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Service Labor, Freedom, and the Technique of Tipping

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Abstract

Tipping has been a legally recognized form of labor remuneration in the United States for many decades, but it is experiencing a resurgence outside of its usual confines in the hospitality sector. The proliferation of the practice is bound to the long-term economic shift into services, as well as the more recent expansion of the gig economy. Tipping informalizes the wage relation, incentivizes the worker in precarity, and internalizes social relations of subordination, and is thus a highly effective technique of labor subsumption particularly suitable for the idiomatic kind of social dependencies and subordination required by an increasingly ‘neo-feudal’ capitalism. Around the spread of the practice, there is an apologetic liberal discourse on freedom and ‘choice’ that emphasizes the supposed advantages of tipping for the worker subjected to it, over and above the increasingly problematic wage relation. Drawing anecdotally on a critical insider-ethnography of laboring in the restaurant industry of the *Hamptons* (Long Island, New York), and by enlisting a Neo-Roman concept of liberty, the article attempts a critical reappraisal of liberal claims regarding tipping as a form of remuneration in the so-called ‘service sector’. Instead, we indicate how tipping actually produces more appropriately governable worker subjectivities for capital.

Keywords

gig economy, government of accumulation, insider ethnography, neofeudalism, neoliberal capitalism, precarity, republican liberty, restaurant industry

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Introduction

The technique of *tipping* is currently undergoing a definite social resurgence, and given that it accounts for a large majority of a tipped worker's total income (at least in the United States), it is a practice of considerable political significance. Unsurprisingly, a legitimizing set of claims concerning freedom, 'choice', flexibility, and other predictables of neoliberal discourse has coalesced around this expansion of the practice. However, there are serious reasons for us to question the validity of this discourse, and to consider how the technique of tipping is actually more likely to redeploy and entrench asymmetries of domination and subordination than to signal a new era of freedom for labor in advanced capitalist societies.

The essential critique in this article is that the technique of tipping is a highly propitious means of deepening the real subsumption of labor, both tactically and strategically, and thus of rendering labor more vulnerable and precarious for domination and the extraction of surplus. More specifically, it is much more effective at placing labor into asymmetric social relations of *dependence*, in a way and to a degree that was not possible under the terms of waged labor, while simultaneously securing the compliance of that labor through a seductive liberal discourse of 'choice' and 'self-empowerment'. We contend that dependence-inducing social relations in contemporary capitalism can be more effectively perceived through expressions of the experience of tipping, and that neo-republican or Neo-Roman notions of freedom can provide tools for articulating these experiences and critiquing these relations.

So what exactly is tipping as a social practice? Having first appeared in European societies transitioning from an increasingly monetized feudalism into a nascent capitalist world-economy, *tipping* was born on the problematic and ambiguous threshold of feudal and capitalist social relations. Otherwise known as *le profit, pourboire, étrennes, gratifications, Trinkgeld, Drinkgeld, and fooi*, a *tip* simply meant 'a small act of generosity as a mark of satisfaction' for services rendered (Van den Eeckhout, 2015: 349). It emerged out of practices of gift-giving and servitude in Tudor England, where 'vails' were given to servants in large households by visitors as acts of largesse in a world still governed by mores of patronage and *noblesse oblige*. From these 'vails', the practice diffused through the 17th and 18th centuries to taverns and *hôtels* across Europe as the money economy expanded through the early-modern period, and as traditionally domestic labor was extended into the public space (Federici, 2004; Ross, 2018). As a public hospitality sector grew in the 18th century, the position of the professional 'server' grew out of domestic service into a distinct occupation of its own, with tipping as its main form of remuneration. Historical accounts vary, but the word 'tips' itself seems to have arisen in late 18th century London coffee houses from the acronym T.I.P.S.—'to insure prompt service' (Segrave, 1998: 4). As the practice metastasized to the United States in the 19th century, it was not well received initially in the democratic culture of the young republic. The hospitality and railroad industries (The Pullman Company in particular) fought to establish and retain tipping through the transition into the 20th century, arguing that they should not have to pay their employees' wages, because many workers were former slaves and so should receive the patronage of tips instead of wages (Jayaraman, 2016: 33–34). Ironically, post-Depression moves to democratize and organize labor in Europe resulted in the eradication of tipping across its hospitality industries just as it became more popular and formalized in the post-war United States.

Tipping has thus become entrenched as a customary form of payment in the United States that is a legally recognized form of remuneration for labor services rendered under specific circumstances. A 'tip' has been defined as 'the price, determined unilaterally by the customer, for a service received', which 'is not obligatory, and its amount is not fixed in advance, except by a social code' (Archibugi, 2004: 1). In the United States, a tipped employee is now defined as someone who

‘engages in an occupation in which he or she customarily and regularly receives more than \$30 per month in tips’ (USDL, 2019)—a very open-ended definition indeed! In contrast to the fixity of wages that secures a worker’s income, tips are unfixed, flexible, and subject to arbitrary determination on the part of customers. Tipping is therefore obviously a more precarious species of labor remuneration than wages. Furthermore, in light of the greater dependence-inducing power of tipping over and above the wage-form, it is not accidental that 70% of tipped workers in the restaurant industry are women (Allegretto and Cooper, 2014), nor that that percentage is larger as one moves down the income pyramid.

Before we get to the problematic liberal claims made over tipping, we will have to establish ‘the broader constellation of interests’ (Burawoy, 1998: 9), in which the practice of tipping is once again becoming resurgent beyond the hospitality industries of the United States. Once we have this strategic picture established, we can delve more meaningfully into the specificities of tipped work, so as then to ‘extend out’ once again from the ethnographic framework onto a more social plane of statement regarding the social role of tipping in our political economy.

Government of Accumulation: A Broader Constellation of Interests

In the long and drawn-out crisis of accumulation since the 1970s, that is, the neoliberal articulation of capitalism (Fairbanks and Lloyd, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Volscho, 2017), there has been a strategic shift from industrial production in the core states of the world-system to what have been labeled in the euphemistic language of neoclassical economics as ‘services’ (Görz, 2012 [1991]; Reich, 1992). But this is more than just a stadial transition from one way of structuring an economy to another. It is a strategic and systemic response to the twin crises of accumulation (Marx) and government (Foucault/Deleuze), a response that allows the continued accumulation of surplus in a way that does not threaten the class position of dominant elites. This is the problem of the *government of accumulation*, and it has two aspects.

