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Domination and Democracy in the Work of Karl Marx and W.E.B. Du Bois

I. Introduction

Historians and social theorists have increasingly described capitalism as a social formation that produces impersonal forms of domination and compulsion.¹ At the same time, many recent political theorists highlight a republican tradition of political thinking that emphasizes the way in which being subject to the personal, arbitrary will of another constitutes an important form of domination.² Thus far, however, there have been few attempts to bring together the insights of social theories of impersonal domination with political theories of personal domination, although recent scholars, especially labor republicans such as Alex Gourevitch, have begun to bridge this divide.³ One of the fruits of labor republican theory has been the development of an “intermediate” category between impersonal and personal domination, described by Gourevitch

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1867]), 1021; Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Norton, 2013 [1974]), 147; Jane Humphries, “Women: Scapegoats and Safety Valves in the Great Depression,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8, no. 1 (1976): 100; Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand* (Harvard University Press, 1993 [1977]), 21, 48; William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 19; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982) 18-19; Giovanni Arrighi and Fortunata Piselli, “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments: Feuds, Class Struggles, and Migrations in a Peripheral Region of Southern Italy,” *Review* 10, no. 4 (1987): 662; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3-4, 159; Seth Rockman, “The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism,” in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives & New Directions*, ed. Cathy D. Matson (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 354; Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 86 (2014): 58; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 78, 280, 336.

² Philip Pettit. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997),

³ On labor republicanism, see Alex Gourevitch, “Labor and Republican Liberty,” *Constellations* 18, no. 3 (2011): 431-454; idem. “Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work,” *Political Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013): 591-617. On another recent approach to theorizing impersonal domination in the context of republican debates, see Sharon Krause, “Beyond Non-domination: Agency, Inequality and the Meaning of Freedom,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39, no. 2 (2013): 190.

as “structural domination,” which focuses on the impersonality of legal domination.

By drawing on the insights of these schools of social and political thought, my aim in this essay is to begin to articulate the relationship between impersonal, structural, and personal domination and to show that when scholars focus primarily on personal or structural domination, they can miss the ways in which both are conditioned—but not entirely displaced—by impersonal forms of domination. At the same time, if thinkers place sole emphasis on impersonal, abstract domination, then they may overlook the concrete structural and personal forms it can take. I make my argument by drawing out the ways in which Karl Marx and W.E.B. Du Bois theorize all three forms of domination. In a concluding section I demonstrate the democratic institutional forms both thinkers seek to develop in order to counter impersonal domination and its concrete manifestations.

II. Impersonal Compulsion

Both Marx and Du Bois attend to the personal, coercive aspects of a “free” wage-labor system and the tactics used by capitalists to coerce and control the labor force. As such, it is tempting to think of both thinkers primarily as theorists of one important variant of personal domination, class domination. For example, in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx speaks of the ways in which masses of laborers have become “slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois state,”⁴ and in *Capital* he speaks of “the domination of the capitalist over the worker.”⁵ In similar fashion, Du Bois often alludes to the personal and coercive aspects of capitalists and their attempts at overt control of the labor force. In *Black Reconstruction*, for example, Du Bois speaks of the “oligarchy of capitalists” and the ways in which Southern planter capitalists and Northern

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 479.

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 899.

industrial capitalists formed two factions that “fought to dominate both the poor whites and the Negroes” through numerous coercive techniques.⁶

Yet Marx also argues that capitalism rests on “a mode of compulsion *not based on personal relations of domination and dependency...*”⁷ Instead, he theorizes capitalism as an “impersonal”⁸ structure constituted by laboring activity, laboring activity that then becomes alienated in “objectified” form as commodities, money, and capital. Du Bois too speaks of capitalism in terms that indicate it is a system driven by imperatives that are beyond the personal intent of individuals or groups, and that these imperatives condition arbitrary personal domination, and specifically the personal relations of racial domination. Thus in his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn* Du Bois writes that he has moved beyond a position that sees racial domination as driven by intentional and personal “ignorance and ill will,” towards a standpoint that views racism as driven by “more powerful motives...economic motives.”⁹ He argues throughout *Dusk* and elsewhere that impersonal aspects of the labor market are what really drive racism both in America and globally, which can be seen in “the connection between race and wealth” and the “income-bearing value of race prejudice.”¹⁰ In what follows below, I elaborate in more detail how Marx and Du Bois theorize impersonal domination and how it conditions and *is in turn conditioned by* structural and personal forms.

Marx on Abstract Labor

Marx’s discussion of alienation in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* provides a helpful point of departure for considering the nature of impersonal domination under industrial

⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1962 [1935]), 483, 472.

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 1021, my emphasis.

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 247 note 1.

⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Piscataway N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2007 [1940]),

¹⁰ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 129.

capitalism. In this section I focus on Marx's discussion of alienation, drawing first on *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and then on Marx's elaboration of alienation in *Capital*. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx develops a theory of labor that departs quite significantly from Lockean theory, the latter of which supposes that a person who mixes their labor with land now has a claim to that property by right. In contrast, Marx argues that in industrial capitalism, the more a worker mixes her labor with a product, the more she becomes alienated from that product.¹¹ He says this is the case because in capitalist society people do not consume what they produce, but sell their labor to others who in turn use this labor-power as a raw commodity to augment their own accumulation.

In describing this process at the outset of the *Manuscripts*, however, Marx's very first point is not that the worker comes to be dominated by the capitalist (although this will eventually play a role in his analysis¹²) but rather that the worker becomes dominated by the object she produces. The worker, he writes, "falls under the *dominion* of his product, capital" rather than under the dominion of the employer or the capitalist.¹³ Additionally, although Marx uses the language of "bondage," he speaks initially of "object-bondage."¹⁴ Marx here transforms the republican language of *dominion* and bondage in a distinctly *impersonal* direction, a point missed by republican theorists who have sought to demonstrate Marx's republican credentials.¹⁵

The initial object-bondage Marx describes is that of the production of commodities, but these commodities are of two types. The first are what people typically associate with commodities, namely, products that are taken up as raw material and fashioned into an object, in

¹¹ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," in *The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd Ed.* ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 71-2.

¹² See especially Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 78.

¹³ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 72.

¹⁴ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 72.

¹⁵ See Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), x note 3; Phillip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 141.

the way that raw cotton is spun into yarn. Marx writes that these objects confront the worker “as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer” in which “the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.”¹⁶ But Marx also writes that labour produces another type of commodity: “Labour...produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*.”¹⁷ In both cases, the capitalist buys the commodities in order to create a product that will come out of the production process with a greater value. The capitalist, constrained by impersonal market prices and competition, can only survive to the extent that he or she can keep the costs and prices of both types of commodity to a minimum.¹⁸ At this point we can see why Marx cannot be seen merely as a theorist of personal, class domination: the capitalist too is conditioned by impersonal forces, he or she becomes a “creature” of them just as the worker does.¹⁹ While keeping this claim in mind, Marx’s argument about the way in which commodities dominate people requires elaboration.

When Marx writes that the laborer produces him or herself as a commodity, and that this itself is a form of alienation or domination, what I take him to mean is the following: when a person produces commodities for others rather than for themselves, they re-produce wealth for a ‘system’ that relies on one only form of laboring, wage-labor. Yet this system is premised on the very necessity of cheapening and extracting as much labor from the worker as possible. Thus the more wealth the worker produces, the more she enriches the capitalist, who in turn has an interests in cheapening her labor. The process becomes further entrenched because it tends to eliminate other forms of producing, thus reinforcing itself. As a result, people are *compelled* to work. Initially this compulsion can take the form of personal and legal forms of coercion, yet

¹⁶ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” 71-72.

