Total global employment amounts to approximately 2.43 billion people, obtained by aggregating regional employment figures reported in the ILO tables. The UN World Population Prospects 2024 estimates the world population at 8.13 billion. This implies roughly 30 percent of humanity (though including minors and individuals outside the labor force), is embedded in some form of employment relation within productive units. Since informal employment represents roughly 60–70 percent of total employment, the number of formally employed workers is considerably lower than 2.4 billion. Even under a conservative assumption of around 700 million formal workers, this would still amount to approximately one eighth of the global population, underscoring the scale of formal employment (though including self-employment).

3. Republican Liberty and Non-Domination

The conception of liberty underpinning this analysis follows the republican tradition. Unlike *negative liberty*, which defines freedom as the mere absence of interference, or *positive liberty*, which ties it to self-mastery or the ability to act according to one's desires, *republican liberty* is defined as non-domination; it regards even the potential for arbitrary interference, rather than actual interference, as a limitation on freedom, and it is compatible with non-arbitrary forms of intervention.[27]

This distinction is central: domination, rather than interference, captures the ethical and political antithesis that republican theory seeks to normatively redress. As advanced by Philip Pettit in *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997), to be unfree is to *live under the arbitrary power of another* – to stand at the mercy of someone who holds a capacity for interference that is neither constrained nor justified by common, law-like norms. Freedom, by contrast, is wherever such arbitrary power is *institutionally prevented*. In the republican tradition, to live under domination is often seen as equivalent to live as a *slave*; while to be protected from it is to live as a free *citizen.*[28]

Domination, in this framework, consists of three interrelated components. First, it requires a *capacity to interfere*; an actual and ready-to-use power, not a mere hypothetical threat. This power may be exercised actively or held in reserve, yet it must be ready for use and capable of shaping another's options for the worse. Second, interference must be *arbitrary*, meaning it does not take into consideration the relevant interests, judgments, or shared goods of those affected. Non-arbitrary forms of interference, by contrast, are those constrained by rules that are made to take into consideration the interests of the interfered

[27] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 23-5.

[28] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 51–61. Republican liberty, for Pettit, is freedom from domination. It is negative insofar as it rejects domination rather than requiring self-mastery, and positive insofar as it demands not merely the absence of actual interference but secure protection against arbitrary interference. Domination exists if and only if four conditions are satisfied: (1) *capacity*, where one agent possesses a ready-to-use and fully developed power to interfere deliberately and for the worse; (2) *arbitrariness*, where this power is not constrained to track the interests or shared standards of the person subject to it but depends on the will of the power holder; (3) *scope*, insofar as the power applies to choices the other is in a position to make, even if only within specific domains such as the workplace; and (4) *common knowledge*, since domination characteristically involves mutual awareness of the power asymmetry, reflecting the human need to know how far one falls under the power of others. Interference may operate by restricting options, shaping incentives, or imposing penalties, but it is its arbitrary character, not interference as such, that constitutes domination. Pettit briefly discusses the employer-employee relationship as also pertaining to this analytical framework (57).

– as in some forms of taxation which are governed by law and public interest rather than by a particular will. Third, domination concerns *specific spheres of choice* in which one agent or institution can impose its will over another. Thus, domination may exist in some dimensions of life but not others: an employer may dominate an employee within the workplace even if both are politically free citizens outside it (and so the opposite can also be true!).[29]

Importantly, Pettit's framework rejects any *end-state* view of freedom as absolute or complete. There are no perfect or utopian states of pure non-domination, only processes through which domination is progressively reduced and freedom consequently expanded.[30] This process-centric conception emphasizes institutional evolution rather than culmination: what matters is whether power becomes accountable and law-like *over time*. Liberty is therefore not achieved once and for all but secured through continuous adjustment and vigilance against arbitrariness. I build on the republican analytical toolkit, and adopt it as the normative standard for evaluating how different polities promote or constrain freedom.

From this standpoint, liberty advances whenever the effective and concrete capacity for arbitrary interference is institutionally curtailed. A socio-political organization that contributes in the advancement of this end is a *freedom-promoting* entity. This insight extends beyond the state to any site of organized power, including the firm. If the modern workplace can reduce the discretionary power of managers and/or owners to a significant degree enough to see a progressive diminution of domination and gains in freedoms, then we might consider it a *freedom-promoting* institution.

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[29] Ibid., 58.
[30] Ibid., 147. Pettit here is sufficiently clear with the point here by stating: "To endorse republican freedom is not to accept a ready-made ideal that can be applied in a mechanical way, now to this group, now to that. It is to embrace an open-ended ideal that gains new substance and relevance as it is interpreted in the progressively changing and clarifying perspectives of a living society".

4. Adaptation to External Forces

4.1 'Hard' Adaptation: Compliance to Supra-Firm Regulation

Across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, firms have absorbed and adapted external discourses organized around universal protections, human rights, and labor regulation. As these discourses evolved, productive units increasingly adopted institutional forms and normative vocabularies aligned with the protection of workers from arbitrary power.[31]

Clear examples of such extrinsic influences include the rise of supra-firm regulatory frameworks developed by state and international organizations. The regulation of labor in 19th century France, culminating in the promulgation of the French Labor Code in 1910, illustrates this dynamic. The French Labor Code marked a partial culmination of a long effort to codify intra-firm relations, standardize practices, and limit specific abuses in the context of the Third French Republic. It is emblematic of the relationship between the supra-firm and firm levels, when the might of the former imposes itself to the latter.[32]

Likewise, the creation of the International Labour Organization in 1919, with its explicit aim of advancing "fundamental principles and rights at work," reflects the global consolidation of norms that press firms toward standardization, codification, and constraints on discretionary authority.[33] Today, many states throughout the globe have some sort of Labor regulation which oversees and settles how contracting should be carried out, and specific conditions that are intra-workplace related.

4.2 'Soft' Adaptation: Cultural Appropriation

Yet compliance to the dictates of supra-firm authorities is only part of the story. Firms have also appropriated and internalized political and moral vocabularies from the outside, often reshaping them for managerial purposes. Thinkers of the Classical School of Management Theory, such as Henri Fayol, already drew heavily on state-oriented and sometimes quasi-military political discourse to conceptualize internal interactions and propose normative frameworks for administration.[34]

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[31] Sheila Eastman, "The Influence of Government on Labour Relations in France," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 20, no. 3 (1954): 296–307, https://doi.org/10.2307/138507.
[32] Ibid.
[33] International Labour Organization, "Mission," International Labour Organization, accessed January 25, 2026, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/lang--en/index.htm.
[34] Henri Fayol, *General and Industrial Management*, trans. Constance Storrs (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1949), 19–40. On p. 40, Fayol presents *esprit de corps* as an example of importing state and

Contemporary firms have advanced this pattern further. The incorporation of terms such as "equal opportunities," "fairness," and "freedom" into managerial language would have appeared alien in the factories of the 19th century, or even in the Fordist industries of the mid-20th.[35] The prevalence of such language, most evident in firms that have achieved significant organizational scale and sophistication, reflects a meaningful internalization of republican concerns. These firms are themselves innovations in forms of production, characterized by value chains that extend across unprecedented ranges and levels of complexity relative to their predecessors.

A predictable objection arises here, namely that these adaptations may be driven by convenience or reputational incentives rather than conviction, or worse, that their substantive impact is deliberately minimized, reducing them to mere façades. This objection is neither unique to firms nor does it undermine the argument. From a republican perspective at the level of the state, few would claim that rulers restrain their discretionary power out of benevolence alone; rather, republican theorists typically explain the emergence of checks and balances by reference to countervailing powers capable of resisting domination.[36] Pettit's emphasis on contestability as a core element of freedom reflects this view.[37] Whether such developments stem from convenience or conviction is therefore normatively irrelevant, since what matters is not the *motives* of institutional designers but the *effective constraints* that are produced.

A second objection could concern the impossibility of showcasing a single exemplar of a fully realized republican firm. This objection misunderstands the nature of institutional development. A republican exemplar is not a fixed end-state but a process: institutions evolve through contestation and adaptation, never reaching finality, yet always *taking steps* within a trajectory that can be judged as closer to or farther from an ideal benchmark. From this perspective, even the mere infusion of republican language into the internal discourse of firms marks progress relative to earlier forms of productive organization that lacked any vocabulary of non-domination.