On the one hand, there is the problem of accumulation. Neoliberal capitalism has proven less and less effective at restoring circuits of accumulation in a way that avoids persistent and increasingly volatile crises (Bakir and Campbell, 2013; Brenner, 2002; Duménil and Lévy, 2011; Harvey, 2010a, 2010b, 2015; Hudson, 2012a; Varoufakis, 2015; Volscho, 2017). However, it *has* proven effective at entrenching and innovating both socio-economic oligarchy and the asymmetric relations of social subordination and dependence necessary to reproduce that oligarchy (Fairbanks and Lloyd, 2011; Hudson, 2012a, 2012b; Volscho and Kelly, 2012). In this increasingly zero-sum political economy, the strategies of accumulation-by-dispossession and redistributive dispossession have become more and more idiomatic of the dominant regime of political economy (Andreucci et al., 2017; Bin, 2018; Harvey, 2004, 2005; Hudson, 2011; Lapavistas, 2013; Lazzarato, 2012). As exploitation from expanding rounds of production has become more problematic in the regime of accumulation, the role of appropriation has become more predominant, with techniques of direct dispossession proliferating both inside and outside of immediate processes of production (Harvey, 2010a, 2015; Moore, 2018; Welsh, 2017a, 2020a, 2020b, 2021c). In this paradigm of accumulation, capital is not reinvested in production, but is eaten up and redistributed as rents. Accumulation therefore ‘occurs as much through rent, debt and force as it does through commodity production’ (Dean, 2020: 2, 2021: 44). It is in this context that we ought to understand the shift to services in the social metabolism of contemporary capitalism, at least in the core regions of the world-system.

On the other hand, there is the problem of government. The neoliberal regime has emerged from a crisis of subjectivity opened up by the disintegration of the institutions and modalities of the disciplinary society (Deleuze, 1992, 1995: 182; Lazzarato, 2014: 7–8; Welsh, 2017b, 2018) and it

is in terms of this latter that we should understand how subjectivity becomes ‘a key site of political struggle in the contexts of neoliberalization and neoliberal governmentality’ (Ball, 2016: 1129; see also Ball and Olmedo, 2013). Instead of the formation of habits, we have the mobilization of energies (Rancière, 2012: 32), and instead of the armatures of disciplinary power, from the factory to the asylum and the school room (Foucault, 1991, 2006), we have the affective regime of mobilization (Lordon, 2014; Welsh, 2021b). Government has become a problem of ‘governmental rationality’ (Foucault, 2007, 2010) more than it is any longer one of discipline, and as such it is one of how subjectivities are produced to be governed appropriately.

These two problems can be expressed together in the fundamental concern of the neoliberal ‘problem space’ (Burchell, 1996: 28; Gordon, 1991: 16): *how to produce and reproduce appropriately governable subjectivities for capital*. This means that new (old) techniques in the government of accumulation are being unearthed and innovated in the capitalist core, techniques that more successfully navigate the simultaneous problems of accumulation and government. These techniques are beyond discipline and the wage-form. They are techniques no longer of the factory, but of the ‘social factory’ and its post-disciplinary matrices of social relations (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Negri, 2018; Welsh, 2018, 2020a). In short, they are techniques more efficacious at realizing the necessary and pressing *real subsumption of labor* (Marx, 1993: 400–401; Negri, 1992: 92),¹ without which the chronic crises of neoliberal capitalism would rapidly become acute.

With this social context in mind, it is therefore the responsibility of sociological research to identify, characterize, and critically analyze these techniques, to map their genealogical emergence, to expose their insinuation into our working lives, and to articulate experiences of them out from the most intimate scale onto the broader strategic plane, so as to enable more trenchant critique of them. The technique of *tipping*, whether as policy instrument or as social practice, is one such technique.

We argue that there is something especially fitting about the practice of tipping for the neoliberal government of accumulation. This is not to say that the practice straightforwardly encapsulates, categorically encompasses, or universally characterizes labor and its control in the neoliberal paradigm. It is not to make another one of those ‘extravagant leaps across space and time, from the singular to the general, from the mundane to the grand historical themes’, against which Michael Burawoy (1998) warned in his ‘extended case method’ (p. 5). It is simply to say that an investigation into the growing popularity and prevalence of the tipping technique can highlight decisive tendencies in our changing mode of production in a manner that will open up the dominant discourse around that development to critical reappraisal.

This is why we have incorporated a small ethnographic element into our analysis of tipping, wherein we briefly express an experience of tipped labor in the Hamptons of Long Island (New York (NY)). In this capacity, we offer an insight into the mechanisms, dynamic, and operative details of tipping, as well as some of its effects upon those subjected to the logic of its informal proportions. Rather than attempt an exhaustive ethnographic study of the custom, we use anecdote to illustrate the subtly opaque ways in which the technique works and to render experiences of the tipping technique into something useful for social critique. The anecdotal experience in the ethnographic expression below is provided in order to theorize out from a social practice, and we turn specifically to critical ethnography to problematize those ‘taken-for-granted social, economic, cultural, and political assumptions’ that have crystalized around the practice of tipping in neoliberal discourses (Schwandt, 2007: 50).

To set up our analysis of tipping itself, we must position this fascinatingly protean technique of labor control a little bit more into the context of some recent social transformations in work forms, and then we have to specify the eulogizing liberal claims over tipping that have emerged out of these transformations. By positioning the practice of tipping in relation to these transformations in

work forms, our ethnographic illustration will then be more credibly poised ‘to extract the general from the unique, to move from the “micro” to the “macro”, and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future’, but in a way that is cautiously and reflexively ‘building on pre-existing theory’ (Burawoy, 1998: 5).

Liberal Claims on Gig Work and Tipping

The informalization of labor is one strategy in the new government of accumulation, maneuvering both discourse and labor itself toward its real subsumptions. With a steady proliferation of precariousness through service labor becoming normalized across neoliberalizing economies, the phenomenon of ‘gig work’ in particular has risen to prominence in the service sector (Healy et al., 2017; Flanagan, 2019; Johns, 2019; Muntaner, 2018; Snider, 2018; Torres, 2018). This gig economy has certain features, objectives, and implications, foremost among which being claims regarding freedom, choice, flexibility, and self-government (Milkman et al., 2021). Naturally enough, neoliberal ideologues celebrate a great emancipation in the informalization of labor through uberization and other forms of post-Fordist organization of production that allegedly enhance the capacity for personal choice and self-determination outside of the confines of the disciplinary framework. However, this kind of assumption needs to be interrogated, if we are to satisfy ourselves that the great shift to informalized labor in services is in fact a world-historic liberation, rather than a new social technology of social subordination, domination, and dispossession for capital.