¹⁷ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” 71.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 33; Marx, *Capital*, 590.

¹⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 92.

once it is in place, individuals are compelled by the need to obtain subsistence, by an *impersonal necessity*. In *Capital*, Marx refers to this type of process of eliminating alternative ways of living and producing as one of the “formal subsumption” of labor and the “real subsumption” of labor²⁰

Formal subsumption refers to a process whereby other ways of living and laboring, such as artisanal production, are taken up and transformed by capital, but not eliminated entirely. “Hybrid” forms of wage-labor and other forms of labor continue to exist. Real subsumption refers to the process whereby these other ways of living and laboring are entirely abolished. According to Marx, the forms of compulsion common to both ways of subordinating labor are *not* premised on “personal relations” of subordination.²¹ Systems that continue to rely on force, violence, and arbitrary power tend not to be able to compete with those that rely on more “consensual” and impersonal relations of power, as one historian of Egypt has shown with regard to that country’s nineteenth century cotton industry.²² The key point here is that domination becomes an “impersonal” structure, yet a structure constituted by human activity and praxis—specifically, the practice of laboring to make goods for a market. The focus on the ‘activity’ of labor that produces dominating structures is why Moishe Postone refers to Marx’s theory as a “theory of practice,” one in which can be found a theory of “the domination of labor *by* labor.”²³ To clarify how labor can dominate labor, we can turn to the second type of commodity in Marx’s discussion of alienation, the commodity as object.

It helps to distinguish here, as Marx does, between “dead labor” and “living labor,” in which the former dominates the latter.²⁴ Marx uses the concept of dead labor to name those

²⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 645.

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, 1021.

²² Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 166.

²³ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 3-4, 160 note 97.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 342; see also Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 14 where they speak of the “living labor” and “accumulated labor.”

objects that have already been created and turned into capital, while living labor connotes the actual laboring humans in the workplace. Marx gives machinery as a central example of that which constitutes dead labor. Machinery becomes an impersonal form of domination for at least two reasons. First, by producing technology and machinery, laborers produce the very means by which they are continuously thrown out of work and back into a labor market that, as I've discussed above, contains few or no alternative forms of employment. As Marx puts it, "The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing."²⁵ Secondly, the very machinery itself can dominate the worker within the labor process, insofar as it completely changes the pace and tempo of work. "In handicrafts and manufacture," Marx writes, "the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him."²⁶ To put it succinctly, large-scale machinery or "dead labor" dominates both in the labor process and in the labor market. In this sense, Marx carries through his theory of alienation from his early works to his developed theory of capitalism in *Capital*, which goes against the Althusserian theory of a "break" between the "humanist" Marx of the *Manuscripts*, and the "scientific" Marx of *Capital*.²⁷ Not only does Marx theorize alienated labor, however, he seeks to indicate how it came into being in the first place. He does so most fully in his discussion of "primitive accumulation."

Marx argues that the historically specific structure of alienated labor and its impersonal form of domination arose in the late fifteenth century when "A mass of 'free' and unattached proletarians was hurled on the labour-market by the dissolution of the bands of feudal retainers...[and] by the usurpation of the common lands."²⁸ This contingent process of "primitive

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 783.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 548.

²⁷ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 878.

accumulation” or “accumulation by dispossession,”²⁹ sets the stage for what Marx will call “abstract labor,” a concept meant to signify the homogeneous interchangeability of waged work, as distinct from feudal labor, in which labor was mediated—distributed, controlled, given meaning—by “overtly or ‘recognizably’ social relations” and was not interchangeable.³⁰ For Marx, the qualitative specificity of labor in capitalism becomes reduced to an abstract equivalent, as “individuals transfer with ease from one type of labour to another.”³¹

One of Marx’s most insightful recent interpreters, Moishe Postone regards the concept of abstract labor as so central a category that it “sufficiently differentiates capitalist society from all other existent forms of social life.”³² A society in which abstract labor predominates, he writes “is characterized by a unique form of social interdependence—people do not consume what they produce but produce and exchange commodities in order to acquire other commodities...the specificity of the producers’ labor is *abstracted* from the products they acquire with their labor.”³³ On this view, labor has become a “peculiar means” by which people acquire, consume, and produce goods, regardless of the specific, concrete labor they perform. All forms of labor are homogenous, general, or “abstract” to the extent that they can be paid by a “universal equivalent,”³⁴ that is, money, which capitalists pay out according to the labor time worked during the day, week, or month. Labor becomes an *instrumental necessity*,³⁵ and the particular structure

²⁹ David Harvey and Giovanni Arrighi have recently employed the term “accumulation by dispossession” in place of primitive accumulation in order to indicate the constant and ongoing dispossession required for capital accumulation. They think the term primitive accumulation may imply a one-time event. See chapter 4 of David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).; Giovanni Arrighi, Nicole Aschoff, and Ben Scully. “Accumulation by Dispossession and its Limits: the Southern Africa Paradigm Revisited,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 45, no. 4 (2010): 410-438.

³⁰ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 150.

³¹ Karl Marx, “‘Introduction’ to the *Grundrisse*,” in *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 150.

³² Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 150.

³³ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 148-9.

³⁴ Marx, *Capital*,

³⁵ On capitalist labor as instrumental, see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 182 ff.

of surplus value extraction in capitalism requires that the time a worker spends at work is well beyond what would be necessary to produce their subsistence goods.³⁶

Du Bois on Abstract, Instrumental Labor

While Du Bois does not explicitly invoke the concept of abstract labor, he does identify the mode of impersonal domination that drives wage-labor, especially when he speaks in the language of necessity and compulsion. In *Black Reconstruction*, for example, he disparages the “necessity of continuous toil”³⁷ of wage labor in the United States and also writes “of the ordinary worker the world over today, slaving ten, twelve, or fourteen hours a day, with not enough to eat, *compelled by his physical necessities* to do this and not to do that, curtailed in his movements and his possibilities.”³⁸ Du Bois of course recognizes the continuing presence of coercive and personal forms of labor control within capitalist societies, as I will discuss in the next section, but the quotations above demonstrate that generally he sees wage work as driven by impersonal imperatives, especially by people’s own necessities and lack of alternative possibilities.

Du Bois offers an equally compelling analysis of the impersonal nature of large-scale machinery and how it can operate as an object of domination, by stripping workers of control of their own activity. He discusses this mode of impersonal domination in the chapter of *Dusk of Dawn* titled “The White World,” where Du Bois engages in a dialogue with a fictional white interlocutor named Roger Van Dieman. Van Dieman represents for Du Bois the “ideal type” of the racial ideologue who espouses Christian ideas of tolerance and brotherhood yet at the same

³⁶ As Kathi Weeks has recently written, this is far from being a condition peculiar to Marx’s nineteenth century era. “Waged work,” she writes “remains today the centerpiece of late capitalist economic systems; it is, of course, the way most people acquire access to the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. See Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work, The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

³⁷ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 17.

³⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 8-9, my emphasis.

time affirms and defends racial domination. In one particular passage, Van Dieman attempts to assert the superiority of the “the white world” over “the black world.” As one example, he argues that modern industry “is the best expression of the civilization in which the white race finds itself today.”³⁹ Van Dieman goes on to make the further claim that industry is more fully ‘developed’ in majority-white countries. Du Bois’s response is that white industry’s advance and development is cause for indictment, not celebration, since industry as currently organized is a monstrosity that entrenches both racial and class subordination:

If this vast Frankenstein monster really served its makers; if it were their minister and not their master, god and king; if their machines gave us rest and leisure, instead of the drab uniformity of uninteresting drudgery; if their factories gave us gracious community of thought and feeling; beauty enshrined, free and joyous; if their work veiled them with tender sympathy at human distress and wide tolerance and understanding—then, all hail, White Imperial Industry! But it does not. It is a Beast! Its creators do not even understand it, cannot curb or guide it.⁴⁰

The first thing to note in this passage is that Du Bois establishes a theme he insists on throughout his work, which is the racialized nature of capitalist production. Rather than a theory of capitalism, we might borrow a term from sociologist Gay Seidman and say that Du Bois develops a theory of “racial capitalism,”⁴¹ in which racial divisions are exploited and entrenched in order to keep labor divided and to guarantee a constant supply of cheap labor.⁴² While the subsequent racial domination may manifest in a personal and coercive manner, Du Bois also notes that impersonal market and price movements foster the conditions in which a limited number of jobs exist, creating the fear of job loss and racialized competition within the working class.⁴³

In addition to the racialized nature of modern industry, the passage establishes two other

³⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 149.

⁴⁰ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 149.

⁴¹ Gay Seidman, “Is South Africa Different? Sociological Comparisons and Theoretical Contributions from the Land of Apartheid,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 419.

⁴² Du Bois, *Dusk*, 205 ff.; see also *Black Reconstruction*, 680.

⁴³ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 678.

important points. First, in using the metaphor of Frankenstein to describe industrial capitalism, Du Bois makes a point similar to Marx's discussion above, in which the products that come to dominate men and women are not human, but neither are they completely separate from humans. They are not an external structure that works to determine people, but rather, people do assert agency in the sense that they have created the products of industry. But as Du Bois points out, echoing the alienation argument, the makers of industry (both workers and capitalists) no longer control the objects that have been created. Du Bois uses the language of "mastery" here to denote one way in which people are dominated, which may imply a focus on personal domination,⁴⁴ but much like Marx transforms the republican language of *dominion*, so too does Du Bois transform the language of mastery in a direction that implies an *impersonal* type of mastery. In doing so however, Du Bois reveals something important about his attitude towards industrial capitalism—he does not reject it entirely, but sees possibilities and potentialities within it.

He signals this attitude when he claims that machines could serve people, that people could master industry rather than the other way around. Indeed, further along in *Dusk* he speaks of a plan for "industrial emancipation,"⁴⁵ and throughout his works he argues for the idea of industrial democracy or the "democratization of industry." What he means by industry and machinery serving people can be partially gleaned from the remaining sentences in the passage. Du Bois argues that machines could potentially provide "rest and leisure," but instead are used for other purposes, namely, to intensify work and productivity, which results in repetitive and "uninteresting" work. In this regard, Du Bois's account corresponds to Marx's claim that wage

⁴⁴ As Sharon Krause points out, the master-slave relation is the paradigm of recent republican theorizing. See Sharon Krause, "Beyond Non-domination: Agency, Inequality and the Meaning of Freedom," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39, no. 2 (2013).

⁴⁵ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 207.

work tends to eliminate free and spontaneous forms of laboring activity.⁴⁶ Instead, work has become a merely instrumental way of gaining access to one's means of subsistence. Du Bois's early work is just as concerned with this problem of instrumental labor, even though he had yet to engage seriously with Marxian critiques of capitalism.

Already in *Souls*, for example, Du Bois argues that three central aspects of life that should all be informed by one another, "Work, culture, [and] liberty,"⁴⁷ have become separated. Work has become emptied of cultural content and "higher aims." It is unfree to the extent that the labor process rather than the worker determines the pace and rhythms of work. Through this lens of instrumental labor, we also gain insight onto Du Bois's well-known critique of Booker T. Washington.

In addition to critiquing Washington for de-emphasizing political agitation, Du Bois also criticizes him for promoting a "gospel of Work and Money,"⁴⁸ in which the former becomes merely a means to the latter. However, it is important to point out that Du Bois does not necessarily see Washington's approach as a result of personal failure, but as a symptom of a larger American approach to work and labour. For example, in chapter five of *Souls*, Du Bois asks the following questions: "in all our Nation's striving is not the Gospel of Work befouled by the Gospel of Pay?" He goes on to write that such an ideology of work has become naturalized as "unquestioned" common sense.⁴⁹ Like Marx then, Du Bois articulates the ways in which impersonal norms, the very structure of abstract labor, and objects such as large-scale machinery come to dominate people living within capitalist social formations. Yet there is another key element to impersonal domination that both Du Bois and Marx grapple with, which is the

⁴⁶ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 76-77.

⁴⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, 43.

⁴⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, 67.

⁴⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 83.

abstract temporal norms and standardized, homogeneous forms of time that come to condition a way of life driven by ever-increasing attempts to expand production and accumulate capital. In the next section then, I discuss Marx and Du Bois's views on what Postone calls abstract time.⁵⁰

III. Abstract Time

In 1833, Marx tells us, the modern day match was invented when a process of attaching phosphorous to the match head was discovered. Once this discovery was made, the manufacture of matches in England spread quickly, and by 1863 a working day of "12 to 14 or 15 hours" had become the norm. Most of the workers were under the age of 18 and exposed to tetanus, pollution, and other hazards. "Dante," according to Marx, "would have found the worst horrors in his *Inferno* surpassed in this industry."⁵¹ Around the same time, the production of wallpaper was also rapidly expanding, and Marx notes that during the busy time for its production, the seven months between October and April, "the work often lasts, almost uninterruptedly, from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. or further into the night."⁵² One of the wallpaper manufacturers cited by Marx notes that these working conditions led to high absence and illness rates amongst his largely female workforce. When they were able to make it to work, he tells factory inspectors, "I have to bawl at them to keep them awake."⁵³ On the other side of the Atlantic, in Massachusetts, Marx writes that laws were instituted between 1836 and 1858 that would limit the daily hours of child labor to no longer than ten hours per day. Similar legislation was passed in New Jersey in 1851 and Rhode Island in 1857.⁵⁴ While these laws could be seen as progress from one standpoint, Marx notes that when viewed historically, they were in fact retrogressive, given that a ten-hour

⁵⁰ See chapter 5 of Postone, *Time Labor and Social Domination* for a helpful elaboration of this concept and the empirical historical conditions giving rise to it.

⁵¹ Marx, *Capital*, 356.

⁵² Marx, *Capital*, 356.

⁵³ Cited in Marx, *Capital*, 356.

⁵⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 383 note 84.

limit for work “was in England, even in the middle of the seventeenth century, the normal working day of able-bodied artisans, robust ploughmen and gigantic blacksmiths.”⁵⁵

My purpose with these examples is to begin to show that in addition to the general impersonal compulsion to work, which captures the first aspect of impersonal, abstract domination, there is a second aspect, which involves a loss of control over one’s life-time. Employers of course sometimes use personal, arbitrary modes of domination to induce people to give up their free time in order to produce commodities, but I would argue that this is not the end of the story. For Marx, capitalists themselves are compelled by impersonal temporal norms, and these norms often cause them to intensify and exploit their workers at ever-increasing levels. Importantly, these temporal norms are not directly controlled by any agent. Marx seeks to capture the temporal aspect of domination of the capitalist with his concept of socially necessary labor-time.