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military principles into business management: "Dividing enemy forces to weaken them is clever, but dividing one's own team is a grave sin against business".

[35] See GSK, *Annual Report 2024*, 166; Sanofi, *Annual Report 2024*, 76, invoking fairness, equal opportunity, inclusivity, and non-discrimination as firm adaptation of political discourse into corporate practice.

[36] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 51–61.

[37] Ibid.

4.3 Epilogue

I do not aim here to exhaust the analysis of how external regulations, policies, and discourses shape firms along republican lines; many relevant avenues lie beyond the scope of my argument. For present purposes, it suffices to note that historical examples demonstrate the firm's adaptive and environment-responsive character when confronted with extrinsic pressures. Firms are capable not only of complying with external constraints but also of appropriating ideas from outside and internalizing them within their own evolving institutional language.

I will now shift focus to the forces that have intrinsically generated something akin to the rule of law within firms. These forces arise neither from compliance with external regulation nor from any internal popular revolution of intra-firm "citizenry." Rather, they reflect a pattern of republican evolution that appears *aristocratic* in character.

5. Towards *Republics of Production*: Freedom-promoting structures produced from within

5.1 The starting point: Delegation and Separation of *ownership* from *management*

One of the most consequential transformations accompanying the growth of markets and the increasing complexity of value chains and productive units is the analytical separation of the roles of *owner* and *manager*. As firms expand, the tasks related to *owning* capital (providing capital and setting long-term strategy for it to produce value over time) and *managing* it (directing its daily operations while also providing further input in its planning) cease to fully coincide in the same individual and/or group. This separation is not merely semantic but essentially *structural*, reshaping *who* holds power and *how* it is exercised within the firm.

Historically, ownership and management once tended to overlap. In pre-industrial households and early industrial factories, capital typically took the form of small, owner-operated enterprises in which the shareholders were directly involved in supervision and direction; whether it would be the *pater familias* (or any form of head of the household), the master craftsman of a workshop or guild, the shop-owner of a small retail establishment, or an early industrialist who runs his factory directly. This last example is the one I take to be analogous to Marx's archetypical persona of "Moneybags," as depicted in *Capital.*[38]

That proximity (owner as *supervisor*, owner as *daily administrator*) characterized earlier relations of production and placed control in a single hand. The pivotal issue, then, is the proximity of roles: where *owner* and *manager* are so proximate that they can be conflated into one, power within the firm is exercised in a much less constrained manner, similar to a father with their children in a family unit.

That *owner-managers* once held far greater discretionary power than what emerged after their separation from management is evident in both preindustrial workshops and early industrial settings. The master-apprentice dynamic in artisanal production, along with Marx's "Moneybags" figure and the social critiques of industrial life in 19th century

[38] Marx, *Capital*, 121.

Western Europe, as seen in Victor Hugo, illustrate this clearly,[39] with an owner present on the shop floor supervising, disciplining, and punishing at will, with no internal mechanisms of accountability. Workers subject to such concentrated authority often experienced a more immediate form of domination, closer to servitude, than the later, more mediated forms of subordination that developed subsequently.

When a growing enterprise requires delegation, a new relationship emerges: an owner *hires* a manager to supervise workers. In that instant, the firm's internal constitution changes. The manager now *commands* but is also *accountable* upward; managerial authority, by being answerable to ownership, ceases to be a wholly monolithic, unchecked power. For analytical clarity, this can be modeled as a transition from an *owner–worker* dyad to an *owner–manager–worker* triad, where "manager" denotes any employee charged with supervising others and "worker" denotes those without supervisory duties.

This is not a formal or explicit separation of powers in the state-level constitutional sense, nor does it make the firm a perfectly balanced polity; yet it does produce an essential historical consequence: power is *dispersed* (or *separated*, or *divided*). Where power is not absolute it therefore must be *shared* to an extent, and sharing generates incipient control mechanisms. Monolithic authority gives way to multiple centers that, at bare minimum, observe one another and, at maximum, check and counterbalance each other.

The modern firm's separation of ownership and management inadvertently breaks the old unity of command. This does not mean that ownership itself is necessarily fragmented, but by analytically dissociating ownership from direction, authority is exercised through distinct offices and reciprocal constraints. For modern workers, this means confronting indeed larger and hierarchical corporations, as the skeptical tradition emphasizes,[40] yet ones in which power has become *internally divided* across multiple functions and authorities.

They no longer face one solitary proprietor but a layered hierarchy in which owners, boards, and managers advance differently, sometimes clashing, interests. Owners prioritize returns

[39] See Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Christine Donougher (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), pt. 1 (*Fantine*), esp. bk. 5, for a vivid depiction of factory workers in France, using the precarious situation of Fantine as an ideal type of the complete lack of due process, exemplifying how she was fired (the accusation of having an illegitimate daughter turned into a decision of termination of her contract by the monolithic authority of Valjean as the factory owner-manager).
[40] Anderson, *Private Government*, 50-1.

on capital and optimizing its allocation; whereas Managers may seek different personal benefits such as operational stability, hierarchical status, and higher remuneration (a growth in their salaries is, by definition and all other things constant, a direct reduction of the return on capital because it diminishes profit), amongst others.[41]

5.2 The *division of power* as byproduct of the *division of labor*

The separation of ownership and management creates an internal division that disrupts the old unity of arbitrary rule. While the *division of labor* is often highlighted as a defining development of the industrial revolution, its parallel process of the *division of power and administration* receives comparatively little attention. This process is not only concurrent with the division of labor, but it is also a consequence of it; dividing power and administration is itself a form of dividing up business processes and tasks, creating new roles that require labor, mental resources, and time.

The concept of *division of labor* often focuses on the allocation of specific tasks within business processes. In Classical Management Theory, particularly Taylorism, the concern was *mainly* with tasks performed on the shop floor, mostly by workers with limited supervisory authority engaged in manual and repetitive work, though this was not always strictly the case.[42] The concept of the *division of labor*, however, might naturally extend beyond other contexts, such as global supply chains and also to forms of work that are less repetitive or manually-intensive in nature.

By contrast, the *division of power* concerns how authority and command are distributed in firms where ownership and management are analytically separated and the effects of this separation were already becoming evident. By the turn of the 20th century, these changes were already so significant that Fayol, in *General and Industrial Management*, emphasized the principle of "unity of command" as cornerstone of his project, recognizing that the concurrent development of *labor* and *power* divisions could undermine a firm if authority were dispersed across numerous functions and heads without proper coordination.[43]

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[41] Neil Anderson, Deniz S. Ones, Handan Kepir Sinangil, and Chockalingam Viswesvaran, eds., *Handbook of Industrial, Work & Organizational Psychology: Volume 1: Personnel Psychology*, 1st ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2001), 386–392.
[42] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1919), 5–29.
[43] Fayol, *General and Industrial Management*, 24.

While the structural separation of ownership and management creates the potential for a dispersion of power, the actual distribution of authority is shaped by the differing objectives and incentives of owners and managers. Owners think in terms of optimizing invested assets; managers pursue organizational survival and career incentives. These divergent goals create conflicts in multiple areas, such as salary or promotions, transforming what was once a single-headed authority into a dispersed power structure. In practice, this generates competing objectives within the firm and begins to erode the traces of monolithic power.

I argue that this creates a macrostructure that effectively separates power and limits its absolute exercise, not only because authority is dispersed across multiple heads, but also because it generates a form of two-way accountability akin to a social contract. Managers are accountable to owners for delivering operational results, while owners are accountable to managers for providing fair remuneration and rewards, including material compensation, influence, and career advancement.[44] Arbitrary interference is therefore both costlier and less feasible. No manager truly operates without oversight: any decision that undermines firm performance is prone to potentially elicit a response from owners, who act as supervisors of the supervisors, either through sanctions or removal from office.

Managers, because they lack proprietor status, are just as replaceable and prone to dismissal as non-supervisory workers. In that sense, even the highest administrators in the hierarchy, such as CEOs, are analytically equivalent to its lowest members. Both are prone to be *hired*, *supervised*, and *dismissed*. The fact that supervisors are themselves supervised is an essential cornerstone of any political system that operates with checks and balances.[45] Theoretically, a supervised supervisor can act without constraint only insofar as their own superior permits it. The very existence of a higher authority, however, ensures that the threat of sanction and control is *always* present within the relationship, thereby transforming its structural capacities. It is therefore safe to conclude that the *division of power* is the political counterpart and consequence of its poietic mirror, the *division of labor*.

