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What is the relationship between domination and exploitation?

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> **When, in primitive society, the economic dynamic lends itself to definition as a distinct and autonomous domain, when the activity of production becomes alienated, accountable labor, levied by men who will enjoy the fruits of that labor, what has come to pass is that society has been divided into rulers and ruled, masters and subjects — it has ceased to exorcise the thing that will be its ruin: power and the respect for power.**
>
> **- Pierre Clastres**

In his 2023 book *Exploitation as Domination*, political philosopher Nicholas Vrousalis presents a compelling and important new model of the relationship between domination and exploitation, one that foregrounds the role of power

and dispenses with some of the weakest and most incoherent features of classical Marxist thought in this area (for example, the labor theory of value). Professor Vrousalis's book is an exciting and sorely needed intervention in an area of fundamental importance, providing a new account of exploitation that clarifies the concept and frees it from much of the confusion that has surrounded it. The book is ambitious in that it confronts at least two major questions: What makes all of the various historical forms of exploitation unjust? Is capitalism always exploitative? And the answers he provides are perhaps not what you'd expect from a Marxist. Vrousalis wants to provide a new picture of the mechanics of exploitation, and accordingly of the relationship between domination and exploitation. Vrousalis wants to understand exploitation more completely, to get at what makes it wrong and what makes it possible; he says early on that his goal with the book "is to change the conversation from contemporary theories of exploitation whose focus, almost invariably, is on harm, coercion, or unfairness." Exploitation, for Vrousalis, goes beyond the fact of unequal exchange or the extraction of surplus to a system defined by the instrumentalization of another person's position of vulnerability for personal enrichment. There is no way to establish such a system absent a pre-existing relationship of domination in which one party is structurally empowered to dictate the terms of work, social cooperation (if we can call it cooperation), etc. In Vrousalis's view, then, exploitation relies on domination. He argues that for people or groups engaged in cooperative work, no one should possess unilateral control over the labor of others, a principle he refers to as the non-servitude proviso.[1] At the center of his thesis is the idea that complaints about exploitation are really "about who serves whom and why," which directly challenges some of the most prominent ways of thinking about exploitation. He summarizes several of the major accounts of this relationship and lays out the reasons for

domination and recreates exploitative class relationships. Because he doesn't think they can be separated as a practical or historical matter, Poulantzas is not interested in establishing a temporal or conceptual hierarchy between these concepts. To separate domination and exploitation is, for him, to misrepresent both. The state represents the crystallization of class power at a given moment, as well as the preservation of the class system through time. It is not necessarily that Poulantzas denies the possibility of a domination that exists apart from exploitation. Instead, he wants to argue that as a practical matter (and importantly under capitalist relations and social formations) it misrepresents both domination and exploitation to abstract them from one another. He contends that they exist in a co-constitutive entanglement, as the political state exists precisely to reproduce exploitative class dynamics.

control over the labor capacity of another. The various political-economic forms that have come to pass have been only different vehicles for servitude, different forms of exploitation. I see *Exploitation as Domination* as consonant with efforts to open a scholarly dialogue between Marxism and anarchism, and relatedly to stress the importance of Marx as a key thinker on the subject of *freedom*.

When we look at the corporate economic system as late-modern or perhaps post-modern people, I don't think we have much of any understanding of what we're seeing. That is, we have not understood that, as intellectual historian Mathias Hein Jessen writes, we can't understand today's astonishing degrees of corporate power until we understand that corporations "have always been a fundamental part of how the state has governed and continues to govern social life." Vrousalis's excellent book moves us closer to being able to understand what's before us, providing a more rational and robust model of one of the most important and mysterious dynamics in society, the relationship between domination and exploitation.

Notes

1. Particularly given the libertarian themes and philosophical moves throughout the book, the comparison between Vrousalis's non-servitude proviso (NSP) and the non-aggression principle (NAP) is almost inescapable. Individualist anarchists may find that this opportunity for comparison and synthesis is conceptually ripe and promising.