Socially necessary labor time refers to the average amount of time workers (on a large-scale, societal level) need to work in order to produce any particular commodity. The employer does not determine the socially necessary labor time, but she must abide by it, otherwise the business risks being overrun by competition. As an example, Marx notes that once power-looms were introduced into nineteenth century England, a hand weaver could turn the same amount of yarn into cloth in half the time it took previously.⁵⁶ But this meant that the first factories to introduce the loom could now sell the same product for a cheaper rate, compelling other cloth-producers to increase productivity in order to reduce labor time spent on the product. For this reason, Marx notes that the capitalist, like the worker, is non-sovereign and dominated by a

⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 383.

⁵⁶ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 129.

structure “of relations whose creature he remains.”⁵⁷ As such, although Marx is a severe critic of capitalists, he also notes that within his theory they are not individually responsible per se for the structures under which they operate. Individual capitalists and laborers, he writes, “are dealt with here [in *Capital*] only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests.”⁵⁸

The language of class interests here might imply that Marx is operating within a personal or class domination framework. While this is certainly an aspect of what he is talking about, I also think that we can read this passage as evidence that impersonal temporal norms condition, but don’t fully determine, the practices of both capitalists and workers. A capitalist for example, is the “bearer” of an economic category insofar as he or she must sell their commodities above and beyond expenditures on labor-power and raw materials. To the extent that they fail to do this, they cease to be a capitalist.

Yet none of this should be taken to mean that Marx overlooks the existence of personal, direct domination. Instead, Marx shows us how abstract temporal compulsions intensify these forms of domination. Given the competitive aspect of socially necessary labor time, employers have an incentive to continually increase the productivity of their workers. But since the work ethic needed to meet the demands of socially necessary labor time is not natural, “the capitalist’s ability to *supervise* and enforce *discipline* is vital” and thus “The overseer’s book of penalties replaces the slave-driver’s lash”⁵⁹ As a result of these mechanisms, the abstract dimension of time (socially necessary labor time) has begun to affect concrete practice (productive, concrete labor) in important ways, and leads to Marx’s numerous descriptions of the “autocratic” and “despotic” nature of commodity production. “[W]ithin the capitalist system,” he writes, “all

⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 92.

⁵⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 92.

⁵⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 986, 550.

methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker...they become a means of domination and exploitation of the producers...*they transform his life-time into working-time*, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital.”⁶⁰ As Postone puts it, socially necessary labor time “entails the constitution by individual action of a general external norm that acts reflexively on each individual.”⁶¹ When this temporal necessity is combined with the necessity of abstract labor, we thus have two central aspects of the impersonal domination by capital.

It is also important to point out here that these temporal forms of compulsion were not limited in their effects to the white-male working classes of Europe. As Du Bois points out in *Black Reconstruction*, the socially average prices and labor time set by the industrial centers of Europe and North America served as competition with the patriarchal system in the American South. Planters of “cotton, tobacco and sugar” were then “left a narrow margin of profit.”⁶² As a result, Du Bois writes, the Southern planter “could retaliate only by more ruthlessly exploiting his slave labor so as to get the largest crops at the least expense.”⁶³

Once slavery was abolished, abstract temporal norms continued to exert a concrete effect on racialized populations. Historian Thomas Holt, for example, shows that as American slavery declined and emancipation became a reality, liberal reformers attempted to create a new working class out of the emergent population of free blacks.⁶⁴ These reformers realized that to build this new class the freemen would have to become inculcated with the values and behavioral dispositions necessary to a wage-labor system, which would include the motivation to work

⁶⁰ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 799, my emphasis.

⁶¹ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 191.

⁶² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York, NY: Atheneum Publishers, 1935), 37.

⁶³ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 37.

⁶⁴ Thomas Holt, “An Empire Over the Mind: Emancipation, Race, and Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South,” In *Region, Race, and Reconstruction*, eds. Kousser and Macpherson (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982).

extended hours and accumulate goods beyond subsistence needs. It was necessary, as Holt points out, because the time it took to produce one's subsistence goods was well below the norms of the wage system. As he notes with regard to post-emancipation Jamaica, "freedmen could earn their accustomed subsistence needs by working...for little better than one day a week."⁶⁵

These workers understood that entering the wage-labor market would undermine the (limited) autonomy they had as independent producers on their land. As a result, they resisted most attempts to be integrated into the wage-labor market. Freedom for them was not to be found in the "free" wage-labor system then being promoted, but in the ability to cultivate one's own land and produce for one's own consumption. Freedom, for the emancipated men and women, "involved some measure of personal autonomy, the ability to make choices about one's life and destiny."⁶⁶

Du Bois writes often about the impersonal temporal norms of industrializing capitalism. In a 1907 essay titled "Economic Cooperation," for example, he seeks to de-naturalize the "absurd" centrality that work has come to play in everyday life, and argues that in a future society "earning a living" will cease "to occupy the large space that it does today in human endeavor."⁶⁷ He amplifies this claim four decades later in a 1949 speech titled "Government and Freedom," where he explicitly connects abstract temporal and laboring compulsions to capitalist growth imperatives. "So long as work is organized for private profit," he writes, "there grows up the singular idea that the object of life is Work, that hard and unpleasant toil for the waking life of most human beings is what people live for."⁶⁸ Instead, he argues that in a future socialist society, work would still be required, but "that its routine need not demand twelve hours a day or

⁶⁵ Holt, "Empire Over the Mind," 288-89, my emphasis.

⁶⁶ Holt, "Empire Over the Mind," 299.

⁶⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans* (New York: Arno Press, ([1907]: 1969), 10.

⁶⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Government and Freedom" Ben Davis Rally Nov. 6 1949. In: WEB Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1949.

even eight.” Rather, “probably from three to six hours would suffice, and leave abundant time for leisure, exercise, study, and avocations.”⁶⁹ Note here that Du Bois offers an important suggestion as to the relationship between freedom and necessity. He does not argue that freedom means the absence of *all* necessity, and thus he does not envision a technological utopia in which machines do all of the work.⁷⁰ Rather, he argues that a free society would still require some necessary labor, but that the temporal norms would be significantly different. In this way, Du Bois can be seen as making an important contribution to what Michael Hanchard has called “temporal freedom,”⁷¹ or what other scholars refer to as “temporal autonomy.”⁷²

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois amplifies the notion of temporal freedom by showing the connection between freedom, land, and temporality. Land allows people to control the temporal rhythms, pacing, and hours of that they work. As Eric Foner notes, working one’s own land, as many freed blacks understood, would allow them “to establish the conditions, rhythms, and compensation of their work, and to create time to pursue...personal and community goals.”⁷³ Although *Black Reconstruction* can be read in large part as a chronicle of how this way of life was cut short in the post-emancipation South, he offers some illuminating examples of the connection between land and freedom in a brief discussion of the Sea Islands off of Georgia in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Following the Union Army’s confiscation of nearly half a million acres of plantation property, General Sherman ordered the colonization of these islands, upon which 30,000 free men and women were settled. Du Bois notes that over half of them “were self-supporting within a year,” and they “worked fewer hours and had more time for

⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth,” in *Darkwater* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 2004), 79.

⁷⁰ Here I am adapting a point made by Postone regarding freedom and necessity in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 33 note 48.

⁷¹ Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 245-268.

⁷² Robert E. Goodin et. al., *Discretionary Time: A New Measure of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (Harper and Row, 1988), 140.

self-expression.”⁷⁴ In this sense, Du Bois shows that when people can choose their own form of laboring, they favor those conditions that allow for the free time and the “free and spontaneous activity” described by Marx in his discussion of estranged labor.⁷⁵ Yet as both authors show, these forms of free activity are consistently eliminated by capitalist modes of producing. To begin to show how, I draw in the next section on the notion of “structural domination” and use Du Bois and Marx to illustrate the concrete manifestations of the this type of compulsion.