[44] Ibid., 26–32.
[45] F. A. Hayek, in *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Ronald Hamowy, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 275.

5.3 Analytical implications of Power Dispersion

Domination, understood as the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in the choices of others, is reduced insofar as those who exercise supervisory authority, whether individuals or collectives, are *constrained* by other agents with equal or superior power. As authority no longer resides in a single figure but is distributed across the firm, attempts to exercise unchecked discretion encounter structural limits. I return later to the capacity of the firm as a whole to dominate, but for present purposes the focus remains on internal officials who wield influence and administrative authority over other members of the polity.

These officials increasingly operate under conditions in which their authority is dispersed, a change that is often accompanied by a reduction in their attributions. This reduction concerns both the formal scope of their powers and the informal, socially-accepted range of potential interferences, whether arbitrary or not. The *division of power* produces a form of specialization in the uses of authority, just as the *division of labor* produces specialization in technical tasks. As responsibilities become segmented, each official exercises a narrower set of functions. This alone does not mean that their remaining powers are automatically more law-like. Up to this point the argument concerns the *dispersion* of power, not yet its *checks* or *control*.

If all authority is concentrated in the hands of Moneybags and he alone supervises a workshop of one hundred employees, then he effectively centralizes every administrative and supervisory power. In such a structure the question of who checks Moneybags has a simple answer: no one within the firm. One may appeal to external moral constraints or to his own conscience, but within the immanent political structure of the firm he faces no limitations other than those he chooses to impose on himself. Power concentrated in a single individual or collective cannot be checked, since the power-holder cannot simultaneously be judge and party. *Self-constraint* alone therefore cannot be taken as a sufficient basis for effective and substantial controls on domination.

This changes the moment he hires Smith, and later Perez, Andrews, and Robinson, assigning each of them particular supervisory tasks. By delegating distinct aspects of the business to these new officials, Moneybags divides the powers and attributions that once resided entirely in his own hands. As the managerial stratum grows, each delegate receives a smaller share of the authority once concentrated in a single figure. The analytical analogy is to imagine the distribution of power as following a decreasing inequality index: the initial situation approaches absolute inequality, while each new layer of administrative delegation reduces the concentration of authority and moves the internal structure of the firm toward a more diffuse power distribution.

Employee-citizens in a polity where Moneybags monopolizes all administrative power face a different structure and intensity of domination from one in which Moneybags has delegated authority to Smith, Perez, Andrews, Robinson, and others. In the latter, power is not only separated across multiple agents but also distanced across its layers. As Moneybags relies on more intermediaries to run the enterprise, he becomes increasingly removed from the day-to-day operations, precisely the sphere in which arbitrary interference is most immediately experienced by the largest part of the citizenry.

The same dynamic repeats when Smith delegates to Carlton and Quevedo: the managerial stratum itself fragments into further hierarchical levels, each *dispersing*, *separating*, and *distancing* power even more. When Moneybags' 19th century factory is projected forward into more-recent archetypes of a firm; namely productive units with global reach and hundreds of thousands of employee-citizens spread across business units, countries,[46] and hierarchical layers, the magnitude of this long-run process of power division becomes apparent and helps situate the scale of the structural historical changes involved.

That power becomes increasingly separated, though not necessarily checked, is no minor advancement within a system that aims to promote republican liberty. It is under precisely this premise that the Roman Republican coup of 509 BC took place: no individual should hold excessive power, duties had to be shared, and attributions must be delimited and bounded.[47] The same principle, extended to the macro-analysis of state power, was later articulated by Montesquieu as a foundational condition for constitutional balances capable of sustaining a liberty-promoting regime. The first step in *constraining* power is to *separate* it, since power that remains monolithically united cannot meaningfully check itself.[48] That

[46] Abbott Laboratories, *2024 Annual Report*, 2.
[47] Fustel de Coulanges, Numa Denis. *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*. Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001, 205–209.
[48] Pettit, Republicanism, 79, 177–9. Pettit states that "The second condition associated with the desirability of having a nonmanipulable, constitutionalist system of government requires that the powers which officials have under any regime of law should be dispersed." (177), treating this dispersion of power as a prerequisite for any system that aims to be both constitutional and non-manipulable. He further understands this dispersion-of-power condition as part of a broader republican project that extends beyond the classical

such separation arises organically at the intra-firm level not only provides the springboard for further institutional frameworks that operate as freedom-promoting constraints, but also shows how firms can develop the capacity to promote liberty by generating the primary precondition of a republican constitution.

Dispersing power alone does not settle the question of liberty at work by reducing domination. One major objection remains: even if power is dispersed so to as reducing effectively the capacity of arbitrary interference at the macro level, the micro-sphere of supervision may still reproduce direct subordination – the whip might simply pass from Moneybags to Smith. Indeed, a stratum of senior employees increasingly centralizes dealings with shareholders, while the bulk of workers remain disconnected from ownership; separation of ownership and administration thus risks replacing one concentration of domination with another if not accompanied by institutional safeguards. As stated before, the division of power is not a *sufficient* condition for power to be checked, though it is a *necessary* one.

The key regularity established so far, and the analytical starting point, is that as productive units grow they almost always *delegate* functions and attributions to intermediaries outside of the owner stratum. This creates a new form of *equality* within the firm: management both supervises and is supervised. As firms expand and capital becomes more complex, power spreads across different heads, raising the risk that authority becomes less strict, unified, and cohesive unless mechanisms exist to counteract fragmentation. By the early 20th century these effects were already so evident that Management Theory had to integrate them in order to alert for a preservation in the unity of command, a concern already noted by Fayol.[49]

This shift does not require every exemplar to fit the same model, but rests on the broad regularity that growing productive complexity *necessarily* compels owners to relinquish direct supervisory control. The clarification is important because the argument traces a structural tendency rather than a universal rule, and it is this tendency that underpins the

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legislative–executive–judicial division. As he notes, "Within that tradition, the functional division was part of a larger project of dispersing power" (79) This makes clear that Pettit's concern is not limited to separating the highest offices of the state, but also includes the dispersion of state functions more generally, so as to minimize manipulability across institutional domains, including areas such as public administration.

[49] Fayol, *General and Industrial Management*, 24.

broader claim about the transformation of power relations within the firm. I now move from this dispersion of power to a derived further process: institutional complexification.

5.4 Institutional Complexification

I have argued that the dispersion of power arises naturally from organizational growth and complexity, driven by the necessity of delegation. This dynamic forms part of a broader *division of power* that develops alongside the *division of labor*. As productive units expand, roles, hierarchies, and competences diversify, separating functions and multiplying centers of authority. I now examine how this dispersed power is institutionalized within the firm's administrative structure and internal norms, and how a form of rule of law emerges within it.

Two consequences of this institutional complexification are particularly significant. First, the compartmentalization of administration into departments, notably the emergence and role of Human Resources. Second, the development of intra-firm codes, guidelines, and manuals that compile explicit norms regulating interpersonal and hierarchical interactions, much like civil codes and constitutions structure relations within a state. Together, these trends signal a shift from firms as enclosed tyrannies toward what might be called *republics of production*.

With *institutional complexification* I refer to the process by which dispersed power becomes structured and constrained through formal mechanisms. As firms compartmentalize administration into departments, they create units that possess some autonomy but are subject to overarching governance.[50] Departments can provide internal refuge, alternative career paths, and avenues of contestation; they generate intra-organizational exit options and thereby reduce the bargaining asymmetry between supervisors and subordinates.

A particularly important product of this process is the emergence of Human Resources (HR) as a distinct function. Charged with managing the firm's human capital (hiring, training, evaluating, and, where necessary, dismissing), HR centralizes decisions that were once at managers' unilateral discretion. In doing so, it becomes an imperfect but real appeal mechanism: it can mediate disputes, review managerial conduct, and, in some cases,

[50] Anderson et al., *Handbook of Industrial, Work and Organizational Psychology*, 102–106.

sanction managers.[51] Thus the technical mission of HR yields an institutional capacity that constrains arbitrary managerial power.