2. As we have seen, Poulantzas's view of the mutual imbrication of domination and exploitation complicates and undermines any neat logical priority between the two. While he accepts that they can be distinguished at the level of concept, he is insistent that under capitalist relations, domination and exploitation constitute each other in a permanently and necessarily entangled dynamic. Rather than a neutral arbiter, the capitalist state is part of the structure that sustains political

their inadequacy. The book sets forth a system of conceptual speciation broad enough to "cover the whole ethical terrain," and distinguishing three species of exploitation theory: (1) teleology-based, (2) respect-based, and (3) freedom-based theories.

In teleological accounts, Vrousalis says, the exploiter is one who either preempts "possibilities for Pareto-improving cooperation" or who benefits from the bottlenecks created by attempts to block such cooperation; he says that the paradigmatic case of this kind of exploiter is the feudal lord or the monopolist. This is an approach that defines exploitation not necessarily in terms of relations of domination, but in terms of deviations from a hypothesized ideal of optimally cooperative social behavior. Framing exploitation in terms of *telos* is a way to think about how society might work ideally, or to get at what its true goal or purpose is. If individuals or groups successfully create impediments to the social goal of cooperation (or equality, or freedom, etc.), then the system fails to achieve its purpose and fulfill its proper end. Perhaps here ideal social cooperation is akin to a machine with a function and defined goal. Exploiters try to stop the machine or use it in a way it was not intended to be used in order to prevent the natural result or goal from coming to pass. What exploiters in this category have in common with each other is that they are positioned to capitalize on institutional inertia or inherited power, to funnel surpluses disproportionately to themselves. Teleological theories of this kind may stress either harm, in which one party is worse off, or missed mutual benefit, where the exploiter has ruled out a fairer redistribution of gains or a positive-sum system. Vrousalis observes that on such distribution-centered theories of exploitation, you could conceivably get a just distribution of wealth from a system with a small ruling class. This seems unsatisfactory and unacceptable, particularly in light of Vrousalis's power-inclusive way of thinking about exploitation.

In a recent interview, confronting such distribution-centric theories, Vrousalis singled out the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, pointing to Proudhon as an example of a radical thinker in favor of government redistribution, which Vrousalis's model correctly sees as inadequate. Given that Proudhon's ideas are not discussed in the book, I suspect that this remark about Proudhonism was made in error, perhaps that Vrousalis meant to refer to another thinker. Indeed, I see clear affinities between Vrousalis's picture of the relationship between domination and exploitation and Proudhon's. The remark on Proudhon is surprising in light of the clear libertarian resonances running throughout *Exploitation as Domination*. Many of Vrousalis's central points about the relationship between domination and exploitation contain clear echoes of the classical anarchists, and no less many after their time. Anarchists never believed you could exploit someone without a level of actual, physical domination, even if it is often the case in the modern age that the dominator and the exploiter are not the same person. Vrousalis's important point about property relations and ownership patterns is also deeply Proudhonian. Vrousalis's argues that labor flow is the true, independent explanation of exploitation, that we must think in terms of labor capacity and the means of production – and this brings us to a point where traditional ways of talking about exploitation necessarily take a back seat to the question of property. Proudhon was always careful to point out that exploitation—"the exercise of the right of increase, the art of robbing the producer"—always ultimately depends on "physical violence, murder, and war." Like other classical anarchists, he understood well the priority of domination. When he says that market exchange is, historically and materially, both free and unfree, Vrousalis is again speaking a Proudhonian tongue. Proudhon in fact ends up as one of the modern era's great opponents of state-led economic redistribution. Or, as the scholar of anarchism William O. Reichert wrote, "To establish

and dominated. As he observes, it cannot be left to chance that capitalists ultimately find a group of people who are destitute, having nothing to sell but their labor. He contends that servitude is an indispensable feature of capitalist relations, that "capital just is monetary title to control over the labour capacity of others." This more accurate definition is important because it specifically identifies, in both normative and historical terms, what it is that makes capital problematic as a *social* system; it is a definition embracing the understanding of capitalism as not only an economic system, but as first a political and social system.

