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Eugene Debs and the Socialist Republic

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Tom O'Shea¹ 

Abstract

I reconstruct the civic republican foundations of Eugene Debs's socialist critique of capitalism, demonstrating how he uses a neo-roman conception of freedom to condemn waged labour. Debs is also shown to build upon this neo-roman liberty in his socialist republican objections to the plutocratic capture of the law and threats of violence faced by the labour movement. This Debsian socialist republicanism can be seen to rest on an ambitious understanding of the demands of citizen sovereignty and civic solidarity. While Debs shares some of the commitments of earlier American labour republican critics of capitalism, he departs from them in his thoroughgoing commitment to common democratic ownership of productive property. His socialist republicanism remains valuable today for its ability to illuminate features of plutocratic control, judicial autocracy, and the regime of property best suited to suppressing economic domination. I conclude that Debs not only deserves a prominent place in an emerging radical republican canon but presents a distinctive contrast with many of his Marxist contemporaries and offers a compelling challenge to recent liberal, plebeian, and socialist forms of republicanism.

Keywords

Eugene Debs, socialist republicanism, socialism, republicanism, republican liberty, domination

¹Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Roehampton, London

Corresponding Author:

Tom O'Shea, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5PU, UK.

Email: tom.james.oshea@gmail.com

Eugene Debs is best known as a labour organiser, stirring orator, and prisoner of conscience. But rarely has he been taken seriously as a political thinker, and even less so as a political theorist.¹ The story of Debs's contribution to concrete socialist politics is so incandescent—taking in the drama of strikes, elections, and incarcerations—that it has often outshone the details of his account of unfreedom in capitalist societies.² My goal is not only to provide the first sustained philosophical reconstruction of this account but to show how Debs advances the civic republican tradition in particular through his intertwined reflections on citizenship, law, liberty, and property. Although his debt to American republicanism stretching back to the Revolutionary War has long been noted (Salvatore 1982, 1992; Burns 2008), including significant affinities with labour republican ideology, little scholarly attention is devoted to Debs's place within broader civic republican political philosophy. That has been an unfortunate omission—limiting our understanding of both republican and socialist thought.

Debs had a tremendous influence on socialist politics in the United States—setting up the American Railway Union, leading the famous Pullman rail strike, cofounding the Industrial Workers of the World, and running for president five times, including while imprisoned for opposing American participation in World War I. But he did not present his thinking in a highly systematic fashion, with much of Debs's writings consisting of speeches and short contributions to newspapers and labour magazines. Likewise, his political thought developed in piecemeal fashion over the course of his life, often in response to problems encountered by the labour movement, without receiving a definitive formulation. This presents some obstacles to reconstructing a Debsian political theory. So too, it can be tempting to dismiss him as a mere populariser, drawing from a mishmash of assorted tropes, while failing to advance a coherent theoretical interpretation of economic, social, and political life. But this conclusion overlooks the philosophical kernel of Debs's thought, which I argue can be found in an incisive neo-roman conception of freedom that shapes his ambitious socialist republicanism.

My aim in recovering Debsian political theory is partly exegetical: demonstrating that civic republicanism is integral to his articulation of socialism rather than being a superficial remnant of popular American

1. For exceptions, see Kann (1980) and Levy (1988).

2. For major biographical accounts of Debs's role in the American labour movement, see Ginger (2007 [1947]) and Salvatore (1982). See also Brommel (1978).

postrevolutionary thought. Establishing that perhaps the most prominent socialist in the history of the United States develops a critique of capitalism that both rests upon and reworks the specifically neo-roman foundations of civic republican political philosophy should itself be a significant result. But my goals are also constructive: to offer a precedent for a plausible and unambiguously republican socialism, which might then inform contemporary debates about oligarchic power, unaccountable legal authority, worker freedom, and the socialisation of property. The recent surge of academic interest in radical civic republicanism makes this an especially opportune moment to reappraise the republican foundations of Debs's socialism (White 2011; Gourevitch 2015; Roberts 2017; Muldoon 2020, 2022; O'Shea 2020a, 2020b; Vergara 2020; Leibold et al. 2020).

Tracing the shifts in his thinking introduced by the need to formulate a political response to the onward march of industrial capitalism, I focus on four themes vital for understanding Debs's place within the civic republican tradition: citizenship, law, liberty, and property. On this basis, I argue that the neo-roman conception of freedom shaping his understanding of each of them results in a compelling socialist republicanism—one able to identify legal and economic domination of the working class, while supporting a bold programme of common democratic ownership of productive property and a civic culture characterised by solidaristic virtue. I conclude that Debs not only deserves a prominent place in an emerging radical republican canon, but offers a distinctive contrast with many contemporary liberal, plebeian, and socialist republicans. But we should begin by outlining the notion of civic republicanism that frames this study.

Republicanism

Civic republicanism as a modern political and intellectual formation arose from attempts to justify the distinctive self-governing institutions of northern Italian city-states that emerged in the late medieval period (Skinner 1978, ch. 1–3). This defence drew on classical sources, especially the Roman historians and moralists, and was informed by the structure of Roman law, which contrasts the status of free persons under their own power with that of slaves, who are subject to an alien jurisdiction. When this framework is taken up by later civic republicans, liberty is said to be incompatible with subjection to another's will, such that the English republican Algernon Sidney (1704, 9) tells us:

Liberty solely consists in an independency upon the Will of another, and by the name of Slave we understand a man, who can neither dispose of his Person nor Goods, but enjoys all at the will of his Master.

Freedom becomes an independence achieved through security against arbitrary power—something threatened by the tyrant or overmighty magistrate. Civic republicans have typically taken the rule of law to be an important bastion in the defence of this neo-roman liberty, while also championing the social conditions for citizens to develop civic virtues that will lead them to pursue the public good rather than their private interest alone (Honohan 2002).