IV. Structural Domination

Up to this point I have been discussing the way in which the structure of labor and time within capitalist social formations present a historically new form of impersonal domination. However, in making this argument I have thus far assumed described wage labor in a fairly ‘pure’ form. Yet one of the key insights of Du Bois to Marxist theorizing is to complicate this notion of pure wage labor. As he notes in *Souls*, only about twenty percent of free blacks in the early twentieth century South would actually have fallen under this category.⁷⁶ Nearly forty years later, he makes a similar point, writing that blacks made up a small percentage of the industrial labor force in the North.⁷⁷ Thus, to begin to get at the more fine-grained nature of class relations, and the forms of domination that did prevail in the American context, I turn to a notion of “structural domination,” and illustrate this concept through Du Bois’s writings about debt peonage in the Jim Crow South. I follow by elaborating how Marx also contributes to a theory of structural domination, focusing on his ideas about the law and the state.

As liberal and republican theorists have outlined in detail, a central component of personal domination refers to the actual or potential interference with someone by another

⁷⁴ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 74-75.

⁷⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” 77.

⁷⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*

⁷⁷ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 210.

person.⁷⁸ Structural domination, however, is a concept meant to operate between this type of personal domination and the more impersonal abstract domination I have thus far discussed. As Gourevitch writes, structural domination is “an intermediate condition between personal subjection and anonymous interdependence.”⁷⁹ One way to conceive of this type of domination is as legal domination, and I focus on this in what follows. Legal domination operates between the personal and the impersonal because although it manifests personally in police, clerks, and other agents, laws are created and represent men and women in the abstract, in terms of rights and citizenship.⁸⁰ Yet although laws are abstract in this sense, they are not self-generated in the same way that laboring practice is a “self-generated,”⁸¹ form of domination. Laws might be said to be more of an external rather than immanent form of domination.

Du Bois on Debt Peonage

Du Bois first outlines the personal and structural forms of domination involved in peonage in *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in 1903.⁸² He writes, for example, “In considerable parts of all the Gulf States, and especially in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, the Negroes on the plantations in the back-country districts are still held at forced labor practically without wages.”⁸³ He notes that the typical black farmer must pay nearly “twenty to thirty per cent of his crop in

⁷⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” In *Four Essays on Liberty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969 [1958]); Pettit, *Republicanism*.

⁷⁹ Gourevitch, “Labor Republicanism,” 14.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition. ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 26-52.

⁸¹ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 126.

⁸² There has been a great deal of scholarship on this book in recent years, focusing on such themes as double consciousness and on Du Bois’s fraught relationship to democracy. Yet his discussion of peonage and the relationship between debt and domination has been largely overlooked. This is surprising, given that Du Bois discusses it as early as the second chapter of *Souls*, where he notes the “difficult question of labor” that arose in the Reconstruction-era South. For a critical engagement with the central debates around double-consciousness, see Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). On Du Bois and democracy, see, among others Adolph Reed Jr, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Gooding-Williams *ibid.*; Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with WEB Du Bois* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 34.

rent” which he calls “rack-rent.”⁸⁴ Du Bois’s description of black sharecroppers in conditions of peonage evokes the sense in which the South in the early twentieth century was a peculiar mix of capitalist and feudal relations.

Similarly, in a 1926 article titled “The Shape of Fear,” Du Bois describes the conditions for black tenants in the town of Mer Rouge, Louisiana, where a convict lease system operated, and where free blacks were arrested on extremely arbitrary or flimsy evidence, and then hired out essentially as non-paid labor. “There is no modern wage system,” in this town, he writes “but nearly all is barter and debt peonage.”⁸⁵ Peonage, according to a federal court judge in 1903, is “the situation or status in which a person is placed, including the physical and moral results of returning or holding such person to perform labor or service, by force either of law or custom, or by force of lawless acts of individuals unsupported by local law, 'in liquidation of any debt, obligation, or otherwise.’”⁸⁶

One of the ways peonage manifested as personal domination was when an employer would pay the bail bond of someone who had been convicted of a crime, and then “held the debt over their heads, and worked them as if they were still prisoners.”⁸⁷ Even more common was the loaning out of equipment and clothing at exorbitant rates, and tying workers to the land until they had repaid their employers. We see here the use of debt as a form of arbitrary personal domination, which brings Du Bois’s claim about the “slavery of debt” into sharper focus.⁸⁸

Yet as the quote from the federal judge above notes, there was, in addition to the personal domination by employers, the structural domination of the law. Du Bois discusses this when he

⁸⁴ Du Bois, *Souls*, 114.

⁸⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, . "The Shape of Fear." *The North American Review* (1926): 299.

⁸⁶ Pete Daniel, "Up from Slavery and Down to Peonage: The Alonzo Bailey Case" *The Journal of American History* 57, no. 3 (1970): 655.

⁸⁷ Daniel, “Up From Slavery,” 655.

⁸⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, 109.

notes that “...the practice of peonage in the rural South...has been buttressed by a system of statutes and administration which applies to all rural labor, black and white, and which makes a body of legislation positively astonishing in its reactionary and medieval aspect.”⁸⁹ Despite its reactionary aspect, the law still carried institutional legitimacy, making it harder to contest. Additionally, the ambiguity of the law left it open to interpretation, opening up the potential for arbitrary abuse. Du Bois’s discussion of the wording of the labor contracts, for example, illustrates this relationship between law, ambiguity, and domination.

He writes that typically in a wage-labor situation, the worker is given his wages after he or she has completed their work, and these wages are then theirs to keep. This sort of transaction seems so obvious in today’s world as to warrant little comment, but as Du Bois points out, the situation was different in the rural south, in which

wages are characterized as money 'advanced' to the laborer, he is charged high interest on it, and the transaction is made the basis of a contract which not only puts the unfinished product under the control of the undertaker, but which in many cases even makes the laborer liable to criminal prosecution if he leaves his job and makes the capitalist the sole judge as to whether the contract is kept.⁹⁰

Here then is a combination of both personal and structural domination, occurring under the guise of the “abstract” or “free” labor Marx and Du Bois emphasized above. The capitalist becomes “sole judge,” which opens to the door to personal domination, yet the structural domination embodied in the contract combines with the personal to provide justification for arbitrary personal discretion. Yet we should also note here that agent behind the personal and structural forms of domination here is a capitalist and capitalists themselves are compelled by the drive to increase productivity and cheapen labor in order to compete in an impersonal market. Here we begin to see the articulation of the three modes of domination.

However, an objection might be raised here as to the generalizability of the example. An

⁸⁹ Du Bois, “The Shape of Fear,” 81.

⁹⁰ Du Bois, “The Shape of Fear,” 82.

argument could be made that what Du Bois describes in these passages is particular to the agricultural South and thus not necessarily relevant to the rest of the country. Yet Du Bois also describes patterns of personal and structural domination within urban wage-labor markets, which manifest in the exclusion of blacks from the leftist labor unions and the inability of anti-racist parties to recruit sizable numbers of white workers.

In *Dusk of Dawn*, for example, Du Bois describes the failures of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) to recognize the constant and continuing aspect of racial domination within the American working-class. He writes that the CPUSA failed to “envisage a situation where instead of a horizontal division of classes, there was a vertical fissure, a complete separation of classes by race, cutting square across the economic layers...[and as a result] the split between white and black workers was greater than that between white workers and capitalists.”⁹¹ The mainstream unions had similar limitations, as African Americans encountered “in the AF of L and also even in the CIO, the current racial patterns of America.”⁹² Both the agricultural South and the urban North consequently combined aspects of personal and structural domination.