But Vrousalis does discuss one important sense in which capitalism is different from systems like slavery or feudalism — just not qualitatively. Vrousalis notes that unlike in some earlier systems—for example, feudalism or slavery—under which domination and exploitation are more directly unified in a single authority, capitalism is defined in large part by its institutionalization of a division of labor between those who regulate and maintain domination (the state) and those who directly exploit labor (capitalists). In the triadic form, there is a third party that stands, strictly speaking, outside of the directly exploitative relationship, but that provides its structure and preconditions. This structuring force is the state, the "regulator" that governs the state of affairs between the dominators and the dominated. The state creates a situation where the only choice for the dominated party is the choice between no work and work dominated by someone else. Give up your control over your time and purposive actions or starve. So we see Clastres's ideas operating here again in that domination has the place of logical and temporal priority, and it is required for relegating the exploited to the position of servitude. To have exploitation, you must have domination, but it is possible to have domination without exploitation. Fundamentally, Vrousalis's theory of exploitation is more powerful than traditional Marxist models in its power inclusivity: it insists that exploitation is about

exploitation wrong is exactly what makes domination wrong — unilateral control over another person's purposive capacities. This theoretical approach ties the critique of capitalism very directly to the general critique of arbitrary power, redolent of the anarchists. Vrousalis's arguments resonate strongly with anarchist ideas in their attention to the injustices associated with unilateral control over the labor capacity of others, the core of domination. His focus on freedom as non-subjection to arbitrary power is central to his position, and he explicitly contends that it is possible to reconcile individual autonomy and radical equality, offering an alternative to the authoritarian statism of traditional Marxism, particularly in its Leninist tradition.

Importantly, under Vrousalis's theory, we don't need any kind of labor or cost theory of economic value in order to derive exploitation. It is simply the dividend or benefit of domination, where dominators exercise control and then extract, turning others into their servants. This way of constructing the system also helpfully underscores the *continuity* of capitalism with previous systems of exploitation. A labor theory of value is totally unnecessary for properly grounding or explaining unequal exchange or surplus extraction. In discarding the unhelpful labor theory of value for his definition of exploitation, and instead grounding it in domination, Vrousalis arguably stands more closely to the anarchist emphases on hierarchy and servitude. Vrousalis's framework steps us back to show the continuity across historical political-economic systems, allowing us to see in slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc., various particular instances of domination. Vrousalis's fundamental thesis is that exploitation under capitalism is an instance of structural domination. That is, exploitation is not just a question of harm, unfairness, or even coercion. For Vrousalis, domination means that one class is unilaterally in command of the purposive capacities of others, with the state playing a decisive and necessary role in regulating this relationship between dominator

proper foundations for the better social order of the future, Proudhon maintained, these foundations must be patterned after the theory of *commutative justice* rather than the theory of distributive justice that is universally practiced in the modern world" (emphasis in original). In *Modern Political Ideologies*, political theory scholar Andrew Vincent explains Proudhon's thought in similar terms:

> Of significance here is the fact that in arguing for this procedural and commutative idea, Proudhon poured scorn on the distributive senses of justice, which we might now tend to associate with reformist socialism and social liberalism. Distributive justice, he argued, relates to authority, law and government. It implied that someone was planning and patterning. Like Herbert Spencer, Proudhon saw distributive justice as feudal in character.

Respect theories of exploitation claim that it is fundamentally about the failure to "treat exploitees with equal concern and respect." Vrousalis says that the paradigm here, in addition to the feudal lord and the monopolist, is the rentier class and Piketty's "'patrimonial capitalist' who gains from background unfairness." Such respect-based theories, as restated by Vrousalis, involve the Kantian worry about treating other people as mere means to your own ends, typically through the use of coercive force or some other kind of fundamental relational unfairness. It's important to point out that while, for Vrousalis, respect theories don't neatly reduce exploitation to force or coercion, this does not mean that they necessarily exclude these factors. The focal point of respect-based theories is the violation of something like equal moral standing, with exploiters treating others as means and failing to show equal respect. If such a situation may manifest through sheer force,

legal rights violations, or some more general instantiation of unfairness, then it nevertheless is not strictly limited to these kinds of specifics. Vrousalis's critique of respect-based theories worries that particular formulations focus too narrowly on moral failings at the level of the individual (e.g., disrespect, treating people as mere means to your ends, etc.); this focus at the micro level, the level of the interpersonal interaction, comes at the expense of robust engagement with the deeper structural and systemic conditions behind exploitation. Such criticisms of the respect approach remind of similar concerns about right-wing libertarianism or vulgar libertarianism, which frequently focus on choice at the microscopic scale while underappreciating (or ignoring outright) the massive background context of violence and dispossession. Vrousalis outlines a view of domination as that which violates a person's innate moral right to independence and self-mastery. To dominate, on this view, is to subject one agent's will to another's in ways that we would not welcome as a universalized or generalized moral principle for all of society: it is a clear contradiction for a rational agent to both endorse their own independence and at the same time a universal ability to deny independence to others, to dominate them and force them to serve your goals.