Republican traditions were among the most important ideological influences legitimating the American Revolution and shaping its aftermath (Bailyn 1967; Wood 1992). Sometimes these took a relatively patrician cast—for instance, James Madison’s hope for merely representative republican government, which secured “*the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity*” (Hamilton et al. 2008, no. 63). Civic republican fears about dependence on the arbitrary will of others were also called upon to justify the denial of suffrage to tenants and waged labourers, on the grounds that their economic dependence meant they would serve as mere proxies for their landlords or employers (Montgomery 1993, 16; Sydnor 1952, 123; Wood 1992, 178). But in its more democratic and egalitarian guises, republican sentiment found popular expression as ideals of both agrarian freeholding and artisanal independence (Schultz 1993; Lause 2005). These early agrarian and artisanal republicanisms fed into what many scholars have identified as a recognisable “working-class republicanism” or “labor republicanism,” often advanced in opposition to waged forms of labour, which were said to reproduce a subordinating slavery (Montgomery 1993, 7; Cassano and Rondinone 2010, 418–21). Thus, during the closing months of the Civil War, we find William H. Sylvis of the National Labor Union characterising the relationship between employer and employee as “for the most part, that of master and slave” and “totally at variance with the spirit of the institutions of a free people” (1872, 130).

This labour republican analysis was prosecuted most vigorously in the 1880s by the Knights of Labor—the first national labour organization with a mass membership in the United States.³ An exceptional recent study of the

3. On the history of the Knights, see Fink (1983) and Parfitt (2016). The persistence of strands of earlier artisanal republican ideology in the Knights’ thought is discussed in Oestreicher (1987).

Knights by Alex Gourevitch has shown they reproduced Sidney's understanding of slavery:

The weight of chains, number of stripes, hardness of labour, and other effects of a master's cruelty, may make one servitude more miserable than another: but he is a slave who serves the best and gentlest man in the world, as well as he who serves the worst; and he does serve him if he must obey his commands, and depends upon his will.⁴

The lesson is that liberty is incompatible with vulnerability to the arbitrary power of a master, whether or not they happen to exercise that power against the slave's interests. Likewise, the Knights claim that someone is a slave when they are capable of self-government but are nevertheless subject to another's will (Anon 1885a). On these neo-roman premises, they conclude that waged workers are deprived of liberty when exposed to the arbitrary power of a boss: "the caprice of he who pays the wages of his servants" (Anon 1885b).

The Knights of Labor sought a "cooperative commonwealth" that would abolish waged labour, such that republican principles of liberty are not to be confined to narrowly political suffrage but reach into the economic realm.⁵ In that spirit, George McNeill took the failure to "engraft republican principles into our industrial system" to have produced a labour regime that "makes the employer a despot, and the employee a slave" (1892, 455–56). Another knight, George Schilling, called for an even more ambitious "Universal Republic of Labor," which would unite producers of all nations.⁶ This labour republican repurposing of classical republican ideas reveals how a neo-roman conception of liberty found purchase beyond opposition to monarchical and imperial power and was turned against the economic domination of employers.

Citizenship

Eugene V. Debs was himself a product of the small-town American republicanism of Terre Haute, Indiana; however, his upbringing was not steeped in

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4. Compare Sidney (1704, III.21) and Anon (1882). For discussion, see Gourevitch (2015, 14).
 5. The term was popularised in the United States by Laurence Gronlund in the 1880s, whose writings also influenced Debs. See Gronlund (1900 [1884]).
 6. George Schilling in *John Swinton's Paper*, March 7, 1886, quoted in Parfitt (2016, 59).

the republican radicalism that would eventually be championed by the Knights, let alone the combative socialism of his later years. Nevertheless, he absorbed the comparatively egalitarian ethos of a community characterised by shallow class divides and the residual spirit of frontier democracy. Debs's Alsatian father exposed him to the writings of Francophone republicans, including Rousseau and Victor Hugo, with these sentiments being reinforced by an 1860s Midwestern education that "offered a democratic vision that stressed individual potential and community progress within the context of the political traditions of the American Revolutionary heritage" (Salvatore 1982, 11–12). All this left him with an affinity for the language of liberty and citizenship—the rhetorical foundations of his republican politics.

Throughout his life, Debs shared the republican preoccupation with the singular importance of the citizen and often drew a contrast between the "sovereign citizens of a republic" and the servile subjects of kings and emperors (I.591; II.562).⁷ That provides an explicitly civic articulation of the popular sovereignty that some scholars take to be a cornerstone of radical republicanism.⁸ Debs also understands citizen sovereignty as a status possessed by individuals, which is incompatible with their subjection to another's arbitrary will. Of those exposed to such power, he comments, "Call him a sovereign American citizen if you will, but he is a slave" (II.566). While republicans like Sidney had excluded those performing servile labour from citizenship on the grounds that "the difference between *civis* and *servus* is irreconcilable" (1704, 69), Debs will come to fight for the emancipation of those workers whose economic domination encroaches on the prerogatives of their citizenship.

When the young Debs joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman in 1875, however, he was still many years away from socialist republican militancy. In keeping with the irenic sensibilities of Terre Haute, he sought harmony between workers and employers on the basis that their interests were aligned—opposing strikes as a disastrous outcome for labour and capital alike (I.106; I.114). So, too, his early contributions to the Brotherhood's

7. The most extensive collection of Debs's writings publicly available in print appear in the six-volume *Selected Writings of Eugene V. Debs* currently being published by Haymarket Books. References to works by Debs in their first three volumes (2019, 2020, 2021) use a Roman numeral to indicate the volume followed by an Arabic numeral to indicate the page.