So, how does tipping fit into this tableau? At its simplest, tipping is the practice of paying for personal services directly to the server according to the purchaser’s immediate proclivity in the context of a culturally determined social code, rather than a formally fixed tariff, price, or schedule paid to employers of service labor (Archibugi, 2004; Ross and Welsh, 2021). In the United States, tipping is a customary and ubiquitous practice across numerous service industries, which often are already low-paid, female-dominated, and reliant on immigrant labor. Tipping is most prevalent in the restaurant sector, and makes up by far the greatest proportion of the income received by restaurant workers. Crucially, tipping is not just a marginal supplement to a regular waged income, as one would find in other societies such as in Europe, but the primary source of income for most restaurant workers, which currently stands at about 3 million workers across the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS), 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Tipping becomes a way to reduce further the low-wages of service labor within capitalist accumulation imperatives (Ross and Welsh, 2021).

Although tipping is usually considered to be an exclusive property of the restaurant industry, its formal proportions and operative logic are not confined to that sector, and the technique is not only highly adaptable to other work settings, but is actually being adapted to other settings in the functioning of the expanding gig economy. Already by 2015, the *National Employment Law Project* estimated that there were 4.3 million formally tipped workers in the United States. Although restaurant workers evidently make up the majority of them, other tipped workers include car wash workers, taxi drivers, nail salon workers, valet parkers, and airport attendants. With the spread of the practice into gig work, this number seems to be rising, meaning that the political and sociological significance of tipping as a practice is likely to enlarge appreciably in the coming years. While established norms around tipping might have been destabilized by the increase in gig work (Ballentine, 2019), it is clear that the technique itself has enlarged considerably beyond the restaurant industry through the proliferation of gig work. Gallup now puts the percentage of workers in the United States engaged in some form of gig work at around 36%—some 55–60 million Americans (McFeely and Pendell, 2018)—and the practice of tipping has certainly expanded in gig

work via the informalized organizational apparatuses of the gig economy, such as Uber, AirBnB, DoorDash, and TaskRabbit (Ballentine, 2019; Milkman et al., 2021; Wilson, 2019).

Spearheaded by gig work, tipping is clearly a technique that is coming to touch many more workers than before, many more than are formally accounted. Something is driving this expansion. Given the increased quantitative prevalence of tipping as a labor control technique throughout the core economies, the analytical interest then shifts to the qualitative implications of tipping in our mode of production, as well as its effects upon the free living of individuals and groups subjected to it.

Unsurprisingly, there has been a strong political response to these developments. An extensive legitimizing discourse on freedom and ‘choice’ has emerged around the practice of tipping, emphasizing the advantages of tipping for the worker subjected to it—over and above the increasingly problematized wage relation—and for society at large. Naturally, behind the spread of tipping are the usual cheerleaders of the ‘flexibilization of labor’ discourse (see Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Reilly, 2000). Beyond this, organizations like *The Mises Institute* or *The Heartland Institute* connect the practice of tipping more explicitly to a discourse of choice, freedom, and entrepreneurial behaviors clearly placed within the coordinates of free-market ideology (Federal News Network, 2018; Glans, 2018; Zahringer, 2014). This perspective is not especially new. As early as 1965, business writer John Henderson claimed that employees receiving 75% of their income from tips ought not to be considered as employees, but as private entrepreneurs ‘doing business on somebody else’s property’ (quoted in Segrave, 1998: 104). However, this view of tipping is making a definite comeback, as can be seen in the \$200 million campaign to push California’s Proposition 22 (2020), a legislative gambit to classify rideshare and delivery workers as independent contractors instead of employees (Marshall, 2020; Vicks, 2022). In the study by Brewster and Wills (2013) cited below, even some service workers have adopted Henderson’s position that they are actually ‘renting out a little section’ of the restaurant in their work (p. 201).

It is against this discursive and ideological backdrop that groups like the Restaurant Workers of America (RWA, 2020), an organization that fights to maintain tipping and the ‘tip-credit’ system (Ross and Welsh, 2021), can therefore claim a commitment ‘to preserving the freedom and flexibility of America’s restaurant workers’ in their eagerness to embrace the spread of tipping. Similarly, articles discussing the pros and cons of tipping on *trycake.com* and on the *National Restaurant Association* (NRA) website point to the ‘flexibility’ and ‘earning potential’ that tipping makes possible for tipped workers (Cake, 2019; NRA, 2019).

The association of tipping as a vehicle for personal autonomy is made in Brewster and Wills’ (2013) account of tipping as a source of employee agency. Although we share their line of questioning developed from Rosenthal (2004), namely, that there is a need for ‘workplace level accounts of how employees experience and evaluate regulation in relation to their self-determined interests’ (pp. 602–603), the argument that we construct differs crucially. While Brewster and Wills see tipping as ‘an organizational structure’ that is an ‘effective way for management to manufacture servers’ consent’, and as an ‘opportunity to experience empowerment’ away from ‘bureaucratic, technical, normative, managerial’ structures (Brewster and Wills, 2013: 193–194), we see tipping itself as a form of regulation that is far more insidious. While ‘freedom’ and ‘flexibility’ sound like liberating opportunities, these liberal claims tied to tipping are highly problematic and fail to account for the dependency-inducing experiences of the technique, as well as how it produces more appropriately governable worker subjectivities for capital.

Brewster and Wills argue that agency and ‘empowerment’ revolve around the furthering of the ‘economic interests’ of servers. They point to instances of workers taking on ‘entrepreneurial’ roles, engaging in a ‘transforming of the self’ to suit customer desires, and to tactics of manipulation on the part of tipped workers to further their economic ends (Brewster and Wills, 2013: 205,

203, 200). They point to ‘economic motivations underlying servers’ strategic attempts to control customers’ emotional states’, emphasizing how ‘this facet of servers’ experiences of empowerment is a direct manifestation of their economic reliance on customer gratuities’ (Brewster and Wills, 2013: 203). The framework presented in that research relies on neoliberal notions of liberty, agency, and freedom, and interprets the tactics of workers to make money as simply empowering, but couched in these same strategies one can just as easily perceive survival tactics that are intelligently employed and simply necessary to reproduce oneself socially and economically in an environment where remuneration is not guaranteed. These strategies point directly to the mobilizing, incentivizing, and internalizing force that is created through the control technique of tipping. One worker in the Brewster and Wills study responded in their interviews that ‘I could be anything you want me to be . . . I can act however they want me to act’ (Brewster and Wills, 2013: 203), because ‘that’s the way you should look at it and sell yourself’ (Brewster and Wills, 2013: 201). But what if they want you to flirt, or for you to give them your phone number, or reveal more and more information about your personal life?