Finally, freedom-based theories of exploitation are focused on the loss of self-governance and independence, and argue that the loss of freedom is the fundamental injustice at the heart of what we mean when we say exploitation. Even beyond, say, the unfairly low wages or hazardous working conditions, exploitation denies the exploited person control over their own life, its projects and labors. Vrousalis puts down stakes within this area of freedom-centered accounts of exploitation, his argument focusing on how exploiters are able to exercise control of others' purposive capacities at the structural level. Vrousalis's own account reflects the freedom-based theory's stress on the violation of autonomy

ing that if there has been a decline, it is primarily to be found in the advent of political power and institutionalized domination. In the main line of Western political thought, whether we take it from Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel, even Marx, stateless societies are understood almost always as incomplete or immature, awaiting the next stage. Within such a teleological model, the state is an apotheosis, the necessary fulfillment of history. For Hobbes, the state is the indispensable answer to the bleakness of his state of nature. Rousseau makes the state the institutional representation of the social contract. Hegel's state is the highest expression of ethical life, and for Marx, it is at least a necessary stopping point, slated perhaps to wither away at some distant time in the future. But in every case, there was a deep mistake, the unfounded idea that the absence of a state is always a problem to be rectified or a hole to be filled. The developmental trajectory must terminate in the centralized state. It is remarkable that across many traditions that disagree amongst themselves, the state is treated as destiny.

Perhaps the crucial distinction has been whether one regards domination as logically prior to exploitation, a relationship of conceptual hierarchy or priority, or as structurally inseparable from exploitation, a relationship of mutual interdependence and inseparability.[2] I believe Vrousalis's account, that "exploitation is a form of domination," is even superior in some ways to Clastres's idea that domination *precedes* exploitation, though maybe these can work together to help us better understand what we observe. We might see several benefits in Vrousalis's model. If exploitation is just a particular type of domination, then we can dispose of the question of whether one logically or chronologically precedes the other. In place of that set-up, we could have something like a genus-and-species relation, where domination is the general category, exploitation one of its concrete forms. What is arguably most attractive about Vrousalis's model is the normative precision that it offers; it tries to show that what makes

whereby the incessant fission of groups, driven by the deliberate refusal of unification, yields the continual reinforcement of separateness and horizontality. Primitive societies constrained concentrated power also through ritual and rites of passage. Clastres sees such initiation ordeals as the inscription of the social law upon the physical body. The initiation rites cement that no individual may stand above the social group, as everyone in society is equally subjected to ritualized suffering. The collective endurance of pain functions as both enactment and proof of equality, making the physical person the site where society reaffirms its refusal of hierarchy. As Clastres writes, "primitive society… inscribes its law on the body in order to prevent the law of the State from ever emerging." Here, arguably the cruelty is not gratuitous violence; it is a prophylactic mechanism, a culturally contained, highly ritualized violence deployed to forestall the far greater violence of coercive authority and the state.

In Clastres's view, primitive societies lack a state not because they have not proceeded to the point of inventing it, but rather because they consciously and actively produce practices designed to prevent the emergence of the state. They were not just sitting around for hundreds of thousands of years, eagerly awaiting the state, the next level of progress or development; if you zoom out from such a narrow-minded idea even a bit, it quickly becomes apparent that Clastres was right, that the standard view is precisely backwards. For an incomprehensibly long period – particularly if you compare this stretch of unfathomable time to the barely-there blip that is civilization – human beings fought (sometimes literally) to hold off the centralized power of the state. Among his central claims is that many so-called primitive societies are not merely pre-state formations patiently awaiting the foreordained rise of centralized, authoritarian political structures; they are *intentionally* anti-state types of societies. Clastres thus initiates a dramatic overturning, even inversion, of the standard teleology, suggest-

and unilateral control as the essence of exploitation and why it is wrong. Maybe all this talk of what is normatively wrong seems less historically and materially grounded than you might expect from a Marxist. But Vrousalis contends that even if a historically grounded and materialist approach counsels skepticism toward normative claims capable of stretching across history, Vrousalis argues that ultimately the Marxist position itself requires some normative foothold or anchor. He notes that the idea of exploitation is normatively loaded from the start, always something to fight and resist. Vrousalis says that while theft is always wrong everywhere, some forms of exploitative wrongful taking are worse or more severe than others, meaning that we see the same normative content – the wrongful taking – in more or less severe forms throughout history.