8. See the introductory essay to Leipold et al. (2020).

magazine evince more enthusiasm for moralising campaigns to promote the order's ideals of benevolence, sobriety, and industry than developing a critical analysis of the rising capitalist class (I.35; I.54). While his commitment to freedom was recognisably republican in championing the independence that befits citizens, it was often couched narrowly in terms of an individual assertion of "manhood" (I.111). Debs might well have remained within the bounds of this timid craft unionism if not for a series of collisions with the accelerating juggernaut of industrial capitalism. Among the most formative experiences in this respect were a number of major labour disputes—chiefly, the 1888 Burlington and 1894 Pullman rail strikes. These encounters would not only push Debs towards socialism—they provided an occasion to extend and transform republican ideas.

The first significant shift in Debs's republican conceptual framework resulting from these events concerns civic virtue—what J. G. A. Pocock has characterised as "every citizen's ability to place the common good before his own" (1975, 184). While Debs's valorisation of the citizen does not lead him to regularly use the language of virtue, we find an important analogue in the notion of manhood he associated with citizenship (I.315).⁹ He consistently commended manhood as a virtue of character, but his experience of solidarity during the Burlington strike in particular led to a transformation in how this ideal was understood: from an individual honourableness entwined with the moral stewardship of craft unions (1882, 128), towards the courage to defend one's fellow workers from degradation (Salvatore 1982, 79 and 129).

Debs had earlier contrasted manhood with an odious servility sought by the employer, who wants "cringing, fawning slaves, devoid of manhood and ready to do his bidding, as if they were chattels" (I.112). But manhood acquires a more solidaristic dimension by the 1890s, such that Debs lauds the "manly independence" enabled by organised labour and encourages strikers to "proclaim your manhood" in the knowledge that they have the support of other labour organisations (I.315 and II.282). It will shortly thereafter join a republican understanding of solidarity, which is presented as the "enemy of faction" and an indispensable basis for resisting the plutocratic domination of labour (II.427). This amounts to a recognition that the virtues

9. There are well-known etymological grounds for aligning virtue and manhood, with *vir* (man) being the Latin root of *virtus*, and connotations of virility having followed Roman usage into the Florentine republican vocabulary of virtue (Pocock 1975, 37–41).

a republican citizenry needs to protect their liberty are not solely the product of individual character but are enabled and fostered socially. Admittedly, there are often unpalatable masculinist overtones to these invocations of manhood—standing in contrast to the firm rejection of gendered virtue by feminist republicans such as Mary Wollstonecraft (2014, 52–53). But we can often read Debs’s appeals to the virtues of manhood and solidarity more generously as a summons to all workers to cooperate in the uncertain endeavour of defending human dignity (1908a, 390).

Law

Debs will also turn the conceptual framework of republicanism against plutocratic influence over the law. The early strikes he witnessed—from the nationwide Great Railroad Strike of 1877 to the Burlington and Pullman disputes he helped lead—allowed Debs to scrutinise the close weave of judicial, corporate, political, and military power arrayed against workers (Salvatore 1982, ch. 3 and 5). The first of these strikes saw judicial cover being given for federal troops to be deployed on the streets of Terre Haute in order to hand the local rail depot back to its wealthy owner. The same judge, William Gresham, then provided a favourable judgement to the Burlington railroad when it sought an injunction to undermine its striking workers. Debs himself was the target of a judicial injunction during the Pullman dispute that forbade him to communicate with local union branches and that led to his imprisonment without a jury trial. Partisan collaboration between the federal judiciary, government, and military in Pullman’s interests would again result in troops being used to support a rich industrialist against his striking workers.

In the heat of these labour struggles, Debs’s republican account of law was forged. It amounts to more than a self-serving swipe at a hostile judiciary and remains an astute theorisation of legal threats to freedom that other republicans have tended to overlook in their enthusiasm for an empire of law. Unsurprisingly, opposition to one legal device was especially prominent in Debs’s analysis: the judicial injunction, which judges could use to impose strict requirements on the behaviour of members of the labour movement, while unilaterally determining whether to hold someone in contempt of court for breaking these conditions. The sweeping powers possessed by individual judges thereby invited comparisons to absolutist rule. For example, Debs notes that judicial injunctions are commands “as arbitrary and as despotic as ever emanated from a tsar or a sultan,” while also complaining that the

despotic will of judges substitutes itself for law (II.372–4). Commenting on his own imprisonment by injunction, Debs says he is a “helpless victim of autocratic whim or caprice” and remarks that the power to throw him in jail arbitrarily shows that everyone’s liberty is infringed (II.482; II.513; II.442). His reasoning is impeccably republican—objecting not to the rule of law, which republicans have always held dear, but to the intrusion of the arbitrary will of judges that abrogates law (II.442; II.408; II.511). Debs should therefore be understood as complementing rather than contesting Livy’s age-old republican maxim that “the imperium of laws is greater than that of any man” (1922, 218).¹⁰

Common law presents a related target. While republicans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often looked to it as a counterweight to monarchical tyranny (Pocock 1957; Reid 1988, 63), a “republican critique of the common law” was long established in American society by the late nineteenth century (Montgomery 1993, 47). That included a preference for legal codification as opposed to judicial latitude, as well as concerns about common law doctrines of conspiracy being turned against labour organisers (Schultz 1993, 160). Debs makes two main contributions to this popular republican tradition. Firstly, he notes that common law has proved inadequate as a means of protecting workers, especially with respect to workplace injuries or fatalities, since it makes securing compensation from employers prohibitively difficult (I.573–4). Secondly, and more interestingly for our purposes, he charges the common law with being a means of preserving antiquated legal prescriptions that undermine the freedom of workers.