This brings into question the paradigm of empowerment and freedom. What are the limits of neoliberal empowerment? How are these frameworks of empowerment producing worker subjectivities that are more governable? In this discourse, one hears little of the arbitrary will of patrons, the Hobbesian choices, quite simply the way in which power and freedom can actually be impoverished for subjectivities produced by the tipping technique. Clearly, there is room here for another presentation of the tipped worker, as well as another framework in which that worker’s relationship to the mode of production can be understood. The very framework through which we investigate worker subjectivities is a political one, and this is the purpose of our argument around tipping.

The New Servants

André Görz (2012 [1991]) alluded to the emergence of a new class or class-fraction in the post-industrial paradigm, which he labeled The New Servants, and through which he presented with surprising prescience much of what we have come to observe in the informalizations of the gig economy, the service sector more broadly, and in the general shift to services. Although not entirely defining labor in the gig economy, the notion of the *New Servants* does anticipate many of its features. Resembling the precariat *avant la lettre* (Butler, 2006, 2015; Standing, 2011), the *New Servants* can be understood as ‘a sizable mass of peripheral workers, including a substantial proportion of insecure and temporary workers with variable hours and wages’ (Görz, 1999: 48). Put differently, the danger is that gig workers are leading the integration of service workers generally into a new ‘mass serfdom’, a ‘property-less underclass only able to survive by servicing the needs of high earners (e.g. as personal assistants, personal trainers, personal entertainers, child-minders, cooks, and cleaners)’ (Dean, 2021: 42). In order to appreciate this feudalistic phrasing, the emergence of the gig economy must be related to strategic changes in the mode of production, the prevailing paradigm of accumulation at its core, and the crisis in the government of accumulation that was outlined earlier.

The notion of an apparent re-feudalization of social relations is a problematic one, for there are clear difficulties in reconciling the vocabulary of feudalism with strictly capitalist concepts and categories. The impression of a feudalization of relations is nevertheless difficult to escape, when one’s eye is casted over a landscape more and more characterized by extra-economic coercion, direct appropriation, rent-seeking, chronic indebtedness, acute property-power, and redistributive dispossession.

Although she is by no means alone (Hudson, 2011, 2012b; Kotkin, 2020; Welsh, 2017a, 2020b, 2021c), Jodi Dean has been the most recent expositor of this perspective on advanced capitalism as a period of re-feudalization in social relations. Dean is right that this is not a matter of

essentializing structures or sweeping totalities, but of ‘drawing out tendencies that help us make sense of the present’ (Dean, 2021: 49). Dean assures us that the interpretive schema offered by neofeudalism is neither a historical retrogression nor a historiographic anachronism. She clarifies that ‘it’s capitalism itself that is tending to neofeudalism’, and that ‘capitalism is turning itself into a neofeudalism of new lords and new serfs, a micro-elite of platform billionaires and the massive service sector or sector of servants’ (Dean, 2021: 43). She further argues that

we need to consider how we are not in capitalism anymore, but something worse, neo-feudalism. This does not mean that there are no longer capitalist relations of production and exploitation. It means that the other dimensions of capitalist production—expropriation, domination, and force—have become stronger to such an extent that it no longer makes sense to posit free and equal actors meeting in the labor market even as a governing fiction. It means that rent and debt feature as or more heavily in accumulation than profit, and that work increasingly exceeds the wage relation. (Dean, 2020: 16)

This last point in particular is decisive for our purposes here, as we shall see. Generally, it is unclear whether Dean’s deployment of the Neofeudalism concept is intended as a departure point for immanent critique of advanced capitalism, or as a more normative statement about paradigmatic transformations in the mode of production. Regardless, her objective seems neither to be precision, nor doctrinal purity, but rather the indication of tendencies, dialectical contradictions, and hybridities in the mode of production through the long present. Capitalism has always overlapped with, relied on, and exploited other modes of production and accumulation paradigms, and there is currently an ‘overlap of capitalist and feudal modes such that the feudal relations of personalized hierarchy help produce and intensify capitalist exploitation’ (Dean, 2020: 2, 12). Even Marx ‘acknowledged the coexistence of different modes of production and the ways this coexistence could intensify specific tendencies in the different modes, making domination and immiseration even worse’ (Dean, 2020: 11; see also Braudel, 1984: 64–65; Wallerstein, 1976, 2011: 87). Rosa Luxemburg also emphasized ‘capitalism’s reliance on non-capitalist modes external to it’ (Dean, 2020: 11; Luxemburg, (2003 [1913]): 398, 432).

The most important elements of this thesis to carry over into our analysis, aside from the general perspective on the mode of production, are the implications of neofeudalization upon wage-labor and the practical reality of ‘unfreedom’.² Given that capitalism is ‘a system where private property, *waged labor*, and commodity production propel the self-valorization of value’ (Dean, 2020: 1—our italics; see also Harvey, 2010b: 40–58; Marx, 1990: 342), neofeudalization will be marked by a movement beyond or away from the wage-labor form. Similarly, if ‘not even the barest fantasy of freely given consent accounts for the social relations of wealth accumulation today’ in neofeudal capitalism, then ‘today the ideal of freely contracted labor that justifies and conceals coercive class relations is untenable’ (Dean, 2020: 10). These two elements of purely capitalist relations—waged and freely contracted labor—are what the orchestration of labor through the tipping technique calls into question. It is our contention that this problematization is connected to Dean’s quasi-feudalization of capitalist social relations, which can be positioned in the context of the crises in the government of accumulation mentioned earlier.

Andre Görz opposed the service dystopia that was prospective in the chronic contradictions of advanced capitalism, and instead drew attention to the historic opportunity offered by de-industrialization and the broader crisis of capitalism of which it was a part. He advocated for a de-commodifying movement away from the socialized norm of wage-work altogether, and toward genuinely autonomous activity ‘uncoupled’ from the measurable productivity of wage-work (Görz, 2012 [1991]: 13; see also Postone, 1993; Rifkin, 1996). In a recent critique of the discourse around the concept of precarity, Kathleen Millar (2017) has re-emphasized this transcendent objective.