Institutional complexification also includes the spread of intra-firm codes, manuals, and procedural norms – what might be called *intra-firm civil codes*. These rules, whether written or procedural, serve to standardize expectations, make interference predictable and rule-bound, and render managerial action reviewable. Their form matters more than their provenance: even when produced in response to external regulation, these codes operate internally as law-like constraints that reduce arbitrariness.

Codes and procedures, as in the state-level, take many shapes in how they are codified and degrees of visibility by which they are known. They need not be *universally* published or uniformly understood; nonetheless, the mere existence – and partial knowledge – of stable rules increases transparency and predictability much needed to constitute and maintain a republic.[52]

To think historically: imagining a factory worker in the world depicted by Marx is to imagine an individual confronting an authority they had virtually no means to contest. Their situation was defined by an absolute, personalistic power unconstrained by codified rules, where the operative principle was whatever whim preoccupied the firm's autocrat.[53] The idea that such a worker might file a complaint about departmental abuse, or invoke an internal code of conduct to limit the arbitrary interference of a supervisor, reads more like dark comedy than a plausible historical reality.

Contemporary workers, by contrast, encounter layered administrative structures, departmental autonomy, HR mediations, and codified procedures that make managerial interventions more traceable and contestable. This, as in the state-level, does not equate to *full freedom* (whatever that may mean), but it is instead a substantial change in the modalities of control. Up to now, therefore, it can be said that organizational growth tends to produce both *power dispersion* and *institutional complexification*. These processes constitute a structural adaptation that, both deliberately and inadvertently, creates mechanisms limiting the power of arbitrary interference. The transition is ongoing: the 19th

[51] Ibid., 110–122.
[52] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 176.
[53] Marx, *Capital*, 235–239. Marx here states, "Division of labour within the workshop implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist over men" (237).

century factory did not simply replicate itself at larger scale; it developed new structures, while replacing obsolete ones, into corporate forms whose internal constitution increasingly resembles, in important respects, republican checks on arbitrary power.

It is relevant to understand that the dispersion of power is both cause and consequence of institutional complexification. As authority is distributed across new roles with differentiated competences, the need for administrative order intensifies – necessitating new hierarchies, specialized offices, and clarified responsibilities. Conversely, as the institutional framework itself becomes more complex, power becomes further dispersed from its original monolithic form. Growth, in this sense, generates a feedback loop: complexity necessitates division, and division deepens complexity.

One of the clearest manifestations of this process is the compartmentalization of administration. The larger and more complex the enterprise, the less can a single head effectively oversee its entirety. Departments therefore emerge as specialized centers of management, endowed with a degree of autonomy and discretion but ulteriorly subordinated to a higher coordinating entity (typically a board of directors and/or shareholder representatives). This structural necessity produces several consequences. It increases the distance between ownership and employees, but it also generates zones of relative refuge, spaces of internal negotiation and limited contestation.

Departments can form coalitions, bargain collectively, or at least articulate dissent within the organization. Their very existence creates internal exit options from a particular supervising power, allowing workers to move horizontally within the firm rather than vertically or outright out of it, thus improving their freedom of maneuver and reducing dependence on any single superior. The possibility of movement and contestation, however limited, pressures managers to moderate their authority, lest they risk losing staff or credibility within the structure they oversee.

Within this process, the Human Resources (HR) department represents a particularly illustrative instance. Its emergence (now almost universal in contemporary firms) centralizes the administration of labor power in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Quantitatively, HR controls the mechanisms of hiring and dismissal, removing from individual supervisors the unilateral authority to hire or fire. Even when managers may trigger or recommend such actions, at least the execution rests with HR, which may also hear appeals and mediate disputes. This effectively creates a formal mechanism of contestability: an imperfect yet genuine court of appeals that can evaluate the actions of both managers and employees.

Qualitatively, HR's role extends to monitoring the well-being, performance, and development of employees. Though primarily oriented toward optimizing productivity, this oversight inevitably involves attending to hygiene, safety, education, and emotional welfare.[54] These interventions are of course not purely altruistic-motivated, but by institutionalizing attention to worker conditions, HR promotes a form of procedural fairness. It grants workers a voice (particularly in cases of abuse or managerial misconduct) and establishes a precedent for reviewing authority through a quasi-legal framework of internal procedures. Increasingly, corporate discourse itself reflects this transformation, describing HR as a forum for resolution and justice, where grievances are processed according to standardized criteria.[55]

A distinction worth making concerns the court-like character of the HR function. It contains an inherent tension similar to that found in judicial institutions at the state level, from local tribunals to constitutional courts, because it raises the classic question of who controls the controllers. In constitutional orders that prize liberty, authors such as Hayek argue that court-like mechanisms are indispensable for constraining the discretionary power of potentially arbitrary officials.[56] Yet these same mechanisms introduce a second-order problem, namely the difficulty of supervising those entrusted with a constitutional supervision.

The ambiguity surrounding such institutions is evident in many political contexts. In Colombia, several Constitutional Court decisions have had effects akin to legislation and/or administrative acts, notably the 2015 ruling on same sex adoption and the 2016 ruling on same sex marriage, both widely seen as filling a legislative void and generating significant

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[54] Neil Anderson, Deniz S. Ones, Handan Kepir Sinangil, and Chockalingam Viswesvaran, eds., *Handbook of Industrial, Work and Organizational Psychology: Volume 1, Personnel Psychology* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 139.
[55] Lia Marthalia, "The Importance of Human Resources (HR) Management in Company," *Journal of World Science* 1, no. 9 (September 2022): 700–705, https://doi.org/10.36418/jws.v1i9.89.
[56] F. A. Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 287–307.

debate.[57] Similarly, the 2013 removal of Bogotá's then-democratically elected mayor, Gustavo Petro, by the Office of the Inspector General had been interpreted either as an overreach framed as republican oversight or as a legitimate exercise of institutional authority, even when operating in tension with democratic preferences.[58]

No perfected or finalized method of *electing* or *checking* the reach of these counter majoritarian institutions exists. This does not mean that they are beyond all forms of control, but it does require acknowledging that supervising them is neither simple nor straightforward. Their very presence continues to provoke criticism from those who fear that judicial-like power may reverse an institutional framework that has already underwent some change in reducing the potential use of arbitrary interference.

Although concerns about HR departments overstepping their reach receive far less public attention than debates about courts at the state level, their court like character raises similar questions. These include the nature of the authority HR exercises, the sources of its legitimacy, and the mechanisms through which its decisions are reviewed or constrained. It also foregrounds the problem of how to ensure the prudence, fairness, and judgment expected of courts, a concern that becomes especially salient when examining the internal constitution of particular firms.

The fact that a contemporary worker may have access to an institution such as Human Resources, through which situations of abuse can be reported, ranging from inappropriate yelling and insults to unjustified demands for unpaid overtime, physical violence, or sexual misconduct, might have appeared unthinkable to a 19th century worker. In such settings, the accused may under certain conditions become a suspect and, if wrongdoing is established, be subject to sanctions. While this comparison is necessarily counterfactual, it highlights a significant historical transformation. The arbitrary exercise of power, up to and including outright abuse, is less likely to go unchecked (and unpunished, given the case), as institutional frameworks increasingly constrain such behavior and, where they do not

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[57] Human Rights Watch, "Colombia: Constitutional Court Upholds Same-Sex Marriage," Human Rights Watch, April 28, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/28/colombia-constitutional-court-upholds-same-sex-marriage.
[58] Helen Murphy, "Former Rebel Mayor of Colombia's Capital Removed from Post," Reuters, December 10, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/former-rebel-mayor-of-colombia-s-capital-removed-from-post-idUSBRE9B902D/.

fully prevent it, raise the costs of its exercise (for instance, increased existence of intra-exit options as well).

5.5 The Rise of Accountability and the Codification of Rules

Alongside compartmentalization, another institutional feature emerges: the codification of internal norms. As ownership and management become analytically distinct, firms require coherent frameworks to regulate interactions across different levels of authority. This has led to a proliferation of written and unwritten codes, including conduct manuals, ethical guidelines, and procedural standards, which function as intra-firm civil codes.