Debs can be found condemning “that nondescript thing called the ‘common law’—handed down from the time when the employer was *master* and the workingman a *slave*” (I.640). The general concern is that the common law’s foundation in archaic legal tradition rather than democratic statute can reproduce a hidebound conservatism hostile to the emancipation of labour. That acquired a specific force in the ways that the provisions of master-and-servant laws had been preserved, including strong presumptions that workers were to be subordinate to their employers (Orren 1991). Those reservations extend to the mindset of the judiciary itself, who Debs accuses of indulging “plutocratic theories” and denounces in clear republican tones for proceeding on the freedom-denying premise that “workingmen are dependent upon the rich—that they live, move and have their existence by the permission of the rich” (II.168).

10. I here follow the modified translation in Skinner (1997, 45).

Debs also objects to the plutocratic sway of capitalists over the judiciary. Judicial appointments were a particular area of concern, with Debs talking about the influence of the “money power” over who is able to advance to federal courts: an allusion to the abolitionist language of the “slave power,” which was thought to have decisive control over the antebellum federal government (II.544–6; II.520). Corruption was another common charge, including both bribery of judges and the legislature alike, and the provision of inducements for the judiciary, such as the railway companies providing them with passes for free travel (I.414; I.529; II.218). These were not wild fantasies: Gilded Age railroad magnates could be disarmingly frank about their resort to judicial corruption, even claiming there were cases “when it is a man’s duty to go up and bribe the judge” (Josephson 1934, 354). Sometimes external inducements were not even necessary—Attorney General Olney, who pursued Debs, sat on the board of directors for numerous railway lines, and decades as a corporation lawyer left him with personal and professional ties to many railway executives (Salvatore 1982, 131). The danger in such corruption is that in addition to citizens being at the mercy of legal officials themselves, corrupt courts are incapable of offering a meaningful check on the power of capitalists.

The republican critique of state violence that Debs advances follows from these concerns about arbitrary power in the administration of the law. He warns that people’s liberty has been driven away by the ability of corporations and autocratic judges to enforce their will through armed law enforcement officials and troops (II.402). Debs likewise draws on a longer republican opposition to standing armies as threats to freedom and quotes George Washington’s concerns about “overgrown military establishments, which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican liberty” (II.527). In light of the Pullman dispute, he is especially concerned about this threat to republican liberty in relation to the labour movement, whereby federal troops allied to a government and judiciary opposed to the interests of workers are empowered to put down strikes by means of arbitrary force. Nor are capitalists themselves effectively prevented from exercising violence within this legal order, such that Debs condemns the tyranny exercised by millionaires setting Pinkerton agents against strikers (I.538). This indictment of plutocratic power finds private and public violence operating together.

Debs’s republicanism begins to acquire a more critical edge in the wake of his imprisonment as a leader of the Pullman strike—spurred on by an increasing exposure to socialist literature and his own reflections on the powers amassed against the American Railway Union. In this period, he denounces

the present state of society for falling short of republican principles: “Call this a republic if you will, but there is not an element of real republicanism in it” (II.557). Earlier in his political career, Debs leaned on republican hostility to monarchy to raise concerns about the power of “railroad kings” (I.152), and in stronger terms still had denounced employers unleashing Pinkerton violence for exercising a “‘tyranny and cruelty’ paralleled only in lands where a tsar, a sultan, or a shah assumes the right to murder their subjects when it suits their whim.” (I.538) The experience of Pullman leaves him with the further fear that an unbridled judiciary antagonistic to the interests of labour has come to assume an authority that shares the despotism of those same forms of rule (II.249; II.372; II.419; II.432). But the tyrant who rules over their subjects is not the only figure who haunts the republican political imagination. Republican aversion to tyranny commonly finds expression in the fear that citizens will be improperly reduced to slaves and so be exposed to the same despotic rule in their political lives as the chattel slave is within the household (Nyquist 2015). Debs pursues that concern in the economic realm with an account of the slavery of wage workers.

Liberty

Freedom is incompatible with subjection to the arbitrary will of another. That is the kernel of the neo-roman conception of liberty, which civic republicans ordinarily adopt and which denies that liberty is absent only when interference with a person or their property actually occurs. Our freedom is infringed when we are at the mercy of another—dependent on their sheer goodwill—even if they happen to accede to our wishes. Cicero captures something of this idea when he remarks that the most miserable part of being a slave is that “even if the master happens not to be oppressive, he can be so should he wish” (Cicero in Skinner 2002a, 10). In sum, power held in reserve can still dominate. That insight is fundamental to the Debsian critique of the capitalist workplace and labour market. The neo-roman character of his understanding of liberty is unmistakable in Debs’s discussions of waged labour:

No man is free in any just sense who has to rely upon the arbitrary will of another for the opportunity to work. Such a man works, and therefore lives, by permission, and this is the present economic relation of the working class to the capitalist class. (III.303)¹¹

11. For similar formulations, see III.329; III.331; Debs (1897a, 1900, 1902).

This is a restatement of the familiar republican opposition between freedom and dependence on the arbitrary will of another but now turned against the economic relationship between classes. Debs locates the waged worker's unfreedom primarily in the discretion of the capitalist class to grant or refuse them employment, and thereby the income they need to support themselves.

Early modern republicans had concluded that a king's arbitrary power of taxation would leave his subjects unfree because it threatened the secure possession of the resources necessary to sustain their lives (Skinner 2002b). They spoke as wealthy landowners, but Debs effectively broadens that argument to waged labourers, who also possess the means of subsistence only by another's permission, since they lack the tools, land, and resources necessary to provide for themselves. Consequently, even those fortunate enough to find waged labour remain unfree, since they live at the indulgence of others. Furthermore, Debs thinks workers also lack liberty while they labour—being subject to regulations determined predominantly by the interests of employers, as well as the time discipline of the bell or whistle, and lacking the power to shape their own conditions of employment. Thus, he concludes that the worker is virtually owned by another person during working hours (III.600). Under these conditions, Debs denies that waged workers can be said to possess freedom, citizenship, or manhood. He then employs this analysis to underscore the parallels between hired labour and chattel slavery.