A further objection to the use of Du Bois’s pre-World War II writings might be that he writes during a specific historical period—Jim Crow—when personal domination and structural forms of domination were at their peak, and that in the present, abstract impersonal domination plays the decisive role for racialized American populations. This is William Julius Wilson’s opening argument in *The Declining Significance of Race*, for example.⁹³ There are a couple of responses to this objection. The first is that the types of domination described by Du Bois on peonage, such as the arbitrariness of contracts and other forms of debt have been shown by

⁹¹ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 206.

⁹² Du Bois, *Dusk*, 206-7.

⁹³ Wilson, *Declining Significance of Race*, 19.

contemporary scholars to still be very much in evidence and in fact are on the rise. I am thinking particularly of the notion of a “shadow carceral state,” and debtors’ prisons outlined in illuminating fashion by Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa, where they describe the way in which the American carceral state operates beyond the obvious sites of prisons and police.⁹⁴ They note that it is increasingly the case that people are being jailed for all sorts of debt—including consumer debt, legal debts (such as fees levied for being arrested), and non-payment of child support. Even more troublesome is that people who are jailed for debt have no recourse to legal representation, since the courts are jailing people through civil rather than criminal courts. This takes their cases out of the realm of the legal sphere and puts them in the hands, oftentimes, of town, county, and city clerks. Though they’re different, the arbitrary forms of personal and structural domination that Du Bois found in Jim Crow America are still in operation, and often continue to revolve around debt.

Similarly, Beckett and Murakawa note that the debtors’ prisons of today resemble those of the nineteenth century and in many ways are worse, given that “In the first half of the 19th century, most states and the federal government banned the incarceration of debtors who were unable to pay their debt.”⁹⁵ This raises the question of what we are talking about when we talk about capitalism or a capitalist social formation, and whether it is helpful to think about historical periods in terms of one form of domination *replacing* another. I think it is perhaps more helpful to think about the ways in which these different forms of domination articulate with one another in different ways depending on the context. What Du Bois’s work can show, in combination with those such as Beckett and Murakawa, is the continuing perseverance of the three forms of

⁹⁴ Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa, “Mapping the Shadow Carceral State: Toward an Institutionally Capacious Approach to Punishment,” *Theoretical Criminology* 16 (May 2012): 221- 244.

⁹⁵ Beckett and Murakawa, “Mapping the Shadow Carceral State,” 228.

domination. Marx's cursory discussions law and the state may be helpful here as well.

Marx on Law and the State

Marx did not live to see the extension of debt peonage into the twentieth century, but he does anticipate some of the pernicious ways in which ostensibly 'free' labor contracts operate as a structural form of domination. This is evident in his well-known remark that the sphere of the free labor markets, or the sphere of circulation, "is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham." The worker and the buyer of the labour-power "contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression."⁹⁶ Marx goes on to argue that as soon as the contract is in hand and the sphere of production entered, the contract can serve as a way to legitimize arbitrary and despotic conditions within the workplace. In this sense, Marx seems to adopt the view expounded in *The Communist Manifesto* where he had argued that the state and its legal forms (especially property rights) were simply tools that could be manipulated by the capitalist class.⁹⁷ Yet Marx's view on law is not purely negative. In a long section on the Factory Acts in nineteenth century England, Marx goes to great lengths to show that there were very real ways in which legal protection could in fact strengthen the working class, by giving them better bargaining power both within the workplace and the labor market, and by increasing their general quality of life with improvements in health and wages.⁹⁸

A similarly subtle view of the law is evident in a passage written by Marx and quoted by Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*. The passage comes from an 1863 address to President Lincoln on behalf of English workers and drafted by Marx, which Du Bois notes was "adopted by six

⁹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 280.

⁹⁷ Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 3.

⁹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 382-416.

thousand people.”⁹⁹ The theme of the address is the attempt by Southern planters and politicians to return the South back towards a de facto slave system. The address implores Lincoln and the United States Congress to use the “protection of the [national] law...against the inveterate wickedness of local laws and local executives.”¹⁰⁰ What this example demonstrates is that Marx sees law as a double-edged sword with regard to its effects upon the marginalized. At certain times, the law can be used as a form of structural domination against free workers, while at other times it can actually impede the rapid and often destructive advance of capitalist development. He notes, however, that even in these cases, the wealth of capitalists is generally able to obtain influence over the formulation and enforcement of the law in ways in which the working-class is not, at least not without years of lengthy and often risky mobilization.

Recent historians of capitalism offer evidence of the ways in which the law and capital interact in ways that seem to buttress Marx’s general account. Sven Beckert, for example, notes that protectionism and tariffs against British cotton imports in the nineteenth century were essential conditions for the industrial development of the U.S., Russia, Mexico, and nearly all of Europe.¹⁰¹ Other legal mechanisms such as the seizing of land for railroads and other infrastructure, as well as the removal of intra-state tariffs, were also central in the development of industrial capitalism.¹⁰² In these cases, as Marx notes, the “system of protection” worked to create a domestic manufacturing industry by preventing external competition, but it also amounted to an evisceration of local production, land, and ways of life as the domestic industry out-performed indigenous production.¹⁰³ As Beckert notes with regard to cotton, “The spread of machine-made yarn, and later cloth, undermined hand spinning and handloom weaving” in large

⁹⁹ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 90.

¹⁰¹ Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 157-160.

¹⁰² Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 161.

¹⁰³ Marx, *Capital*, 921-922.

parts of Europe, India, and the United States.¹⁰⁴

V. Marx and Du Bois on Economic Democracy

What sort of politics did Du Bois and Marx, respectively, seek to develop in the face of the daunting combination of impersonal, structural, and arbitrary personal domination? In the remainder of the paper I focus on Du Bois's notion of economic democracy, which he thought might be realized in the institutional form of consumer and producer co-operatives. I conclude by discussing Marx's own understanding of cooperatives and their relation to socialism and democracy more generally.

Du Bois on Economic Democracy

In a 1942 newspaper article written for New York's *Amsterdam News*, Du Bois writes that "political democracy" can only be achieved by first establishing an "economic democracy."¹⁰⁵ He echoes this argument five years later in an article for the *Chicago Defender*, writing that "We tried to envisage a modern democracy as political; it is not, so far as it succeeds; and where it succeeds it is and must be economic."¹⁰⁶ His conception of political here includes both the ballot and "the pressure for civil rights and social equality" while the question of economic democracy is first the "question of group production," and is followed by the question of "the distribution of these goods and services among the people who consume them."¹⁰⁷

The institutional mechanism for Du Bois's economic approach was to come through consumer and producer cooperatives, with the former as a means to the latter. "What is a

¹⁰⁴ Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 184.

¹⁰⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Volume 1*, ed. by Herbert Aptheker (Kraus International Publications, 1986), 483.

¹⁰⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Volume 2*, ed. by Herbert Aptheker (Kraus International Publications, 1986), 733.

¹⁰⁷ Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Vol 2*, 733.

consumers' co-operative?" Du Bois asks in 1938.¹⁰⁸ He describes it as both democratic and anti-capitalist, as "an organization of people, membership in which is open to everybody. It is democratic: one member, one vote...while the profit of other stores goes to the owner, the profits of a co-operative are divided at the end of the year among the people who purchased goods."¹⁰⁹ Du Bois argues that the aim is also for cooperatives to rapidly multiply and then join with others to begin to produce their own goods and thus forming producer cooperatives.