These codes serve multiple purposes: articulating a unified strategic vision, ensuring predictable governance, and complying with external legal requirements. Beyond compliance, they express an internal aspiration to standardize behavior and rendering managerial power more transparent and subject to review, thereby further reducing the capacity for arbitrariness.

The need for transparency is again not necessarily born out of a profound republican conviction, but out of the need to optimize the administration of company assets, which are often in the hands of managers with a high degree of discretional action. Just as the need for delegation arises naturally from the demands of greater complexity both inside and outside the firm, so too does the need to *control* the delegates produced by this dispersion of power.

This requires clear rules that bind all members under a shared economic and ethical framework, preserving the unity of strategy that early theorists of the firm, such as Fayol and Taylor, so strongly emphasized.[59] Such codes, by formalizing the rules of conduct, restrict discretionary interference and provide a measure of accountability applicable even to the highest executives – a trend evident in several recent scandals where even CEOs have been sanctioned or dismissed for breaches of internal policy.[60]

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[59] Fayol, *General and Industrial Management*, 24.

[60] "Astronomer CEO Resigns After Video Captured at Coldplay Concert," *Le Monde*, July 20, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/culture/article/2025/07/20/astronomer-ceo-resigns-after-controversy-over-video-captured-at-coldplay-concert_6743537_30.html.

These codes are neither uniform in form nor in their modes of dissemination. Some are published as appendices to employment contracts, while others are conveyed through training sessions, conferences, or posted notices. Their visibility varies, but even partial awareness of their existence has significant effects. The mere knowledge that conduct is governed by a framework of codified and universal norms renders authority less arbitrary and more predictable, particularly where such codes directly address issues of governance using a vocabulary that includes terms such as “discrimination,” “intimidation,” “transparency,” “honesty,” and “fairness.”[61]

This aligns with Pettit’s distinction between arbitrary and non-arbitrary interference: when rules are known, stable, and oriented to the general interest, interference ceases to be the unilateral imposition of will and becomes instead a legitimate exercise of authority.[62] The parallel with the publication of the Twelve Tables in Antiquity, which were deliberately codified and made public by physically writing them in stone, in Republican Rome is instructive. As Fustel de Coulanges observes, this act represented a decisive step in transforming the traditional arbitrary rule of the Roman nobility into a system of transparent, impersonal law – a transformation that underpins the very idea of the republic.[63]

Returning to the nineteenth-century archetype of Moneybags, once he has delegated authority to Smith, Perez, Andrews, and Robinson, each an employee-citizen with supervisory powers over others who may themselves oversee additional employee-citizens, a problem of alignment emerges. How does Moneybags ensure that this expanding chain of agents remains consistent with his policies and strategy? He occupies an *architectonic* position in which his decisions and organizational blueprints shape the firm as a whole, requiring him to secure coordination across its compartments so they can both adapt to external pressures, such as laws and regulations, and pursue his chosen path of value creation and organizational viability.

As more agents acquire architectonic responsibilities of their own, contributing to the formation of the organizational blueprint, Moneybags must allow them greater creative

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[61] Muel Kaptein, “Business Codes of Multinational Firms: What Do They Say?,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 50, no. 1 (2004): 13–31, https://doi.org/10.1023/B:BUSI.0000021051.53460.da.
[62] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 107.
[63] Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 264-8.

autonomy. Yet he must also ensure that their plans remain coherent and do not conflict with his broader design. The need to rationalize and standardize therefore emerges as a natural consequence of delegating authority. Delegation distances Moneybags from the tasks he once performed himself and places key decisions in the hands of others whose actions may affect the firm in far-reaching ways.

If Moneybags remained a monolithic pivot of power, no formal coding of conduct or procedure would be needed, since he could trust that his own actions would always follow his own plans. Even when his new decisions contradicted earlier intentions, he would still be the sole planner and the final instance of approval, so any new design would be validated immediately. Once power is separated through delegation, however, even if this separation arises unintentionally as a consequence of an increasingly complex value chain, the situation changes completely. Delegation means that the higher echelons must hold the lower ones, whether they have supervisory power or not, *accountable* under the same set of norms.

Accountability arises because Moneybags does not delegate authority to give officials unlimited discretionary power to cause the firm's disunity and eventual dissolution. He delegates to lighten his own administrative load and to expand the value the firm can generate, since the growing complexity of production eventually exceeds what a single mind can manage. Once authority is dispersed, placing everyone under the same set of rules becomes far cheaper and far more workable than inventing individual or improvised codes for each official.[64] A rational form of administration therefore requires a degree of *equality*, since accountability operates at lower cost when all members of the firm are governed by the same principles rather than by differing standards.

This does not mean that *all* rules must be identical for every role. Some differentiation is inevitable when it follows from the nature of specific activities, such as clothing requirements linked to hygiene or safety for employee-citizens who work near production lines or machinery. The central point is that the overarching codes, especially those that concern general ethics or supra-compliance rules within the firm, serve as the highest benchmark. These codes form the primary set of formally enacted norms that regulate intra

[64] Fayol, *General and Industrial Management*, 19–40.

firm interaction, and they are the standards against which all citizens are held internally accountable.

The conjunction of *accountability* and *equality* implies that no official is permitted to act *purely* at their own discretion. Their authority is constrained, and their delegated power is not only a reduced portion of the monolithic power Moneybags once held before delegation occurred, but is also controlled by the rules and codes that bind all members of the organization. The scope of their possible interference becomes smaller, and the likelihood that such interference is arbitrary decreases because violations of standard codes now carry higher costs.

This dual commitment to *accountability* and *equality* is illustrated by the dismissal of Astronomy's CEO and HR Director for violating internal norms. The internal rules that arise from the complexification of the administrative structure apply even to the highest figures in the hierarchy. Both values are necessary if the system unleashed by Moneybags' initial act of delegation, and the resulting separation of power, is to be further managed through rationalized and standardized procedures. Fayol emphasizes that unity of command requires a degree of standardization made possible by universal rules and clear standards.[65]

Power is now not only *separated* but also increasingly *checked*. The emergence of these codes ensures that any person with supervisory authority, and even those without formal supervisory roles who can still influence others, faces a reduced scope for arbitrary interference in the choices of other citizens of the firm. Interference becomes neither a presumption nor a discretionary gift attached to a position. It becomes a costlier decision that must align with the firm's internal standards and rules, which now operate as formal constraints on the use of delegated power.

5.6 Epilogue

Through the coexistence of departmental autonomy and intra-firm legalism, power within the modern firm becomes not only *separate* but internally *checked*. Departments exercise authority, yet their actions are bounded by codified rules and the mediating functions of HR. Some individuals retain the ability to intervene, but their discretion is increasingly limited by procedural and normative standards. The result is far from a fledgling imperfect

[65] Ibid.

republic, which reflects a discernible movement toward republican conditions: authority capable of interference but progressively less arbitrary and more governed in a law-like way.

Up to this point, I have concluded that power dispersion, as a structural byproduct of organizational growth and the division of labor, tends to generate its own mechanisms of limitation. The multiplication of roles and procedures does not merely produce more wielders of supervisory power; it creates mutual constraints among them. The workplace transforms from a dominion of arbitrary power into a structure increasingly governed by non-arbitrary rules – a *republic of production*. The 19th century factory has given way to the 21st century corporation: not an egalitarian utopia, but a complex structure whose internal rules and institutions progressively reflect the principles of non-domination and contestability that underpin freedom-promoting regimes. The firm increasingly resembles a republican polity rather than a familial or tyrannical authority.

Until now, I have shown how these institutional and naturally adaptive processes contain an intrinsic potential to promote freedom, continually adjusting to their own complexity and to the demands of the markets in which they operate. In the following sections, I will turn to the constituents of these emerging *republics of production*, the workers, managers, and specialists who inhabit them, and examine how they have evolved both as agents and as outcomes of the ongoing effort to limit arbitrary power in the workplace.

Before moving to the next section, I will address an objection that might come up at this point concerning *whose* authority is exactly the one being constrained. It is important to determine whether the institutional developments described above limit only *particular* officials within the firm or whether they also restrain the firm as a *whole* in its capacity for arbitrary interference. Put differently, even if individual agents *inside* the firm are constrained, does the firm itself as a *whole* remain unchecked?