Slavery thoroughly saturates Debs's analysis of the condition of workers within capitalist societies—becoming the leading rebuke among a number of comparisons between waged work and dependent forms of labour, such as peonage, helotry, and serfdom.¹² As early as 1887, before even the formative experience of the Burlington strike, Debs positions the labour movement as inheritors of abolitionism, who are combatting abuses other than the slave pen and auction block. These new abolitionists seek to dismantle “wrongs which take on some of the forms of slavery, wrongs which work the degradation of men, which sap the foundations of citizenship,” and whose source is employers denying workers the pay they need to feed, clothe, and house themselves (I.213).

What changes from the mid-1890s in light of Debs's burgeoning socialism is the conviction that economic unfreedom has its roots deep within the wage

12. On comparisons to these other forms of dependent labour, which are more frequent prior to the Pullman dispute, see I.113; I.135; I.150; I.213; I.248; I.258–9; I.321; I.414; I.526; I.537; II.54; II.94; II.168; II.410; III.130.

system itself. Workers are said to face an enslaving plutocracy and to be subject to the curse of “wage slavery” (1897b; II.515). Conversely, capitalist employers are compared to slavedrivers and masters who effectively possess industrial slaves (III.194). But are these accusations of slavery any more than overheated rhetoric? Debs’s republican analysis of liberty provides them with a compelling foundation. When speaking precisely, he resists an explicit identification of the two conditions and tells workers that they are “kept in servitude *as if* you were the property of the masters under the law” (1912b, emphasis added). Nevertheless, Debs maintains that “the auction block and slave pen differ in degree only from the ‘labor market.’” (III.490) His neo-roman account of liberty makes sense of this bold assertion—identifying arbitrary power that amounts to an ability to deny members of the working class the material conditions of their very existence (1897a). This power over life and death echoes the privileges claimed by the ancient slave master (Watson 1985, 18).

The use of the figure of the slave to emphasise the dependent condition of labourers was far from new. Apprentices and journeymen in the English textile industry of the 1750s had been compared to slaves in the American plantations (Wheeler 2013, 163). Later Tory radicals in the early nineteenth century also made use of the language of slavery to condemn the lost freedom of the yeoman and its replacement by the authority of self-interested factory owners and the heartless discipline of a world market. The subsistence wages of many workers also led Ricardian socialists to describe them as slaves (Persky 1998). But none of these claims shares the decidedly republican foundations of Debs’s account of wage slavery. Some abolitionists, by contrast, moved from condemning chattel slavery on republican grounds to also identifying and opposing wage slavery. For instance, Frederick Douglass asked rhetorically, “Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for republicans?” (2014: 371). Then, despite initially rejecting the parallel, he later recognises a “slavery of wages” on the basis that employers can enjoy an effective power of life and death over waged labourers, who must accept work on whatever terms will keep them alive (1886, 13). So, too, we saw that the labour republican tradition married accusations of slavery with an analysis of the dependency of waged workers. Those earlier republicans sometimes spoke the language of class conflict—even on occasion a “war of classes” (Sylvis 1872, 130). But what is notable about Debs’s approach is how frequently and explicitly he urges us to understand wage slavery in particular through the lens of class struggle, while suggesting it will be overcome only with the overthrow of capitalism (III.637; 1905c; 1909, 3; 1912a).

That uncompromising analysis brings long-standing socialist critics of wage slavery to mind.

Writing in 1834, Auguste Blanqui locates the servitude of workers not in their being transferable property but the violent appropriation of the tools they need in order to labour, which leaves them at the mercy of their dispossessioners (2016). The following decade, Engels decries a monopoly of the means of existence that ensures the proletariat is “in law and in fact, the slave of the bourgeoisie, which can decree his life or death” (1975, 376). Subsequently, Marx adds that a person with no other property than their labour power will necessarily become “a slave to those who have become the owners of labour’s material prerequisites. He can only work by permission, and hence live by permission” (1989, 81). The claim that slavery can be found in a dependence on the permission, decree, or mercy of another—especially someone with a power over life and death—strikes a familiar republican note. Furthermore, these socialist opponents of wage slavery are often willing to countenance both a class analysis and radical remedies at least as ambitious as Debs’s own.

These continuities are significant and ought not to be downplayed. What does begin to distinguish Debs somewhat from earlier socialist critics of wage slavery is his attempt to integrate a vigorous class analysis of worker unfreedom within the idiom of American republicanism—consistent with his belief that workers must not neglect the “methods and manners” of their own country (1922). That includes a rhetorical alignment of attacks on wage slavery with the popular fight for American independence from British imperialism, the more embattled struggle for abolition, and the unfulfilled promise of American democratic traditions that treasure citizenship rather than subjecthood. But it also finds more substantive effect in opposition towards proactive political violence in the mould of Blanquism (III.157; III.428) and the narrow economism of vulgar Marxists like Samuel Gompers (III.528). Debs thereby nurses a distinctive dual faith in the combined efficacy of the ballot box and industrial union for abolishing wage slavery. Yet, the most significant prescription to emerge from Debs’s neo-roman understanding of liberty was still to come: the demand for common ownership.

Property

Debs anchors his attacks on legal domination and wage slavery within the popular traditions of American republicanism. That ideological backdrop owes much to two pivotal moments: the revolutionary founding of the United

States and the emancipation of the chattel slaves, which Debs associates with the republicanism of Jefferson and Lincoln respectively. But he acknowledges these republican-inflected projects were always incomplete in both their aims and accomplishments. For instance, the founders are criticised for their vague grasp of democracy, excluding the working classes from the framing of the constitution, and protecting racial chattel slavery (III.371). But even abolition and widespread suffrage are deemed insufficient for “a real republic” when they fail to address the most pressing threat to civic liberty: the growing class divides that underpin an industrial slavery (III.604).