Sometimes Du Bois mitigates his own democratic rhetoric by arguing that the establishment of cooperatives be led by a talented tenth.¹¹⁰ In this sense, Adolph Reed is correct to note the relationship between cooperative and talented tenth politics;¹¹¹ however, there is a danger of completely dismissing these sorts of alternative economic institutions simply because Du Bois sought to lend them (at times) an elitist element. There is nothing inherently anti-democratic about co-operatives as alternative economic institutions. In this way, one could read the democratic aspects of Du Bois's work "against the grain" of his sometimes elitist commitments.

Du Bois's notion of cooperatives can also be seen as part of a greater strategy, one that includes both voting and electoral politics, as well as extra-electoral political actions such as strikes and boycotts. In this sense, his approach was in line with the "three pillars of socialism" approach of the nineteenth century, in which cooperatives were used as a way to fund strike activity and supplement party politics.¹¹² We can see this aspect of Du Bois's approach when he notes that cooperatives are to be used "above all to finance a continued planned and intelligent

¹⁰⁸ Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Vol 1*, 214.

¹⁰⁹ Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Vol 1*, 214

¹¹⁰ Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Vol 1*, 204, 208.

¹¹¹ Adolph L. Reed Jr., *WEB Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

¹¹² Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption, 1834-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 120, 139.

agitation for political, civil and social equality.”¹¹³

Du Bois’s most complete statement of his theory of cooperation comes in 1940’s *Dusk of Dawn*. His aim in the text is to show that racial prejudice is often unconscious and irrational, and is underpinned by historically conditioned economic motives. He writes, for example, of his “realization that the income-bearing value of race prejudice was the cause and not the result of theories of race inferiority.”¹¹⁴ The implication of this claim is that overcoming racial prejudice and racial ideology requires overcoming the economic structures of production and consumption that require the use of racial ideology for legitimizing the continued exploitation of marginalized groups. Du Bois argues that it is necessary, at least initially, for cooperatives to be a project of black Americans, a project that could use currently segregated institutions strategically in order to overcome segregation. He was criticized roundly at the time for this standpoint, accused by some of being pro-segregation.¹¹⁵ But as Doug McAdam and other scholars have pointed out, which I think at least partially, if retrospectively, confirms Du Bois’s analysis—when social movement groups have to rely on outside sources they often begin to decline.¹¹⁶ And as Du Bois writes in 1940, “It is silly to expect any large number of whites to finance a program which the overwhelming majority of whites today fear and reject.”¹¹⁷ Additionally, Du Bois argued for black cooperatives because he noted that attempts by blacks to join leftist parties such as the American Communist party were failures as well. While he lauds Communist party leaders in the US for removing “the color bar within their own ranks,” he goes on to note that in doing so, the party lost the ability to recruit a large number of the white working class, who, as Du Bois writes

¹¹³ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 197.

¹¹⁴ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 129.

¹¹⁵ Thomas C. Holt, “The Political Uses of Alienation: W.E.B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903-1940.” *American Quarterly* (1990): 301-323.

¹¹⁶ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹¹⁷ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 197.

about extensively in *Black Reconstruction* and elsewhere, saw black Americans as competition for labor.¹¹⁸ Thus, relying on either white philanthropy or white leftist politics was no longer a viable option for Du Bois.

His project was based on the claim that “In the future reorganization of industry the consumer as against the producer is going to be the key man.”¹¹⁹ It is worth spending some time unpacking this statement. The first aspect of the claim is the there is to be a “future reorganization of industry.” Du Bois argued, likely following developments such as the New Deal, that there was increasingly coming to be state intervention and planning within the economy. He mistakenly understood this change—towards what many at the time referred to as state capitalism—as “the collapse of capitalism,”¹²⁰ but he nevertheless was right to see that the New Deal as well as war production had certainly changed the structures of capitalist distributive mechanisms in decisive ways. In this sense, Du Bois sought to strategize and intervene in processes of impersonal structures, to the extent to which he thought this was possible.

The second part of his claim is that the consumer is to play the key role in this change. Du Bois here is likely drawing on a number of sources. The rhetoric of the New Deal and Keynesian economic theory both sought to base economic planning on a demand-side or consumer approach. Secondly, Du Bois was also drawing on his long interest in European theories and practices of producer and consumer cooperation, which were related to European social movements, and which had de-emphasized producer cooperatives in the late nineteenth-century in favor of consumer cooperatives.¹²¹ The reason for this shift in emphasis was largely based on the inability of producer cooperatives to compete with the large monopolistic

¹¹⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 1ff.

¹¹⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 208.

¹²⁰ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 198.

¹²¹ Gurney, *Co-Operative Culture*,

corporations emerging at the time. Finally, Du Bois was drawing on grassroots rhetoric and practice in cities such as Chicago, where “Buy Black” movements were strong.¹²² In a number of his *Crisis* columns for example, Du Bois refers to the campaign started by the Chicago *Whip* newspaper.

Yet Du Bois recognized that organizing around consumption, through boycotts and especially through cooperative buying processes was necessary but by no means sufficient. The ultimate aim would be to change production relations, to gain “democratic control over industry”¹²³ and drive production according to the “wants and needs” of black Americans rather than “with regard to the profit of the producers and transporters.”¹²⁴ But a great deal hinges here on what Du Bois means when he talks about “democratic control” and whether this control is still a version of talented tenth politics or a politics of anti-democratic “rule”—which is premised on command and obedience—to use Robert Gooding-Williams’ language. By democratic control, Du Bois means control by voting.¹²⁵ While voting is typically seen as a minimal conception of democratic practice, part of Du Bois’s contribution in the decade of the thirties and beyond was to emphasize the need to extend voting beyond election of political representatives and “into industry, so that in regard to work and wages and income, we were going to have democratic control.”¹²⁶

Additionally, part of the reason Du Bois places so much emphasis on politics-as-voting has to do with his affirmation of the nation-state as necessary for black emancipation. This partially has to do with his historical understanding of the state with regard to racial politics.

¹²² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 53 ff.

¹²³ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 209.

¹²⁴ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 208.

¹²⁵ WEB Du Bois, *The Crisis Writings*, ed. Daniel Walden (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publishers, 1972), 520.

¹²⁶ Du Bois, *The Crisis Writings*, 526.

While he is certainly critical of the coercive nature of the state, he also writes that “The Negro must see that his advance so far has depended on federal action rather than on states rights or individual initiative. Federal action emancipated him from slavery and his lone hope for stopping lynching, enacting and FEPC, and getting justice in the courts.”¹²⁷ It is also important to note that for Du Bois, social movement activity is equally important to his conception of politics, and thus he emphasizes boycotts, strikes and other non-electoral forms of political participation, as noted above. Not only does he emphasize these forms of political action, but at certain points he argues that they are necessary in initiating and precipitating state action. For example, in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois affirmatively cites a text called “Results of Emancipation” which notes that “In a republic the people precede their government” and which goes on to elaborate this point by noting how non-state actors “preceded, prepared for, and helped to produce that governmental action” which led to abolition, emancipation, enfranchisement, the Freedman’s Bureau, and Civil Rights bills during Reconstruction.¹²⁸

The key point is the concept of “economic democracy” encompasses all of these different forms of democratic action, from voting to strikes, and these were meant to influence and transform the racialized structures of production, consumption, and work, for both black and white workers. Thus far I have focused on how for Du Bois this was to come through the development of black economic institutions that were to be relatively autonomous from the white philanthropists and white leftist parties. But Du Bois felt there should be a simultaneous attempt by African Americans to work within and attempt to integrate with white economic structures. I refer to this aspect of his conception of economic democracy as “industrial democracy” or “democracy in industry,” terms he uses frequently. Industrial democracy, as conceived by Du

¹²⁷ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 201.

