Preface to Korean Edition (Draft)

When I wrote *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, I had both an intellectual and political purpose. The political purpose was to recover freedom as a concept for Left wing thinking. In the post-Cold War period, and perhaps especially in the post Great Recession period in which we live, freedom has appeared to be a purely right-wing term. It is associated with the critique of progressive taxation and redistribution, of government regulation, or of democratic control over the economy generally. Freedom looks like an apologetic concept, whose primary purpose in public discourse is to defend the rights of the rich and powerful against the claims of everyone else. Above all, freedom seems inextricably connected to the idea of doing what one likes with the property one happens to have. None of this is natural or necessary.

In the nineteenth century, one of the most natural things for workers to say was that they were unfree as and because they were wage-laborers. They were subject to the will of their employers, both in being forced to work for some employer or another, and in being forced to obey the uncontrolled commands of the employer once at work. This unfreedom was a deep violation of the kind of freedom that every citizen of a republic ought to enjoy. True citizens should enjoy economic independence not servitude. While wage-laborers were not chattel slaves, they were wage-slaves, subject to the arbitrary will of their employer.

The labor republicans who made this argument were driven, by the logic of their own thinking about freedom, to argue for the “abolition of wage-labor” itself. At its peak, in the late nineteenth century, this idea attracted the active, sometimes militant, support of hundreds of thousands, even millions of workers in every sector from mining to railroads to shoe-making to cane-cutting. They joined the Knights of Labor, the largest political organization of workers in the nineteenth century. They fought hard, sometimes quite violent, battles in the hope of achieving freedom.

It is hard to imagine such a thing today. That episode reminds us not just that freedom had a kind of theoretical or intellectual power to deliver a thoroughgoing critique of basic economic relationships, it also reminds us of what an actual politics of freedom looks like when it grips masses of people.

The freedom that labor republicans sought was not a freedom from others interfering in their lives but a freedom to be self-governing in all aspects of their lives. That idea of governing ourselves, rather than being governed by others – or by uncontrolled powers generally – is the pulse of republican liberty. Work is a coordinated activity. It requires cooperation according to rules and norms by all those involved in that work. This was a point especially vivid to all those workers in the new, industrial settings of the late nineteenth century, where work was not just the activity of a craftsman and a hired hand or two; nor was work the activity of a farmer who pays a few seasonal workers. Work was the activity of large numbers of people gathered together, performing integrated tasks, to do or make something. Freedom at work meant governing the process together, rather than everyone having to follow the commands of a boss or living the life of an independent proprietor. A Cooperative Commonwealth, as they named the emancipated national economy, made freedom concrete in each workplace through this idea of a producer cooperative.

If the particular story I tell is American, the ideal that emerges out of it applies anywhere people make labor contracts and enter workplaces where employers give orders and expect them to be followed. My political purpose, then, was not just to reconstruct how and when freedom was a radical principle, but to suggest its general relevance.

This political purpose was connected to the book’s intellectual purpose. I wanted to force scholarship on republican political into the nineteenth century. The dominant tendency – less dominant now – was to present modern republicanism as if it first emerged from its ancient cocoon somewhere in the fifteenth century Italian city-states and flitted around on its fully-formed wings until it came to rest somewhere around the end of the eighteenth century. Neo-republican scholarship showed us how Renaissance humanists and political actors in Italian city-states rediscovered a classical republican conception of liberty. Unlike the liberal view, in which freedom is the absence of interference, on this republican view, freedom is the absence of arbitrary power. It is not a question of when someone actually interferes with you but whether they have power over you, or whether they can interfere with you in an arbitrary or uncontrolled way.

Neo-republican scholars traced the movement of this concept of liberty to the revolutionary English republicans of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, before it found its resting place in the drama of the anti-colonial revolt of the American Revolution. That is the basic periodization of touchstone works, like Quentin Skinner’s *Liberty Before Liberalism*, J.G.A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*, and the historical parts of Philip Pettit’s *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, not to mention the surrounding scholarly literature. The prevailing impression was and has been that the intellectual, political, and archival drama of the concept of republican liberty terminated by the time of the early bourgeois revolutions.

If so, this was bad news for neo-republicans. It meant the concept had nothing to say about pivotal questions emerging in the nineteenth century, regarding actual slavery as opposed to political slavery, about labor not just government, about social form not just political constitution. It meant that republican liberty died not a death by liberal usurpation but by historical obsolescence.