Socialism is ultimately needed to transform “a republic in name into a republic in fact” (III.593). When articulating this demand, Debs talks variously of establishing an “economic republic,” “industrial republic,” “working class republic,” or “Socialist Republic” (III.241; III.483; 1905b, 28; III.563).¹³ Among the aims of this socialist republicanism are securing a cooperative industrial democracy, “thus converting the present bogus into a genuine republic” (1902). That programme begins to solidify from 1897 into the early years of the new century, when the failure of the industrial strategy of the American Railway Union led Debs to turn to explicitly political activity—first as part of the Social Democracy of America and then its Socialist Party successor. At this point, he repurposes the earlier labour republican demand for a cooperative commonwealth (III.56 and III.82). In doing so, Debs is clear that increasing concentration of production is not only an inescapable result of economic development but makes cooperative work inevitable (III.312–4; III.482). This amounts to a decisive rejection of any nostalgic return to the relative autarky of mass agrarian freeholding or independent artisanal production. It also marks a break from related republican proposals to redistribute private property in land or other goods to individuals reaching maturity, which would allow them direct economic access to a life of relative agrarian or artisanal independence (Skidmore 1829). Yet, the question of how a cooperative economy was to be organised remained.

Some members of the labour movement understood cooperation rather modestly as profit sharing among workers (Gourevitch 2015, 119; Leikin 2005, 48). But a more common model among the Knights was the specific

13. Similar language referring to an industrial or socialist republic was used by those who were or would come to be associated with the Industrial Workers of the World: James Connolly (1898); Lucy Parsons (2010, 256); Daniel De Leon (De Leon and Berry 1915, 32).

institutional forms of producer and consumer cooperatives. Worker ownership was a principal aim of producer cooperatives, either with each worker able to purchase individual shares, or labour-controlled organisations like the Knights owning the enterprise in capital-intensive industries (Leikin 2005, ch. 2). These measures were intended to ensure that workers could in some sense be their own proprietors, with access to the tools and resources that they needed to provide for themselves, rather than having to sell their labour to members of an unproductive capitalist class. However, the widespread failure of cooperative industry and stores by the 1890s sets the scene for Debs to make an alternative institutional proposal (Leikin 2005, 83).

Debs offers an unreservedly socialist model of cooperative production. When setting out the programme of the Socialist Party, he tells us that it demands “collective ownership of the means of production and distribution,” which will entail “an economic democracy, the basis of the real republic yet to be” (III.428). Of course, this collective ownership might be spelled out in multiple ways. When discussing municipal ownership, Debs advocates collective ownership of public utilities for their “operation primarily in the interest and for the benefit of the workers therein employed,” including shortening hours and sharing out surpluses not needed for reinvestment (1905a). Other formulations envision a notably different situation, whereby “the working class, in control of industry, will operate it for the benefit of all,” rather than each workplace being run principally in the interests of its workers (1905b, 32). But Debs’s most mature statements reveal an even broader democratic vision of the control of collective property, which is not restricted to workers alone:

all things that are jointly needed and used ought to be jointly owned—that industry, the basis of our social life, instead of being the private property of a few and operated for their enrichment, ought to be the common property of all, democratically administered in the interest of all. (1971[1918], 250)

This wider democratic ideal does not mean workers themselves can forgo building organised power in their workplaces: Debs, the industrial unionist, warns that the socialist republic cannot simply be voted into existence (n.d., 31). Nevertheless, common ownership ultimately comprises productive property in everyone’s hands so that everyone can benefit from it. That includes an end to economic competition for profit and a reorientation of production towards use.

What is so significant from a republican perspective about this demand for common ownership of the means of production? Republicans have long

sought the economic independence required for freedom in the secure possession of certain property. For classical republicans, this was originally possession of land that was assumed to be worked by the unfree for the benefit of the landholder (Cicero 1991, 58). Subsequently, more egalitarian republican agrarianism favoured a yeoman or homesteading approach, with the land shared more equitably among the citizenry (Harrington 1658, 45). That possession of the land became the foundation of the economic independence needed for a robust political freedom—a commitment running deep in much republican ideology in the United States (Foner 1970; Lause 2005). For other republicans, the most salient property for economic independence was possession of tools and other factors of production that could support artisanal life. We saw that labour republicans also began to explore ways in which land, tools, and capital might be subject to forms of shared ownership through cooperatives rather than individual proprietorship alone. Some even proposed nationalisation of infrastructure like railways and telegraphs, the coordination of cooperatives by means of labour notes, or their closer integration into a wider commonwealth (Powderly 1890, 395). Yet, the primary form of ownership they envisioned for productive property remained the worker's stake in their own workplace.

The democratic conception of common ownership of productive property at which Debs arrives is rather different from these worker-owned cooperatives popular among the Knights. He provides us with an understanding of republican economic independence rooted in property, which is not simply shared between specific groups of workers but fully socialised—put under the ownership and control of all citizens for the benefit of all citizens. That collective control over production and distribution preserves the long-standing republican association between freedom and property while radically transforming what *kind* of property can serve as the basis of economic independence. Freedom now arises not from a citizen's individual title to land, tools, or capital, or their shared stake as a worker in a particular economic enterprise, but from their democratic citizenship itself, which grants them a measure of common control over production and distribution.