As I read Vrousalis's book, I reached again and again for my copy of Pierre Clastres's classic, *Society Against the State*. Both Clastres's anthropological anti-statism and Vrousalis's normative account of domination foreground the importance—indeed the primacy—of power relations. Both go to the most fundamental questions about the nature of power, its origins and patterns. From the first few pages, Clastres shows his eagerness to broach the most fundamental questions about power. If the tradition of the philosophers takes the state for granted as the natural and inevitable telos of human society, if the anthropologists wanted to see stateless societies as before the state, Clastres shows that he wants to break radically with both. His discussion of the difference "between societies with a + sign and those with a - sign" is a hint at his broader project and point of view. It is one way he gives us the map of the book by marking categories as signs within codes of valuation rather than as mere neutral descriptions. The categories and conceptual tools themselves always contain and reflect normative commitments. Clastres argues that even if we could define political power perfectly, identifying the point of rupture at its start, we

would nonetheless be left with a potentially infinite range of gradations. "[T]here would appear an infinity of intermediate degrees, conceivably turning each particular society into a single class of the system." He argues that whether we assume continuity or discontinuity in the move from non-power to power, its fundamental nature and beginnings remain largely hidden. Yet Clastres observes early in the book that in the major traditions of thought, political power does come down to coercion:

> And the difference in their respective languages means less than their common point of departure: the truth and reality of power consists of violence; power cannot be conceptualized apart from its predicate: violence.

It is important to understand at the outset that Clastres's anthropology and his interventions in the discourse on domination are explicitly motivated by deep suspicion of conceptual abstractions detached from ethnographic reality. He argues forcefully against the application or projection of Western philosophical categories (for example, the state, the pathway or teleology of history, sovereignty, etc.) to social systems that are indeed defined by their refusal of such categories and the practices to which they refer. In this way, Clastres remains a vital counterpoint to both the followers of Marx and the Foucauldian liberal ilk. Clastres was neither a Marxist nor any kind of structuralist, but he also determinedly resists the Foucauldian notion that there are elemental "bits of power" or "power sequences" within all relations. Clastres was very keen to take on the idea that there are micropowers embedded in and informing everything. He bristled at both the economic determinism he saw in the Marxists and the amorphous abstraction he saw in many of their less structural foils. For Clastres, there is no sense in which power is omnipresent or constitutive of all relations. He contends that thousands of

unique societies have organized themselves such that relations of dictate and obedience are never able to crystallize. He thus resists the attempt to dissolve the problem of domination into an abstract field of power relations permeating everything. Clastres is clear about his view on power in *Society Against the State*:

> Society's major division, the division that is the basis for all the others, including no doubt the division of labor, is the new vertical ordering of things between a base and a summit; it is the great political cleavage between those who hold the force, be it military or religious, and those subject to that force. The political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation. Alienation is political before it is economic; power precedes labor; the economic derives from the political; the emergence of the State determines the advent of classes.

In both *Society Against the State* and *Archaeology of Violence*, Clastres presents the relationship of domination as a qualitative rupture that goes beyond the mere presence coercion to create a situation of structural separation between the rulers and the ruled. The state, in this view, represents the moment at which power is made fully exterior to the social body, the chiefs releasing themselves from the constraints of traditional reciprocal obligations. They acquire the new right to command, institutionalizing the asymmetrical relationship thus created and transforming their society's political mode into a hierarchical and authoritarian one. Domination as concentrated, fixed political power breaks the former mode of reciprocity and permanently inscribes inequality in the political form. This is the beginning of the state for Clastres. Understood within this context, Clastres sees primitive war as a structural counterweight,