The processes described limit the capacity of particular agents to interfere arbitrarily with others. This more personalized form of domination is the most immediate and visible type of power, both within the firm and in broader political life, such as when a supervisor wields master-like authority over a subordinate without meaningful constraint. A further question, however, is whether the firm as a whole is also constrained in its capacity for arbitrary interference. To address this, I treat the firm as an entity in its own right. This perspective allows for a closer analogy with the state and permits the use of political concepts such as free, independent, and sovereign in analyzing the firm's authority and its limits.

The principle of sovereignty, when applied to states, denotes that a political community is free from subordination to any external power and stands as the ultimate authority within its recognized territory and population. Sovereignty also implies equality among states in the realms of international law and diplomacy. No state may legitimately violate another's jurisdiction, and each must be engaged on equal terms, a status acknowledged and mediated by supranational bodies operating above the level of individual states. The crucial point for present purposes is that entities themselves must be considered free as entities if liberty understood as non-domination is to function as a normative ideal at the supra-entity level. To recognize an entity as sovereign is to acknowledge that it holds prerogatives within its jurisdiction that no other entity may arbitrarily contest[66].

Firms, like states, can be evaluated through a similar benchmark of sovereignty if freedom is to be preserved at the supra-firm level among the entities that inhabit it. This implies that firms also possess, and regularly exercise, sovereign prerogatives, and that such prerogatives are not only necessary for the freedom and independence of the entity but need not be normatively troubling so long as the treatment of individuals within is constrained by rules that limit arbitrary power.

What, then, are the prerogatives of the firm that function as sovereign decisions? Just as states can revoke citizenship, authorize deportations, or impose imprisonment, firms retain the essential prerogatives of hiring and dismissing those who contract with them. The power to decide whom to hire and whom to release is a formal authority that rightly belongs to the firm and, by itself, does not diminish the liberty of its members. It is not the only sovereign prerogative, but it is among the most central to the firm's operations.

As with state-level sovereignty, the normative concern lies less in the existence of these prerogatives and more in how they are exercised and the extent to which they are shielded from arbitrariness. The institutional developments described earlier reduce the scope for arbitrary interference from within, making the firm as a whole appear more freedom-promoting. A similar logic applies to states: those that limit the power of potentially

[66] "Sovereignty," *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, accessed January 25, 2026, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sovereignty.

individual *dominators* within their structures are, as wholes (entity-level), less likely to be seen as exercising arbitrary domination over their citizens.

The issue of prerogatives and the sovereignty of entities is far from simple, and contemporary geopolitical debates constantly reveal this difficulty. Questions such as "Is state X committing genocide?" or "How can we determine whether the imprisonments or deportations carried out by state Y are lawful?" or "Is state Z a regime of unfreedom despite its official claims to respect individual liberty?" illustrate how contentious, complex, and heavily disputed these assessments are. Likewise, determining whether it is legitimate to take international action on states X, Y, or Z in response to abuses of their sovereign prerogatives and in defense of an allegedly oppressed population raises further layers of normative and empirical controversy.

These are important questions, but they fall beyond the scope of this work. What matters for my purposes is the structural lesson they share: the more robust and institutionally constrained the internal framework of an entity is, and the more effectively it curtails the potential for internal domination, the more its sovereign prerogatives can be interpreted as rule-bound rather than arbitrary. By analogy, a firm with a strong internal architecture that limits discretionary power is less likely to dominate as a master. Its prerogatives, like those of a state under a regime of liberty, become more predictable, more procedurally governed, and less susceptible to arbitrariness.

6. The Citizenry of the Republics of Production

> "The line taken by republicans comes out in their conception of freedom as citizenship or *civitas.* Citizenship is a status that exists, of necessity, only under a suitable regime of law: as one commentator on the republican tradition says, 'the main feature of the *civitas* is the rule of law'"[67]

6.1 Architects and Masons

If republicanism within productive units is to be more than a structural metaphor, we must turn from *institutions* to the *people* who populate and manipulate them. So far, I have shown how firms, through dispersed authority, compartmentalization, and increasingly codified rules, have reduced the scope for arbitrary interference to resemble imperfect republics. Following the republican tradition, which understands a *citizen* as one who enjoys liberty rather than a *slave* enduring domination, it becomes necessary to ask: to whom do these freedom-promoting institutions actually apply?

But no polity, however well designed, is sustained by structure alone. These organizational republics depend on a citizenry capable of upholding and operating the very frameworks that limit domination.[68] Modern firms therefore require not only workers who contribute economically but individuals whose capacities and dispositions sustain their administrative and normative complexity. It is for this reason that we must ask *who* these citizens are and *how* the same transformations that reshaped the firm's power structure have also reshaped those who populate it.

To understand who populates these republics of production, I will focus on two interrelated aspects. First, I will examine the nature of the work performed by the constituents and how the characteristics of that work reinforce the republican framework of the firm, shaping structures that prioritize equality and reduce subjugation. Second, I will consider how the citizens of these polities perceive themselves (their self-consciousness and sense of agency) contrasting views of the existence of a "working class," seen in traditional Marxism as largely dispossessed except for their labor and undergoing a constant deskilling in jobs that are repetitive and meaningless,[69] with the contemporary notion of workers as *owners* of

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[67] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 36.
[68] Ibid., 251.
[69] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore with Frederick Engels (1888), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 38, PDF ed.

"human capital," whose skills, knowledge, and initiative constitute their own form of value.[70] This self-conception is increasingly prevalent in today's labor markets and actively sustains the republican character of the firm, aligning individual initiative with the increasingly dispersed, accountable authority structures that define these organizations.

The worker of today's firm performs a markedly different kind of labor from that of their 19th century counterparts. The transformation of productive units into increasingly complex and sophisticated value chains – expanded in scale, scope, and technological integration – has reshaped not only what work is, but how it is experienced. Contemporary firms operate as intricate systems of coordination, where technological innovation and the pursuit of efficiency drive the continuous reconfiguration of tasks, responsibilities, and required skills. The old image of a company as a space of mechanical repetition has largely given way to environments in which flexibility, creativity, and information management dominate.

Some authors have interpreted the shift from manual to mental work as a process of *deskilling* – a loss of the practical know-how that once anchored workers to their crafts. In this view, technological automation would hollow out human labor, stripping it of meaning and expertise.[71] I instead take a different stance. Technological change is both destructive and creative: it abolishes certain skills and makes space for new ones. Knowledge is not a finite territory but an expanding frontier; with every innovation, some competencies vanish while others emerge.

The disappearance of old forms of craftsmanship is accompanied by the creation of new modes of intellectual and technical mastery. The bookkeeper of yesteryear is the Excel engineer-accountant of today. The transformation of labor, therefore, should be understood

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proofed and corrected by Andy Blunden, Marx/Engels Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/. Marx and Engels here emphasize the *dispossession* as a property of the proletariat by stating that it is "a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market" (18). They also describe the degrading quality of the work performed, echoing subsequent deskilling narratives which so often claim that workers are losing skills without seeing the acquisition of new ones too: "Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman" (18).

[70] Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research; distributed by Columbia University Press, 1975), 15–40.

[71] Burawoy, *Politics of Production*, 22.

not merely as a story of loss but as one of continual reinvention in the changing (both expanding and forgotten) boundaries of knowledge.[72]

This drive to displace repetitive effort onto instruments – and thereby to free human time for more complex or leisurely pursuits – has long underpinned both technological and cultural progress and was seen as an instrumental good for that reason by Aristotle.[73] The human impulse to make work lighter, more efficient, and more meaningful is in fact the engine of most transformative change in production and technology. It would be misleading, then, to say that labor has simply become "less manual" and "more mental." The coordination of hand, eye, and mind remains today more central than ever to productive activity.[74] What has changed is the *quality* of that coordination: work has become less repetitive, and more interpretive and creative.

To capture this transformation, I will adopt a simple metaphor. Let us call the older, more repetitive form of work *masonic* – rooted in instruction, material concretion, and strict adherence to given plans – and the newer, more creative and interpretive kind *architectonic* – concerned with the design of form, the navigation of uncertainty, and the exercise of judgment. The *mason* executes the plan conceived by others (the *architect*), transforming matter through repetition; the architect conceives the form itself, trading predictability for creativity, certainty for freedom. The modern productive unit is increasingly populated by *architects* rather than *masons*, and this shift profoundly alters the character of its citizenry.