Common democratic ownership is meant to displace the capitalist employer with discretion to determine who works and who goes hungry. Yet, why think common control over productive property would leave people any less beholden to the arbitrary will of others? Why not conclude that the capitalist autocrat will simply be eclipsed by the caprice of a collective of workers or citizens—albeit a collective that the aspiring worker has at least

some ability to shape? Whether or not we take genuine democratic control to preclude such domination, Debs points to another emancipatory advantage of common ownership, which is that it can be used to guarantee everyone access to natural resources and the means of production. The “social ownership of the means of wealth production” thereby becomes the basis of “the inalienable right of all to work” (1906), which is meant to prevent workers being unfree as a result of a dependence on the goodwill of others for the opportunity to meet their material needs.

While the specific institutional means for realising this cooperative ideal are not fully spelled out, Debs often seems to have some form of nationalisation in mind—whereby “the nation’s industries shall be taken over by the nation” (1916, 173). So, too, his claim that competition between capitalists will be replaced by the people in their collective capacity, who “will be but one capitalist”, might suggest centralised state ownership and planning that is subject to national democratic control (1902). But Debs also seems to envision multiscalar ownership rather than entirely monolithic democratic centralisation and talks of both industrial and utility ownership at “municipal, state, and national” levels (1905a, 1912c).

Freedom as a worker goes beyond breaking the bonds of dependence on capitalist employers for continued employment. Debs sketches a richer portrait of the end of waged labour, with no bosses or hired hands but instead “free men, employing themselves co-operatively under regulations of their own” (1911). While I have suggested that Debsian socialism ultimately recognises citizens rather than workers as sovereign over the economy, he clearly supports a tremendous extension of workplace democracy within this framework. Workers are to be equals in the coordination of the labour process, without subordination to an unaccountable master, “so that they may manage industry in their own way, as seems best to them” (1908b). This is a social ideal of relative independence in the workplace rather than the autarkic vision of the farmer working their own land or the artisan who is master of a privately owned workshop. So, too, this Debsian approach breaks with the kinds of worker ownership advocated by the Knights, who gave greater power over their colleagues to those individual workers able to purchase more shares, or placed significant operational control in the rather unresponsive hands of the Knights’ board of executives rather than a firm’s workers themselves (Leikin 2005, 69). The freedom that workers are to possess in directing the labour process is thus to be understood as egalitarian interdependence as much as personal economic independence. What is most

important for Debs, however, is the absence of lordly bosses whose ability to dismiss workers at will and with impunity allows them to dictate the conditions of labour. This need not presuppose there is no authority in the workplace, but any that does develop has to be legitimated by the collective decisions of equals rather than imposed by the whims or interests of any specific individual or clique.

Debs and Republican Theory

Debsian socialism finds capitalism wanting for its incompatibility with republican principles. We saw that the leading charge in this respect is that citizens are deprived of their rightful liberty—reduced to a demeaning dependence on the arbitrary will of another. In response to the suppression of strikers, Debs marshalled those republican concerns to warn of autocratic judicial power and the encroachment of armed force on the liberty of citizens. Under the influence of socialist thought, this neo-roman diagnosis was extended to the workplace, where employers were said to possess a fateful arbitrary power over opportunities to earn a wage, while being able to regulate the working environment in their own interests. The failure of cooperatives and narrow industrial organisation to eliminate this domination prompts Debs to propose common ownership of productive property, which can be controlled democratically by the whole citizenry. The foundation of this socialist republicanism is citizen sovereignty, alongside a recognition of the virtues needed to maintain liberty, such as a solidaristic willingness to defend one another's economic independence, couched in an appeal to the manhood of workers. But whatever its historical interest, does this Debsian analysis make a substantive and distinctive contribution to republican political theory?

The contrast with neorepublican political philosophy is particularly striking. Philip Pettit hopes that conservative proponents of private property will find a republican idiom congenial (1997, 135), while also defending the compatibility of such property with freedom, on the idealising assumption that it does not express “the dominating power of one class” (2006, 139). The liberal republicanism of Alan Thomas holds that widespread private capital ownership is an important means of safeguarding individual economic independence (2017, 146). Robert Taylor's commercial republicanism opposes industrial democracy and associational socialism on the grounds they are more likely to expand than contract dominating power (2017, 102). Of course, Debs shares something of their neo-roman understanding of freedom but

would reject their ease with private productive property and disinclination towards collective economic democracy. These differences reflect Debs's dearly-won belief that the law cannot adequately restrain private corporate power, and indeed nothing short of common ownership will forestall an "economic oligarchy" (III.260). That scepticism about law within capitalist societies marks another important departure from orthodox neorepublicanism, which has often sought protection from domination precisely in judicial oversight, in addition to depoliticised officials such as ombudsmen and auditors (Pettit 2012, 216). While Pettit recognises that the threat of corruption means that such figures should be appointed only with careful screening and a limited mandate (1997, ch. 7), there is little sense of their systematic vulnerability to ideological capture and plutocratic sway, which emerges from a Debsian class analysis of the state.

Debs's sensitivity to oligarchic control aligns his thought more closely with recent plebeian republicans, who believe orthodox neorepublicanism has failed to sufficiently challenge elites (McCormick 2011; Hamilton 2014, ch. 6; Vergara 2020). Taking inspiration from a Machiavellian account of class conflict that stresses that "the many" must be institutionally empowered to resist the domination of "the few," they look to greater use of political trials, popular revision of constitutions, sortition for public officeholders, and above all a revised tribunate—one able to block laws and policies that harm the many. At the heart of this plebeian politics is what McCormick calls "the necessity of properly institutionalized class conflict" (2011, viii). That puts class back at the heart of republican theory but offers rather different prescriptions to Debs. He focuses on socialisation of productive property through a dual economic-political strategy of building union power in workplaces and winning electoral office, whereas plebeian republicans pursue primarily political reforms to secure sortition, vetoes, and accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, Debs's programme does not seek to institutionalise class conflict but to abolish it. That does not mean forsaking all class-based institutions in the meantime (industrial union membership is implicitly restricted to working people, for instance). But Debs's ultimate goal is more ambitious than plebeian republicanism: uprooting class domination rather than using anti-oligarchic political institutions to curb its excesses.