However, the post-industrial potential for this kind of transcendence has so far failed to escape the powerful gravity in the capitalist imperatives to govern and to accumulate, and the disintegration of waged work has been met by more subtle, insidious, and powerful techniques to frustrate the autonomy of individuals and subsume their labor. Instead of the transcendence out of waged work, there has been a movement sideways into the new dependencies of precarity.

It is our argument that the technique of tipping can be qualitatively instructive for understanding the production of the *New Servants* across the neoliberal regime of political economy. While the practice of tipping has been around for a long time (Cobble, 1991; Hill, 1996; Segrave, 1998; Van den Eeckhout, 2015), the informal and interpersonal structure, logic, dynamic, and *techne* of tipping is finding an increasingly decisive and visible role in labor relations generally throughout a neofeudalizing political economy and its drive to internalize, informalize, and incentivize production from workers in all manner of contexts (Ross and Welsh, 2021).

Insider Experience in Critical Ethnography

Thus we come to the ethnographic germ. Previous research on tipping and hospitality has mostly taken the form of normative statistical analyses, policy statements, and psycho-social investigations into customer motivations for tipping or changes in behavior on the part of workers motivated by the existence of tips (Azar, 2004, 2007; Lynn, 2015, 2016, 2021; Shamir, 1984). Historical accounts of tipping such as Van den Eeckhout (2015), Segrave (1998), and Cobble's (1991) study of waitresses provide background information on the custom, but often lack a critical interrogation of it. The *Restaurant Opportunities Center—United* (ROC—United) publish policy reports and reports on worker demographics, sexual harassment, tip-theft incidents, and so on. There have also been ethnographic studies into waitressing, including Spradley and Mann's 2008 [1975] investigation into cocktail waitressing, and Emma Dowling's (2012) article investigating the embodied labor process of serving. While there is research on restaurant interactions around tipped work (Brewster and Wills, 2013; Paules, 1991), or what Shamir (1984) calls the 'service encounter', such researches are usually written within a limited economic, neoliberal, or psycho-social framework that does not push explicitly into the political ramifications of the practice.

Differing from these, we want to articulate an experience of serving in a way similar to Dowling's, but in relation to a theoretical argument about experiencing unfreedom and the potent effects of tipping on worker autonomy. In her autobiographical account of her experience as a waitress, Emma Dowling leads the way by reminding us how 'a detailed analysis of the real conditions of workers today is necessary to validate any analysis of contemporary capitalism' (2007: 117). Ethnographic study of tipped labor therefore becomes increasingly important for understanding and articulating novel and generalized experiences of unfreedom in our mode of production that differ to those of waged labor, and which therefore constitute new threats to the self-government and autonomy of individuals. This unfreedom in the informalizations of tipping is effectively expressed in experiences of it, and ethnographic access to these experiences can be sought in study of those who have long been subjected to its most clearly articulated version: *restaurant servers*.

What setting would be more appropriate for an ethnographic exposé of tipping, gig work, and service labor than *The Hamptons* of Long Island, New York? A great playground of the 0.01%, it provides for us a tremendous ethnographic laboratory for observing how the gig economy functions in the context of the emerging global oligarchy. The Hamptons are a string of villages and hamlets on the south shore of the eastern end of Long Island (Southampton, Westhampton, East Hampton, Hampton Bays, Sag Harbor, Amagansett, etc.), and contain a variable population of over 100,000 people. Just outside of metropolitan New York, these towns are peppered with the second homes and family piles of the ultrarich. Littered with beaches, marinas, boutique shops, spas,

wineries, breweries, and world-class restaurants, all readily available for the consumer appetites of the rich and famous, the Hamptons is ground zero for a nexus of accumulated capital and property-power that is the dominant strata of neoliberal capitalism in the United States and beyond. However, the regional economy is also home to a semi-conspicuous army of laborers, who toil in service to these Hamptons rich in the usual activities—catering, property maintenance, domestic service, hospitality, and so on (Dolgon, 2005).

The political economy of the Hamptons can show us a compendious glimpse into a world where capital and power are accumulated acutely into the hands of a liberal oligarchy predicated upon service labor, finance, and property-power, and what the political implications for self-government or ‘government-of-the-self’ might be for those who serve in such a setting. This of course raises the knotty problem of how we handle the connection between the particular and the general, and of how a case can contribute to a more extensive constellation of meaning.

Throughout our research, we follow loosely the tenets of the ‘extended case method’ of Michael Burawoy (1998, 2009). Given the limited space available here, we cannot present an extended case method fully in this article. This piece should therefore be treated as part of a larger extended case project. The ‘representativeness’ of this case is then something secondary to its primary concern—its contribution to ‘reconstructing theory’ (Burawoy, 1998: 16). Less preoccupied with ‘discovering grounded theory’ in a positivist science, we are looking to ‘elaborate existing theory’ reflexively (Burawoy, 1998: 16). While theory ‘guides intervention’ and ‘constitutes situated knowledges into social processes’, it also ‘locates those processes in their wider context of determination’ (Burawoy, 1998: 21), and this is what we are trying to establish here.

What we want to offer is understanding and insight into apparent changes in the mode of production from the inside, from experiences of laboring in this setting and being subjected (literally) to the operations of the tipping technique, but in a cautious way that allows us to make controlled connections to the ‘broader constellation of interests’ outlined in the earlier sections of this article. We do not claim flatly or reductively that ‘the slice of the world we examine is typical of the whole’ (Burawoy, 1998: 10, 23), but merely that the particular can only be understood critically when placed in relation to the general (and vice versa). By approaching the discourse around tipping in the context of a world-system in crisis, we try not to treat ‘international forces’ simply as ‘constraints’, but rather as ‘resources mobilized by the ruling elite to legitimate its domination’ (Burawoy, 1998: 20). In studying the ‘ethnographic worlds of the local’, we are not assuming ‘the postulated omnipotence of the global’ as something unreflexive and fixed, whether that be the forces and flows of ‘international capital’ or ‘neoliberal politics’ (Burawoy, 1998: 30), but we are trying to make sense of how and why social forces might be mobilized in social situations through social processes so that we can critique that mobilization. Our critical aim is primarily to destabilize and question the liberal ideology around tipping regarding freedom, choice, self-determination, and in relation to the entrepreneurial logic. Once provisionally positioned in established theory on the broader constellations of social forces, expressions of how tipping is experienced become a departure point for finding our way back to a restatement of those forces.