Architects, in this sense, experience a different relation to authority. Because their work requires judgment, initiative, and imagination, they cannot be governed exclusively through command and control. Managerial authority becomes less about issuing orders and more about coordinating autonomous agents.[75] The *architect-worker*, unlike the *mason-*

[72] F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (September 1945): 519–530, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1809376.
[73] Tom Angier, "Aristotle on Work," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 278, no. 4 (2017): 435–449, https://doi.org/10.3917/rip.278.0435.
[74] What I mean here is that, even if modern work is not as physically demanding as factory labor, we cannot treat mental and manual aspects as separate – the coordination of hand, eye, and mind remains integral, contrary to common deskilling narratives. Obsolete organizational practices are replaced by new ones, from clay tablets to books and eventually to Excel, with each innovation transforming the skills required to perform, such as moving from handwritten bookkeeping to Excel formulas. "Upskilling" would therefore capture the nuances in a better way than "Deskilling."
[75] Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, 24. Burawoy states that Braverman notes that, under capitalism, the traditional unity of mental and manual labor in the craft worker is increasingly disrupted: "While capitalism continually creates new skills and new craft workers, it also systematically destroys them by taking, in Bill Haywood's words, 'managers' brains' away from 'under the workman's cap'" (23). This highlights a

worker, cannot have their work reduced to a set of instructions that must be applied in manual-like precision. Their contribution instead depends on interpretation, discretion, and creative problem-solving. In this respect, they enjoy a higher degree of self-direction and, consequently, a lower dependence on immediate managerial will.

This transformation is empirically visible. The proportion of "white-collar" or administrative roles has expanded dramatically, while the number of tasks directly related to the physical manipulation of products has declined.[76] Moreover, the complexity of markets now requires vast constellations of supportive activities – finance, logistics, design, marketing, data analysis – many of which operate mostly removed from the tangible product itself, and sometimes from any material output at all. The contemporary firm, therefore, is not merely a groundwork of repetitive tasks but a network of interrelated forms of conceptual and organizational labor[77].

That productive units are now inhabited predominantly by *architects* rather than *masons* has far-reaching consequences for the moral and political life of the firm. Most notably, it reshapes the self-consciousness of professional workers. The traits demanded of the architect – initiative, creativity, ambition, and a sense of ownership – are unmistakably entrepreneurial. Success in this environment no longer depends on obedience or mechanical precision but on autonomy and innovation. The organization itself, meanwhile, ceases to resemble a pyramid of strict command and becomes instead a multi-tiered structure of *architects* guiding other *architects*, each designing within their own scope of form and function. Ethnographic work such as Hadas Weiss's study in Berlin illustrates the rising self-consciousness of workers as entrepreneurs of their own human capital, individuals who actively invest in their skills and competencies with the expectation of future returns.[78]

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transformation toward a class of workers, "architects" of production, whose roles combine planning, judgment, and execution, and not repetitiveness with strictly manual processes.

[76] Carol A. Barry, "White Collar Employment: I — Trends and Structure," *Monthly Labor Review* 84, no. 1 (1961): 11–18, www.jstor.org/stable/41834419. Already in 1961, the growth of white-collar employment had been noted, reflecting a long-term twentieth-century trend that transformed both the nature of work and the concept of labor itself, moving toward a "more architects, less masons" model.

[77] Najmeh Avazpour and Ali Naghi Mosleh Shirazi, "Evaluating the Characteristics of Knowledge-Based Companies," *International Business Management* 13, no. 7 (September 2019): 279–287, https://doi.org/10.36478/ibm.2019.279.287.

[78] Hadas Weiss, "Workers to Capitalists: Repositioning Berlin's Middle Class," *Economic Anthropology* 12 (December 14, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12345. An ethnographic work done in Berlin in 2024, in which Weiss puts evidence of the idea of self-conception of workers as proprietors of human capital: "My argument will be that Berlin's professionals today perceive themselves and most everyone else as autonomous

This evolution from a *masonic* to an *architectonic* mode of production signals more than a technological shift; it marks a transformation in the very anthropology of work. The modern worker increasingly sees itself as a co-creator of value, not merely an executor of plans.[79] The transformation of labor parallels the earlier institutional developments described: just as firms have moved from monolithic to dispersed centers of power, so too have workers evolved from subjugated instruments to increasingly autonomous participants in the design of production.

6.2 Civic Identity and Self-Consciousness

The growing complexity of productive units therefore has a dual effect. On one hand, it disperses power, compartmentalizes and generates codes and norms of conduct for a more transparent governance, creating a system in which different powerholders are increasingly subject to accountability and checks. On the other hand, it produces a citizenry capable of sustaining this complexity – both in terms of delivering value to the market through sophisticated, interdependent activities, and in navigating their roles within a corporate polity where authority is contested and constrained.

The self-consciousness of citizens who consider themselves *free*, *property-owning*, and *equal* both to other entrepreneurs and fellow workers (including their supervisors) fosters a polity capable of sustaining republican institutions. A citizenry that perceives itself as dispossessed and unfree is far less likely to maintain systems that limit arbitrary power, whereas those who see themselves as proprietors of human capital are naturally oriented toward maintaining and perpetuating structures that distribute power and enforce accountability.[80]

A republic, whether at the level of the state or the firm, cannot endure when its constituents are effectively slaves; republican freedom requires active, capable citizens.[81] Historical analyses of Ancient Rome suggest that a well-educated, resourceful plebeian elite was essential in establishing a system governed by law rather than the arbitrary will of a few.[82]

individuals possessing a socially recognized value (their so-called human capital) that can appreciate or depreciate as the result of their actions." (2).
[79] Ibid.
[80] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 246-50.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 256-62.

Similarly, a republic of production populated by *self-conscious*, *architectonic* workers – people capable of making decisions, managing their own “capital”, and navigating complex organizational structures – creates a citizenry well-suited to sustaining internal checks and balances.

Dispersed power not only generates internal mechanisms of accountability but also shapes a workforce that increasingly embodies principles aligned with republican freedom rather than slavish subjection. By distributing authority, creating institutional controls, and fostering a citizenry that can exercise autonomy within these structures, contemporary firms emerge as freedom-promoting entities, capable of limiting domination from within and ensuring that power, while exercised, is not arbitrary.

7. Workplace Liberty vs Workplace Democracy

> "The crucial conception of the doctrinaire democrat is that of popular sovereignty. This means to him that majority rule is unlimited and unlimitable. The ideal of democracy, originally intended to prevent all arbitrary power, thus becomes the justification for a new arbitrary power."[83]

7.1 Aristocratic Republicanism

Up to this point, I have examined several institutional processes that have shaped the evolution of the firm: the division of power away from singular command; the compartmentalization of departments to enhance autonomy and create intra-firm exit options; the rise of Human Resources as an internal, quasi-judicial organ whose derivative powers curtail misconduct; and the promulgation of formal codes and procedures that standardize conduct and pre-empt arbitrary interference within the complex lattice of hierarchical and horizontal relations that characterize modern firms. These processes – affecting all the citizenry, both those with supervisory powers and without – reflect a broader trend toward the institutionalization of constraints on discretionary authority.

A central assumption underwriting this analysis is that such institutional developments promote freedom insofar as they limit the scope of arbitrary interference at the discretion of any power wielder. Standardization, proceduralism, and the multiplication of oversight mechanisms collectively act to "limit the scope and intensity of the whip": they shrink the domain in which any actor may unilaterally impose their will on another and become their *master*. Yet this assumption raises a further question that must be confronted: whether the interference exercised by authorities within the firm – though formally justified by rules, norms, and procedures – can be regarded as genuinely lawful in the republican sense. That is, does it track the interests of those subject to it?[84]

The challenge lies in determining how the interests of the governed may be connected to the lawfulness or arbitrariness of the interference that occurs within these emergent intra-firm checks and balances. Within the republican tradition, democracy (or *majoritarianism*) is often treated as a useful though potentially dangerous mechanism for this purpose. It is a means by which the interests of the governed can be somewhat integrated into the institutions that govern them, thereby reducing domination. But it is also a mechanism that,

[83] F. A. Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 171.
[84] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 247.

if elevated above the end it is supposed to serve, can become a pathway to new forms of tyranny. Democracy's value is thus *instrumental* and *conditional*, not *intrinsic.*[85]

This tension is especially visible in the firm, where some degree of hierarchical organization and discretionary command is widely considered indispensable, something in which I am in agreement with Anderson.[86] Unlike contemporary Western states, whose highest officials are typically elected by the population, the firm is structured more *aristocratically* (more closely resembling the Roman Senate than any popular assembly of a Greek democratic *polis*): top positions are selected by a narrow group of property holders and influential board members, while most subsequent tiers of authority are staffed through bureaucratic *designations*, not democratic *elections*.