The aim of ending rather than institutionalising class struggle places Debs closer to Marx's view that even a dictatorship of the proletariat "only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*" (1983, 65). Is, then, his socialist republicanism simply Marxism by another

name? That suspicion is strengthened by a number of recent studies that explore the republican dimension to Marx's thought (Roberts 2017; Leipold forthcoming). Of course, Debs's own republicanism was entrenched long before his 1895 exposure to Marx's writings as a prisoner in Woodstock jail—but this encounter with Marxism was important in shaping his nascent socialism, especially the influence of Karl Kautsky (II.644). Significantly, it was during 1895 that Debs first introduces the explicit charge of wage slavery that other socialists had modelled (II.398), which he goes on to frame in decidedly republican terms as an assault on citizenship itself (III.600). Growing familiarity with Marx's thought also inclined him towards a historical materialism given to structural economic explanation rather than moralistic condemnation of individuals (III.106; III.427).¹⁴ Yet, these affinities were not absolute, with Debs departing from Marx on other key questions, such as whether workers should receive the full value of their labour—joining the Lasselleans in endorsing this prospect (1897a; III.546) while Marx was highly sceptical (1989, 83–88).

What stands out most compared to more explicitly Marxist thinkers, however, is the consistency with which Debs wields the classical republican language of the arbitrary will in decrying the plutocratic control of capitalists over law and the economy. Marxist contemporaries such as Kautsky (1910, 40 and 99) and Luxemburg complained of wage slavery and championed a socialist republic—even “socialist civic virtues” in the latter's case (2004, 351; Muldoon 2020, ch. 5). But the neo-roman conception of freedom intimated in Marx's claim that the proletariat works and therefore lives only by permission is far from a pervasive feature of their analyses, whereas it forms of the centrepiece of Debs's emancipatory philosophy (including anchoring an ideal of citizenship that fails to appear with comparable prominence in standard Marxist texts). Thus, it is no surprise to find that contemporary socialist republicans who look to Kautsky and Luxemburg for orientation are keen to jettison the neo-roman account of freedom for a more diffuse democratic ideal of “freedom as collective autonomy” (Muldoon 2022, 52). Debsian socialist republicanism, by contrast, remains true to the classical republican formulation.

Nevertheless, the socialist republicanism that Debs develops may still seem like an unstable fusion of traditions. Indeed, Hannah Arendt turned to

14. For a response to the objection that this impersonal mode of analysis is incompatible with a neo-roman preoccupation with the arbitrary will, see O'Shea (2020a, 9).

revolutionary American republicanism precisely as an alternative to a socialism that she took to be dogged by economism (1963, 58). The American Revolution was thought to have succeeded—where its French counterpart failed—in large measure because it avoided tangling with the social question: addressing not “the order of society but the form of government” (1963, 63), without being overwhelmed by the cries of the impoverished, whose “liberation from necessity” displaces “the building of freedom” (1963, 108). That echoes Cicero’s warning that dramatic economic redistribution will corrode the civic concord upon which political community rests (1991, 95). Similarly, the typical republican response to class domination has been to seek a balance between contending social orders or classes, or else keep them in productive tension, rather than wiping these distinctions away. Does Debs break too radically with his fellow republicans by placing social revolution at the heart of the fight for freedom?

After witnessing the wealthy tighten their grip over the apparatus of the state, Debs concluded that republican government had largely been supplanted by plutocracy (II.441), such that property and poverty were already deeply intertwined with legal and political power, without the need for a revolution to introduce this combustible mixture. He took the political equality necessary for republican government to be impossible without economic freedom (1902). Thus, republicans had to confront class domination, with Debs proceeding under the assumption that a lasting solution cannot be found in a simple rebalancing of wealth and social power but only through common ownership of its primary sources: the means of production. That is an innovation in the republican tradition—but its explicitly republican rationale is powerful. Debs thereby joins radicals such as Wollstonecraft (2014) in extending a republican critique of arbitrary power past its conventionally recognised bounds to establish bolder conclusions than their forebears would have accepted.

In sum, Debs’s interlocking socialist republican approaches to citizenship, law, freedom, and property not only constitute a significant chapter in the history of both socialism and labour republicanism, but continue to offer conceptual foundations for an ambitious emancipatory politics. He challenges the complacency of many neorepublican philosophers with respect to the influence of private economic wealth upon social, legal, and political power. Likewise, his institutional solutions are bolder than the plebeian republicans who share his concerns about oligarchy—pushing for an abolition of class society through a dramatic shift in the ownership of productive property. The

Debsian demand for common ownership distinguishes his socialism from the cooperativism of the Knights, who also adapted a civic republican understanding of unfreedom to the conditions of American industrial capitalism. Those calls for common ownership of productive property bear some resemblance to the thought of Debs's Marxist contemporaries, but his analysis is pursued with a far more consistent and explicit commitment to republican citizenship and its foundations in neo-roman liberty. This socialist republicanism is distinctive in its commitments and able to illuminate the operations of plutocratic control, judicial autocracy, and the regime of property best suited to suppressing arbitrary economic power. Thus, there is much to recommend it to political theorists in an age when plutocratic domination remains a perennial danger.

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ORCID iD

Tom O'Shea  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4558-878X>

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Author Biography

Tom O'Shea is a senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Roehampton. Much of their research investigates the history and theory of freedom, with a current focus on radical republican political theory. O'Shea's previous work has discussed a wide range of themes, such as sexual desire, moral conscience, mental disorder, Kantian metaethics, and the history of consent. Their future research plans include a project on the philosophical legacies of slavery.