This research is therefore informed by a species of *critical ethnography* (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000; Madison, 2005; Schwandt, 2007), undertaken from a loosely insider position. The substance of this analysis is derived from direct experience of working in the restaurant industry on the part of the authors as described below. The anecdotal nature of the description is meant to evoke an experience of tipping, in order to theorize out from a social practice. By a critical ethnography, the aim is to provide insight into a social relation that is little understood by outsiders. This helps us to devise questions and strategies for exploring tipping by highlighting dynamics of power and assumed logics, which in this case assume the ‘flexibility’ of the tipped service industry to be something that provides freedom and autonomy to its workers (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000:

288). In short, it is through *anecdote* that we can begin to form and explore questions about tipping, justice, and freedom, in a way that focuses ‘on specific practices and institutions that aim to change awareness’ (Schwandt, 2007: 50).

The anecdote below describes an event that took place during fieldwork centered around a larger study of tipping in the Hamptons where one of us was a direct participant-worker with 18 years of experience in the industry behind them. The research included firsthand experience, observations, and interviews with tipped co-workers—with the latter forming part of ‘a reflective and dialogic strategy’ that provided an analytic distance with the overall research (Naples, 2003: 44). However, this article only includes one direct observation as anecdote. While ‘membership roles’ (Adler and Adler, 1987; Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), as well as declarations of positions, tend to follow strict dichotomies, this research looks to ‘the space between’ outsider and insider (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 60–62). Although my position was closer to an insider, having worked in the business and geographical area previously, I was never wholly the same as my co-workers because of my researcher status, and often therefore ‘outside’ of those I served and observed.

Ethnography of personal experience allows us to expose parts, relations, and interactions of the social world that might otherwise go unnoticed (Poulos, 2017), such as the emotional labor of interactions at work (Hochschild, 1983). Thick description gives a level of detail that takes the reader more deeply into the field of research (Geertz, 1973). Therein lies an opportunity for the researcher to make something known, to provide the reader with an understanding of lived experiences through the crafting of narrative, which of course is part of any methodological contribution to the ‘emancipation of the lifeworld’ (Burawoy, 1998: 30). Revealed in the insider position of a particular lifeworld are embedded experiences and ‘embodied knowledge’, which provides the field of social research with access to otherwise unknown social dimensions and experiences (Moors, 2017: 387–388; see also Fairbanks and Lloyd, 2011). It transports spatially, temporally, emotionally, and ties the parallel analysis of social structures and theoretical frameworks to lived life (see Dowling, 2007, 2012; Moors, 2017)

The critical sociological analysis in this article will therefore draw from the ethnographic expression of experiences. From experiences of dependence, more developed insights and theoretical reassessments can be coordinated with the societally broader transformations that mark and characterize the neoliberal regime of political economy as a new idiom of social subjugation.

Articulating the Experience: Tipping as an Assemblage of Relations

While also drawing on a broader range of experiences over many years of being a restaurant Server (waitress/waiter) in the East End of Long Island, the particular anecdotal experiences recounted below are of serving at a large private party/function on behalf of that same restaurant. This particular setting of the catered party simply provides a stark and clearly delimited example of what is actually quite quotidian for a server working under regular restaurant conditions. To put it frankly, this is one anecdote among many just like it.

I am thinking back to a private party that I worked during one recent summer in the Hamptons. The restaurant that I worked for was hired to cater a private event at the home of a very wealthy and very particular customer. There was a drum circle and fire dancers were hired. Private nannies were in attendance for the evening, designated to watch over children and entertain them, while parents reveled. I was bartending along with another co-worker and there were about six or seven others from the restaurant working that evening, either preparing food, passing hors-oeuvres, or bussing tableware. My co-workers and I were to be paid a base wage for the evening, plus the usual

tip from the customer.³ We also had the opportunity to put out a 'tip cup' at our temporary bar for direct tips from guests, as bar patrons often like to leave a tip even at a privately catered party. The proceeds we would split evenly among ourselves.

I had many interactions with guests that evening, especially because I was bartending, but one customer in particular stands out. He was a middle-aged man, frumpy, but a bit of a show off, who was more than eager to tell me all about himself, even though I never asked. Having worked in the industry for a long time, there are certain signs that give away the type of interaction that you will have with a customer or 'guest'. He kept coming back to me specifically to have his drinks made. Now, this can often come about for the mutual benefit of both bartender/server and customer. He will likely receive quick and efficient service, because I recognize him and know his drink, and I will potentially be rewarded for my attentiveness with a larger tip. The other potential reason for his continued visits to me in particular indicates his intention to flirt. What is important to indicate here is that under any other circumstances I would never give this guy the time of day. Not because he is middle aged and frumpy, but because of the way he was gloating and inconsiderately flirting. To be fair, I had no desire to flirt with anyone. I was tired, having worked all week at the restaurant, and the only thing that I really wanted to do was to go home, wash off the heat and sweat, and go to sleep.

His visits to the bar became longer and longer each time, and then the direct questions got more and more personal and more and more, . . . well, creepy. His questions became more personal and more sexual, he asked whether or not I had tattoos and commented about how I wear a ring on my index finger, which apparently shows how I am a bit 'edgy', insinuating some kind of potential sexual kinkiness. He then starts bringing friends up to the bar to show me to them and tell them how much he wants me to give him my phone number. He also dropped hints about his status, money, and power. He owned an art gallery, wanted to give me a private tour, and spoke of how he would take me out in his Merc and show me a great time. The more sauced he got, the saucier his comments got and the more insistent on getting my number he became.

The dilemma is thus: I am bound to the circumstances at hand, for there is a curtailed choice structure. First, I am not able to be myself, and I have a limited number of ways that I can interact with this man. Having been in the service industry for a long time, I quickly know what these possibilities are and I articulate them to myself almost instantly. I have to coordinate perfectly and handle this man adroitly, given my own energy levels (exhausted), and within the bounds of what I can do in this particular situation, thus creating a balanced sense of him feeling good about what he is doing but not allowing him to cross a certain line or put myself in danger. If I go too far or give him too much leeway I might have to cut him off abruptly, which could upset him. Alternatively, he might think he can cross a line and, say, follow me to the bathroom, putting myself in a potentially dangerous situation. I have to create boundaries, maintain charm, oh yeah, *and* do my job and serve him and other customers, clean glasses, keep an eye on stocks at the bar, communicate with other staff, etc., etc.