¹²⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 207.

Bois, is not about control and selection of leaders, and is focused rather on ownership of economic resources. “When we talk of industrial democracy,” he writes, “we mean the increased right of the working people to determine the policies of great public services, either through direct public ownership or by private negotiation in the shape of shop committees, working agreements and the like.”¹²⁹

Whereas the cooperative aspect of economic democracy is about either creating new black economic institutions and/or taking up already-existing black institutions and focusing on their development, industrial democracy as Du Bois conceives it is about taking already existing white economic institutions and integrating them more fully, opening them up to more participation by blacks, and ownership by workers. It thus fulfills his two-pronged approach to economic development: the first focuses on the development of black institutions, the second aims for “alliance with the economic organization of the nation,” with “the industrial power of the country.”¹³⁰

In this sense, Du Bois’s political-economic thought can neither be seen as separatist nor integrationist, two charges that were both leveled at him repeatedly. Rather, Du Bois was constantly concerned with what social movement theorists might today call “tactical innovation.”¹³¹ He sought to adopt, modify, and transform whatever tactical or strategic aspect of movement or government politics that he thought would be helpful. But to state this might imply that Du Bois can be seen as just a tactician of the present, without regard for the future. This sort of interpretation would overlook that Du Bois’s thought was always oriented towards the future, not simply the present. The present, in fact, represented what was to be overcome, not simply

¹²⁹ Du Bois, *the Crisis Writings*, 595.

¹³⁰ Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns*, Vol. 1, 204.

¹³¹ Doug McAdam, "Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency," *American Sociological Review* (1983): 735-754.

adapted to.

Marx on Cooperation

In “The Critique of the Gotha Programme” Marx addresses the question of cooperation. He does so in the context of the following demand made by the German Workers’ Party: “The German Workers’ Party demands *state aid* for setting up producers’ co-operatives *under the democratic control of the working people*. Producers’ co-operatives in industry and agriculture *will be brought to life* to such an extent that *from them will develop the socialistic organization of the whole of labour*.¹³² Marx’s first critique of this demand is that it relies on the state, and thus ties itself into a partially dependent relationship on the state. In contrast, Marx argues that co-operatives must be independent from both the state and from those within the capitalist class. His reasoning is based on the idea that if the cooperative society is under control of the workers, yet is dependent on a state that is not controlled by workers, the cooperative will ultimately be pushed in directions that will subordinate its interests and democratic aims.

Additionally, Marx argues that the Workers’ Party has misunderstood the nature of present day co-operatives, which he says have little to do with simply co-existing alongside current political forms and with the current organization of production. For him, co-operatives are above all concerned with the transformation of the organization and conditions of laboring conditions. Marx then has a view similar to Du Bois, for whom co-operatives were ultimately about transforming production relations that were based purely on the accumulation of capital. Both Marx and Du Bois argue that an “autarkic” or self-sufficient organization of co-operatives is necessary to achieve their goal (at least for a time, as we see with Du Bois).

Four years earlier, in 1871, Marx also addresses the question of co-operatives in his essay

¹³² Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” In *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 220, emphasis in the original.

“The Civil War in France.” Here Marx argues that the aim of co-operative societies is to try to achieve “free and associated labour.” Yet he also speaks of the way in which co-operatives can easily be taken in directions that are antithetical to new forms of laboring. He writes that in Paris, “the ruling classes...have become the obtrusive and full-mouthed apostles of co-operative production.”¹³³ While Marx is speaking of the situation in France at the time, he likely also draws on his experience and knowledge of co-operatives in England, where co-operatives had been severely restricted by the state beginning in 1852, in which laws were put in place that outlawed cooperative land-owning, banking, and wholesaling, all of which were central activities.¹³⁴ Land-owning was eventually made legal for co-operatives but a new amendment was made which disallowed education spending.¹³⁵ As a result, as one historian notes, “Marx and his English disciple Ernest Jones—who both recognized the potential of co-operation—repeatedly argued that the movement must once again engage directly on the terrain of politics...”¹³⁶ What this quote reveals is that despite what Marx saw in both England and France, he continued think that co-operatives might have some sort of role to play in the re-organization of labor.

Marx gives much less explicit attention and detail to co-operatives than does Du Bois, but we know that both derived some of their ideas about co-operatives from utopian socialists such as Robert and Charles Fourier, and that a key aspect of their admiration derived from the fact that both utopian socialists sought a reduction in working hours and a form of work that was not merely instrumental.¹³⁷ Fourier and Owen also drew on the idea that some of the gains and potential of industrial development could be put to use in a beneficial way, and thus although

¹³³ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” in *Marx: Later Writings*, trans. and ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 188.

¹³⁴ Peter Gurney, *Co-Operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England: 1870-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 17.

¹³⁵ Gurney, *Co-Operative Culture*, 17.

¹³⁶ Gurney, *Co-Operative Culture*, 17.

¹³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 413 n.10; Francis L. Broderick, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis*, Vol 2. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 168.

they desired a transformed way of laboring, they did not seek a return to the era of artisanal handicraft. Yet Marx, unlike later Marxists, did not see industrial labor as itself emancipatory, and he critiques Henri Saint-Simon for arguing that “industrial labour as such is the essence, and now also aspires to the *exclusive* rule of the industrialists.”¹³⁸ In this sense, both Marx and Du Bois seek a way of organizing labor that can overcome the instrumental and impersonal imperatives of capitalist production, but which neither returns to an artisanal past, nor simply affirms the industrial present.

VI. Conclusion

“The Roman slave was held by chains,” Marx tells us in *Capital*, whereas “the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads.”¹³⁹ Marx captures here the distinction between the direct, personal domination of neo-republicanism, and the impersonal, abstract domination that I have attempted to outline in this essay. Yet this quote may be misleading insofar as it may draw too sharp a distinction between the forms of domination operating in different historical epochs. As I have tried to show in this essay, while both Marx and Du Bois are exemplary thinkers of impersonal domination within capitalist social formations, they are always attentive to how personal and structural domination articulate with, and are conditioned by, impersonal domination, and vice versa. For Marx and Du Bois, the different forms of domination mutually constitute one another. As a result, innovative types of political response are required, and they both seek to affirm multiple institutional sites of politics, including producer and consumer cooperatives, voting, social movements, and strike action. As such, they are attentive to the tactical necessity of both institutional and non-institutional forms of democratic politics. Yet in addition to their theories of domination and democracy, both Marx and Du Bois furnish us with

¹³⁸ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” 82.

¹³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 719.

distinct renderings of freedom, in which people establish their own rhythms, pacing, and hours of work, while still contributing to the production of necessary goods.

Their arguments for this account of freedom, however, do not rest upon a return to artisanal forms of labor, nor on a rejection of the technology and knowledge built up by industrial capitalism. They assume that the advances of industry—despite being built on the backs of black and white labor—can be appropriated and used for the transformation of work. As Du Bois editorializes in 1930, it may be possible to have a partial “replacement of labor by machines” alongside “shorter working time for all labor...”¹⁴⁰ Despite the fact that both Du Bois and Marx see the immense constraints on this possibility within the context of a society that is primarily based on wage labor, they nevertheless offer a distinct theory of “temporal freedom” which can serve to expand the contemporary political imagination in the face of the complex relations between impersonal, structural, and personal forms of domination.

¹⁴⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns, Volume 2*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Kraus International Publications, 1986), 603.

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