It is not easy to study nineteenth century republicanism. It requires reading some less conventional sources, less systematic treatises, occasional writings and journals by unknown figures, and it requires looking at disciplines like political economy that are sometimes hived off from political theory. The benefit of examining these sources is similar to that of the original, path-breaking scholarship on republicanism. We get to see what it is like when concepts are political – when they are put to use, in particular contexts, by particular actors, for the sake of persuading each other to act. And not just for persuading each other to act, but to act collectively according to a common purpose.

As it turns out, nineteenth century labor republicans were engaged in just this activity of putting old concepts to new uses for the sake of political action. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of whole new historical actors, mass movements of slaves and former slaves, industrial workers, women, women workers, farmers, the unemployed, who not only created new forms of social and political power, but who reflected upon and sought to give meaning to their activities. In the process, they appropriated ideas that had been put to use by other agents for other purposes. The labor republicans are one such example of that wider political-intellectual event.

For instance, the seventeenth century republican anti-monarchist martyr, Algernon Sidney, had no interest in criticizing wage-labor, yet two centuries later the Knights of Labor found, in Sidney’s famous statements about republican liberty, one of the clearest expressions of what was wrong with wage-labor. It was up to the Knights, however, to work out how wage-labor was a form of domination. After all, wage-workers were self-owning, under their own legal power. Were they not independent in the relevant sense? That question, of the independence or dependence of workers, was one of the decisive questions of nineteenth century republican thought, since it raised the question of whether wage-labor – now the dominant form of labor organization – was compatible with a republic. If the answer was negative, then republicanism might once again become a revolutionary doctrine. But this time that revolutionary doctrine would be aimed at some of the very groups that had once wielded the republican ideal as their own revolutionary standard.

By telling the story of labor and republican liberty in the United States, I was at once working with and against previous republican scholarship. I was working against the implicit telos that saw the late eighteenth century as the natural end of modern republicanism. I was working with the methodological commitment to looking at how different actors use concepts in different settings and, in the process, are led to various conceptual innovations and transformations.

The political and intellectual purposes animating this book are, I hope, of interest to a general audience across the globe. While my sources are primarily American, I do not see this as a local story, bounded by geography and language. While there are particularities to the American story, they are not peculiarities. We only ever grasp universal movements or general currents in particular times and places. The struggle for liberty by American labor republicans was, in their minds, a global struggle. No wonder that they were eager for news from across the globe, and were themselves an international organization, with members and assemblies in countries like Belgium, Australia and Canada.

While authors think of books as final products, they are really the middle of a conversation. Since the book’s publication, I have found myself challenged on many fronts and become aware of the arguments that I failed to make, made too forcefully, or made in too muddied a fashion. Perhaps the most important topic is the one that has received the least attention. The book was not just about the ideal of freedom but about the politics of self-emancipation. That was the central theme of Chapter 5, the chapter that commentators and readers have paid the least attention. That chapter is where I argue that one of the signature achievements of labor republicanism was to develop an argument for why it is up to those who are denied freedom to organize and claim that freedom for themselves. Labor republicans not only reworked the concept of liberty to explain why wage-workers are dominated, they introduced a new set of ideas and practices for their own self-emancipation.

Most readers have been drawn to the accounts in Chapters One through Four regarding the paradox of slavery and freedom, the attempt to universalize republican liberty through a critique of slavery, and then the extension of that critique to the forms of personal and structural domination in a capitalist economy. Others have shown a great deal of interest in the scope and details of the labor republican argument for a ‘Cooperative commonwealth,’ based on interlocking producer cooperatives under worker control. I am glad that these aspects received the attention they did. But to my mind, the critique of capitalism and the proposal for a cooperative commonwealth are incomplete as a source of political inspiration and intellectual reflection without the politics itself. The central political question is not what is to be done, but who is to do it and by what means?

The labor republican politics of self-emancipation, or the ‘political theory of the dependent classes’ as I named it in Chapter 5, is important both as source and warning. As source, the labor republican argument that it is up to workers to emancipate themselves, reminds us of what it was like to expect the most of those who appear to have the least. One of the most pressing and challenging features of their views was that the great evil of denying the majority the institutions and opportunities for full self-government also explained why they, and only they, could win that freedom through self-organization. In our own time, it is common to see oppression as a reason to think of the oppressed as weak, subject, or disadvantaged and thereforein need of assistance, help or allies. The sometimes explicit, often implicit, view of the oppressed is that they are more like victims than self-determining agents. The labor republicans wholly rejected the view that workers, in virtue of being oppressed, could not fully act on their own behalf. Instead, they believed that the main task of their political theory was to think through how workers could organize themselves into independent social and political organizations, in which they would educate themselves, learn from each other, and exercise collective power. Power and freedom would never be given, they had to be taken.