There is no possibility to tell this guy to 'get lost'. Unhappy guests could lead to an unhappy host, leading to a bad reputation for the business, leading to an unhappy boss. More importantly, I don't actually want to talk to this guy, let alone go on a date with him, but I can't let him know this. I can't embarrass him and say no to him, because I would lose out on the potential tip he and his friends might leave, potentially jeopardizing the tip from the host and directly effecting not only my income but the income of the team. We work as a team and share tips, thus we are all working not just as individuals but for the mutual benefit of the team. If this man takes an interest in me, I am almost obliged to see it through because he could potentially leave us a good tip or tips. When there are multiple examples of this behavior from customers/guests in an evening, this problem becomes ever more acute. I am accountable to my boss as well.

I am caught up in a matrix of relations, a triangle between customer, owner, co-workers, and at the center of this matrix of social relations, the linchpin that makes this entire assemblage possible, and which establishes the idiomatic choice structure of service labor in a capitalist context, is the technique of *tipping*. This is not too far from Eli Wilson's view of 'tip work' as an 'assemblage of social relations and labor experiences in an interactive service setting that are shaped by the presence of tips' (Wilson, 2019: 685). It is tipping that takes what could otherwise seem like a generic anecdote about sexual harassment and the travails of (wage-)labor, and stamps it with the particular effects that the technique has on the subjectivity of the worker subjected to it. It is no coincidence that the US restaurant industry (where tipping is most prevalent) has the highest report rate of sexual harassment over other industries (Johnson and Madera, 2018; ROC-United, 2014).

What we have to do now is work out from these situational experiences of subjectivity formation, articulating the role of tipping in labor processes within the context of identifiable social forces along the way, so as to arrive at a reassessment of the theoretical claims made of tipping (outlined earlier) in dominant liberal discourses around it as a practice.

The main claim around the use of a tipping system is that it incentivizes workers to improve the quality of service provided and to increase the economic efficiency of work performed (Azar, 2007: 1917). However, the quality of service does not necessarily or proportionally effect the tip given in practice (Azar, 2007: 1924–1925), and service quality is contextually dependent upon a range of variables, from the type of establishment or disposition of patron in question to the cultural mores and economic conditions of the geographical area. The other aspect to tipping, often not discussed, is that it allows restaurant owners to pay their workers a lower wage (Ross and Welsh, 2021).

But what is it about tipping that is relevant for the production of more appropriately governable labor subjectivities for capital? Crucial here is the distinction between *waged labor*, of the kind familiar from the industrial paradigm and the 'disciplinary technology of labor' (Foucault, 2003: 242), and the forms of remuneration for informalized labor increasingly typical of the service economy and the post-disciplinary technology of labor control. Tips are received and accounted as though they were wages, but they are not wages in the structural sense. Wages are a fixed regular payment, typically paid on a daily or weekly basis, made by an employer to an employee, especially to a manual or unskilled worker, whereas tips are a sum of money given to someone as a reward for their services. The consequence of this difference is that 'arbitration and compromise take the place of the rule of law' (Dean, 2021: 44). Remember the tendencies toward neofeudalization—'under neofeudalism, the legal fictions of a bourgeois state determined by the forms of neutral law and free and equal individuals break down and the directly political character of society reasserts itself' (Dean, 2021: 45).

The important point is that wages and tipping are two discrete methods of remunerating labor that have profoundly different effects on the behavior, status, and relational position of those who are subjected to them as a technique of labor control. This makes the difference between them a highly *political* matter, even though they are experienced mundanely. Tipping is one of those means by which the personal is made political, and it is therefore hardly surprising that tipping is especially implicated in the production of raced and gendered social relations.

In contrast to the schematic regularity fixed by the wage-form, tipping sets out a Customer–Coworker–Owner triangle (Ross, 2018; see also Ditton, 1977). This triangle is similar to that of the 'service triangle' (Subramanian and Suquet, 2018), in that it relies on pleasing the customer often using a heightened skill-set that centers around emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), but also on satisfying the boss and co-workers. The tipping technique places the individual worker subjectivity in a triangle of both material dependence and affectivity that is not established by the framework of waged-work. First, the tipped worker must satisfy the customer, because the direct remuneration

of the worker through tips depends almost entirely on pleasing the more or less arbitrary will of the customer. Second, the worker must satisfy the owner/proprietor/boss, who provides for the tipped worker not so much a regulated money compensation, for the wages of tipped workers are incredibly low, as it provides a physical and symbolic space to work in order to get tips from customers (recall the previously quoted remarks of Henderson). This unusual dynamic makes of the restaurant owner more of a neofeudal landlord than an executive, and a landlord whose power to revoke tenure if displeased is absolute. Third, the worker must satisfy their co-workers. While waged-work makes of the relation of remuneration an exclusive and contractual matter between individual employee and their employer, tipping places the worker into a matrix of unstable relations among their co-workers, whose collective remuneration through a tip pool depends upon the degree that each worker satisfies both Customer and Owner. Tipping turns fellow workers into a *work brigade* that no longer is incentivized to band together in solidarity, but instead potentially to mistrust and resent one another as threats to the collective income pool (see Welsh, 2017b: 99–100, 2021a: 473–477). Extra effort must be made then not to displease co-workers. Moreover, while front of house workers are tipped, kitchen workers usually are not. As the tipped work of the former relies on the satisfactory work of the latter, a further dimension is added to the triangle of dependence and affectivity (see Kearsey, 2020; Ross, 2018; Wilson, 2019).

Taken as a whole, tipping places the subjectivity production of the individual server into a triangle of dependence, precarity, and affective labor that is not even closely approximated by the fixities, guarantees, and metric proportions of waged work. There are superficial resemblances to the mutual stresses and subordinations of waged work, but the relational framework of tipped work does not produce the kind of simultaneously dependent and mobilized subjectivity that we see here. This is decisive.

How can we characterize then this subjectivity so produced? As we saw from the anecdotal account, tipping relies on confusion, uncertainly, arbitrariness, and informality. These are the means by which the technique produces more governable subjectivities. Given that tipped workers will typically share and divide tips among themselves in a ‘pooled house’, that they rely on the will of customers for their income, and that the possibility even to be in a position to get those tips depends on the will of a proprietary boss, the question that then must be asked is to whom might the individual worker be ultimately responsible? One gets the feeling that the answer is to anyone but themselves. The accumulation imperative is therefore concentrated onto the individual tipped worker. If you do not get a good tip, it is your fault. You did not smile enough, ingratiate enough, or you did not provide good enough service. The customer is not obligated or legally required to leave a tip, let alone a tip of any particular amount. It is simply a custom, and there is no recourse to a third party. There is no appealing to the customer, no dispute with the owner of the establishment over a lack of a tip, and there is the added responsibility to one’s own co-workers should one fail to contribute adequately to the tip pool. With no ceiling to successful performance of the work, the incentivization to perform no longer corresponds to the technical structure or dynamic found in the wage relation.