The result is a hierarchy whose legitimacy does not derive from electoral consent but from property-based governance and managerial expertise. The firm may therefore come to resemble a *republican aristocracy*, endowed with institutions that can be freedom-promoting while nevertheless falling short of the democratic standards we typically expect from states.

Advocates of workplace democracy could argue that greater worker participation, whether in decision making or in the election of internal officials, could reduce domination by integrating employees' interests more directly into the firm's authoritative structures. Historical experiments, such as the worker councils of Yugoslavia and other Eastern Bloc countries, are often cited as evidence that democratic mechanisms can be incorporated into productive organizations.[87]

Yet republican theory does not treat democracy as a necessary condition for freedom. Democracies can be intensely unfree if they allow majorities to *dominate* minorities, just as non-democratic (Aristocratic, for instance) structures can avoid domination if they appropriately constrain arbitrary power. Democracy is, in this sense, a contingent route to the higher aim of non-domination, not the aim itself.

Whether democratizing the workplace necessarily enhances its republican character therefore remains an open question. None of the mechanisms described earlier dispersed

[85] F. A. Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 170–2.
[86] Anderson, *Private Government*, xvii.
[87] Goran Musić, *Making and Breaking the Yugoslav Working Class: The Story of Two Self-Managed Factories* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2021), 17–19, 247–50.

authority, procedural controls, internal oversight bodies, compartmentalization, depend on democratic elections or participatory governance. I have argued for dynamics that have *separated* and *checked* power, but not necessarily have made it democratic as a means of choosing the representatives who hold such power and sculpted a freedom-promoting polity that resembles a republican aristocracy.

7.2 Epilogue

Many republican and freedom-promoting institutions have strengthened liberty without relying on majoritarian approval. Even today, several constitutions of Western secular states enshrine anti-majoritarian bodies such as courts, from local to supreme and constitutional, as essential instruments for preserving a republic.[88] In Antiquity, the conflict between the aristocratic party and the democratic or popular party was often interpreted respectively by various sources as a struggle between liberty and tyranny.[89]

This does not mean that democratic mechanisms to elect and/or control officials by employee-citizens could not *further* reduce domination within firms; only that they *have not been necessary* for the freedom-promoting tendencies as presented here as part of the firm's structural evolution.

Workplace republicanism can exist independently of workplace democracy. Democracy is not part of the essence of republicanism itself. Be what may, being committed to liberty does not automatically commit us to democratic governance; but it does imply a commitment to appraising which institutional features best reduce domination in a specific context, including democratic ones.

[88] U.S. Courts, "About Educational Outreach," *United States Courts*, accessed January 25, 2026, https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/about.
[89] Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 184–188.

8. Conclusion

Firms possess the capacity to reduce instances of domination, understood as being subject to a power capable of arbitrary interference that restricts one's choices and thereby places one in the position of a master's dependent rather than that of a citizen within the republican tradition.

They acquire this capacity primarily through their *adaptive* nature, responding not only to external pressures such as state and supra-state regulation and discourse, but also internally, primarily, through efforts to build administrative structures that better serve their market oriented interest in value production. This internal development is largely spontaneous and often unintended, though deliberate managerial decisions also shape and refine it. The fact that this freedom promoting capability may be developed *from within* provides a springboard for further reflection on the nature and properties of firms, as well as on matters of policy.

This evolution unfolds through two closely connected processes. First, the *division of power*, the political counterpart of the more poietic *division of labor*, separates ownership from management while multiplying and distancing levels of control. Second, the institutional structure grows more complex, forming autonomous compartments governed by shared codes and rules that promote accountability and equality. These mechanisms raise the costs of arbitrary interference by increasing the risks for any employee citizen who violates established norms. This effect is reinforced by the creation of internal exit options and by an expanding capacity to formally contest or adjudicate perceived abuses within emerging court-like institutions, most notably the Human Resources function.

The *dispersion of power*, arising from the delegation of what was once monolithic authority, is a necessary condition for the later emergence of internal institutional balances, checks, and court-like instances of investigation, appeal, and sanction. The underlying principle is that power can be effectively *checked* only once it has been *separated*. Historically, this process has led firms to transform workplaces once marked by near paternal tyranny into republics of production operating under an imperfect yet *relatively discernible* rule of law.

Observing the freedom-promoting capacity of firms requires not only attention to the institutional consequences of separating power, but also a methodological rethinking of political philosophy that values the intrinsic analysis of entities that should be appraised as unfinished, contradictory, and undergoing constant dialectical transformation, rather than an emphasis on perfected end-states and extrinsic appraisals. Tracing the transformation of these over time may yield greater enlightenment than fixating on either the overly negative or overly positive aspects of a single historical instance without relating them to processes of adaptation and development, nor to their *intrinsic capabilities*.

While subjecting a productive entity to an ideal end-state benchmark may yield valuable insights and inform policy, it cannot by itself justify discarding the entity or its structural relations of production as a system that inherently produces misery and unfreedom, or calling for external intervention to forcibly transform its structures. Such action should be preceded (and perhaps avoided) by a careful examination of its internal arrangements and their evolution as adaptive processes, in order to understand the changes taking place and the causes of that evolution from *within*, and to assess whether the entity's bundle of capabilities contributes to improving or worsening the human condition. Hence, proceeding from an exclusively extrinsic and/or static view of the allegedly negative properties of a political entity risks discarding elements that may in fact be moving it in a preferred normative direction.

A policy-making perspective that is guided by liberty and human dignity as its ends might profit more from understanding how these internal dynamics and their causes may provide a more effective basis than outright imposing external regulations, which can inadvertently undermine ongoing changes already advancing those same ends.

Promoting the causes that internally enhance liberty may serve a higher normative interest than simply demanding a structural rearrangement according to an external model. This is comparable to a state's constitution being altered by an international organization or a concert of states imposing their will, rather than allowing change to emerge from the state's own internal processes. I nevertheless leave this issue open with consideration of the benefits and risks of each pathway.

I have deliberately set aside issues of wealth and income inequality to focus instead on the structures within firms that reduce domination. I do this because I challenge the view that employee citizens remain “slaves” merely by participating in a wage system, a perspective the Marxist tradition has used to highlight the inherent contradiction between labor and capital and the alleged resulting forms of alienation. I argue that productive units under contemporary capitalism, particularly those emerging from the global expansion of value chains, can cultivate employee-citizens who are historically *freer*, independently of worsened (or improved) conditions in material welfare.

A consequence of these analytical perspectives and the viewpoint they bring is the rejection of terms such as “slaves” to describe employee-citizens solely because they participate in a wage-based productive unit, without considering the trajectory of the firm and its constituent parts. The “hidden abode” did not remain structurally unchanged; rather, it came to resemble a republic, with power becoming ever more public and “unhidden.”

This systemic perspective also leads me to reject labels such as “communist dictatorships” to schematize critiques against corporate productive units based solely on a focus on their most negative aspects at a particular historical instance. Such extrinsic snapshots overlook historical processes of adaptation, which may actually reveal gains in freedom. While Marx and Engels are right in saying “Modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist”,[90] It is also appropriate to ask retrospectively how the industrial capitalist factory has fostered liberty within its own structures, especially as it pursued the goal of capital accumulation.

This approach reflects the methodological caution I have emphasized, which I consider even more fundamental than any of its political implications. Aristotle captures this principle in Book I of *Physics*, which is primarily devoted to the methodological question of *how to study nature*: “We, on the other hand, must take for granted that the things that exist by nature are, either all or some of them, in motion.”[91]

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[90] Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 18, Marx/Engels Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/

[91] Aristotle, *Physics*, 185a12–185a13, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1991).

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