It was not always clear how this self-emancipation would happen. Was it through state control and regulation or through voluntary formation of cooperatives? Did it require coercion of others or the pooled virtue of individual workers? Were strikes sufficient, acceptable, or regrettable? All of these questions, however, were housed within the same driving thought that it was up to the workers to emancipate themselves through their own efforts. It seems to me something of that spirit of possibility and expectation is worth taking very seriously today. Not just as a source of inspiration, but as a warning to those who would prefer to think of the oppressed as victims. If they are victims, then who is to act on their behalf? And on what grounds are those actors authorized to act? Aren’t labor republicans right that it is a violation of the very spirit of liberty to relate to others as incapable of action? If the dependent do not emancipate themselves then won’t the new relationships only re-institute that very relationship of dependence, with new masters?

If the emphasis on self-emancipation serves as a warning to those who would too quickly characterize the oppressed as helpless victims, it is not without its own risks. Many commentators have asked whether labor republicanism really was as universal or universalizing as I present it. Wasn’t it shot through with racism, sexism, and other limitations? The Knights of Labor were perhaps the most large-scale, comprehensive organization of workers, across differences of race, gender, creed and ethnicity, of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it is true that one finds numerous prejudices, among groups of Knights, in their writings, and in their political positions. Perhaps the most notorious was the racial animus towards Chinese workers, most vividly expressed in support among the majority of the Knights of Labor for immigration restrictions on the Chinese.

However, some readers have misinterpreted these prejudices as fixed, pre-political features that stood in the way or subverted the politics of labor republicanism. That is too simple and mechanistic. The Knights of Labor, like other organizations involved in a politics of self-emancipation, were attempting to awaken, develop and give organizational expression to new capacities for action and commitment. Given the poverty, legal repression, and outright violent suppression that workers faced, the Knights expected their members to exercise exceptional virtue. There was no way for workers to emancipate themselves without a readiness to take risks, sacrifice present goods for distant possibilities, and without a steady belief in the value of the freedom.

Not everyone was spontaneously ready to engage at the level the Knights demanded. That is true of any politics of self-emancipation. Some will refuse, some will betray, others will wait passively to see how the scales tip. This is inevitable. Systems of oppression reproduce themselves by making resistance costly. Those who do exercise the virtues required for effective resistance will, often justifiably, criticize those who do not exercise the same virtues. They will call them traitors, scabs, cowards, and much worse.

Above all, resistors might come to suspect that those who do not join the cause lack the proper desire for freedom. That is what many Knights came to think. It is not a far step from that thought to wondering whether certain groups fail to participate because, as a group, they lack the same virtuous love of freedom, the same willingness and capacity for self-sacrifice. And once that thought emerges, then it some might start thinking that those indifferent to freedom *deserve* their subjection. Or, perhaps, that there is something constitutively different about the non-participating group that leads them to think and act differently – something given and natural about them. That is how some Knights of Labor spoke about the Chinese and even some Eastern and Southern European immigrants – more so, sometimes, even than of black people.

At this point, the politics of self-emancipation collapses back in on itself. Not because it is so tied the prejudice of the society from which it emerged that it could never overcome those divisions. But, rather, because of the central dilemma of the politics of self-emancipation itself. The unfree demand more of each other than can reasonably be demanded, and they are right to demand it, but such demands can re-produce or create anew the very divisions they are trying to overcome. As I wrote in the book,

It is hard to imagine how one could announce and inspire the agency of a class of people without generating the expectation that they act in certain ways. In the case of labor republicanism…these expectations were not drawn from any theory of the naturally political character of man, or idealized conception of citizenship, but from an analysis of what it would take to transform society. To criticize it for being too demanding, therefore, may also be to call into question the very possibility of a dependent group being able to transform conditions they consider radically unjust.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is no way to purify a political theory of the risk that agents who adopt it might fail, and fail in the worst, self-betraying way. *That* is a universal lesson – a warning, it is true, but not just that. Not every failure to fully realize a promise of emancipation is a true failure or a sign of deep, theoretical errors. The Knights did not achieve everything they set out to, but they did far more than nearly any other organization of the nineteenth organization. For us, here and now, the question is not whether they failed but why we are not even in a position to fail as spectacularly as they did. Our task is less to judge them than to demand more of ourselves.

1. Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)