We are confronted then with a worker who is externally responsabilized and internally incentivized to work for tips through the mobilization of an emotional and affective register, but who nevertheless remains bound into the subsumption imperative of advanced capitalist orchestration. When we are dealing with ‘the molding and shaping of humans for capitalist labor’ in labor subsumption (Rikowski and de Paula, 2021: 56), we are obliged to problematize the relationship between the laborer and commodity labor. Is the labor of the tipped server commodified? While there is a familiar commodification in the worker’s labor here, there seems to be something else going on. In our case, the shift from commodity production toward direct surplus extraction is met by the persistence of a monetary exchange for that labor in

some form, confusing the distinction between the categories of capitalism and those of the quasi-feudal. What is blurred is precisely that line between the commodification of labor so essential to quintessentially capitalist social relations and the direct subordination of the will of persons that is so typical of feudal social relations. We do not intend to offer a definitive answer, but merely wish to draw attention to the problem and the need for more investigation into the space thus opened.

The salient point concerns subjectivity formation. One cannot say that the tipped worker itself (usually *herself*) has become commodified, for that would be chattel slavery. However, one can still speak here of a ‘selling of the self’ (Anderson, 2000: 112–113). There does seem to be a sense in tipped service work that one’s affective relations, emotions, and even one’s very existence seem to become things which are subjected, hijacked, appropriated to the contrivance of work in a way that is more penetrating than the conventional alienation involved in the commodification of one’s labor (Ross, 2018: 31–40). Insider ethnographies in hospitality do emphasize how ‘a customer service worker’s smile, connection with others and personality forms an intrinsic part of the commodity on sale’, and how ‘personality in this instance is clearly seen to add value to a product or service, therefore increasing its worth as an aspect of labor power’ (Kearsey, 2020: 504–505; see also Cremin, 2003). Rather than the sale of commodified labor on the ‘free’ labor market, it seems that our very subjectivity ‘becomes the grounds of its mode of domination’ in service work under the tipping technique (Weeks, 2005 cited in Gill and Pratt, 2008: 5).

The Server as a subject exemplifies this domination in both micro- and macro-sociological terms. They are responsible on an individual level for their compensation in the sense that through self-commodification they produce a commodity at an individualized and internal level as they gear themselves specifically toward many different customers and as they ransom their emotions and affects to customers in the hopes of getting tips. In the production of the dining experience (Dowling, 2007), tipped workers rely on their ability to read customers, understand their personalities, anticipate their requirements and desires, all within what might seem like a matter of seconds. They then appeal to the customer’s personality with some facet of their own personality in an almost schizophrenic, *Zelig*-like way. The doubled emotional labor of creating the desired emotion in the customer, while subduing, controlling, repositioning, and sublating one’s own emotions, is no small task (Hochschild, 1983). Success in this endeavor can result not only in good tips, but better shifts assigned by management, as this success indicates one’s ability to operate within the tipping scheme. It also results in better tips for the tip pool and better working relations with co-workers. The triangle is complete and gripping. In the tipped occupation, responsibility is owed to the customer, the owner, and the co-worker, and this is the putative choice structure that liberates the tipped worker.

Tipping, Freedom, and ‘Choice’

In our little anecdote, we saw how liberal claims on tipping seem neither to reflect nor articulate the actual social situation of tipped work as experienced by servers. When brought into relation with the recent resurgence of tipping and gig work in the service industries, and the imperative therein to realize a more effective control, mobilization, subordination (‘subsumption’) of labor in the chronic crisis of neoliberal accumulation, we can see how the experience of the social situation connects to social forces to make such claims much more questionable.

In the anecdote above, I never felt free to make the choices I wanted. Such ‘choices’ before me were always prescribed by the triangular relations of dependence established by tipping, and which were made irrelevant by the arbitrary power held over me by others. I was bound to a situation where I was ‘free’ to make a limited number of choices appropriate to objectives beyond my

control. What was appropriate was placed beyond my ability to effect, reform, or challenge. I had no recourse or power to alter my environment and the *condition* in which I found myself. This is an instrumental agency at best, and one whose objective is fixed in advance of any given decision-making scenario. The dissatisfied are told to ‘go work somewhere else’! As physically free bodies, they can do so. But given the high cost of living in the area, I could not make sufficient subsistence money ‘somewhere else’, and this effect is achieved through the power of the tip in the context of the emerging political economy of rent, debt, and property-power. This particular dynamic is made possible by the tip as a technique of remuneration, while the relational framework the technique establishes is what generates the particular quality to this matrix of social relations in service work. I only do this job for the tips, because I cannot (despite my level of education and work experience) make this kind of money, this quickly, anywhere else. I need this money to survive, to put myself through school, to pay the high housing rents in Long Island’s East End, to repay student loans, to make time to pursue my academic work.

This is not freedom, it is *precarity*. By definition, to work precariously (*prex, precis*) is to work subject to arbitrary power or ‘on a prayer’ (Casalini, 2019: 134), and to be reduced to that condition is to be placed in ‘an asymmetrical relationship of dependency’. The questions both of arbitrary power and dependence through labor are then important concerns for those interested in the effects on freedom in the turn to service labor and tipping.

One way to understand the seeming contradiction between the claims made of tipping regarding ‘choice’, and the expressed experiences of unfreedom and dependence in tipped work, is to juxtapose the liberal and republican conceptualizations of freedom as distinguished clearly in the political and historical works of Philip Pettit (1997), Quentin Skinner (1998, 2002c, 2008a), Frank Lovett (2001, 2010), and various republican theorists in labor studies (Bogg, 2017; Breen, 2017; Gourevitch, 2011, 2013; Lovett, 2018). In order to complete our theoretical reassessment of the discourse around tipping, it will thus be necessary to set out how neo-republican liberty differs from the dominant neoliberal understanding of liberty, how the former can clarify what it is about tipping that diminishes rather than enhances the freedom of those subject to it, and what the implications of tipping might therefore be for the subjectivities it produces and reproduces on behalf of the emerging liberal oligarchy.

In the dominant and hegemonic liberal tradition, the concept of liberty is taken principally to refer to the *absence of interference*. Rooted in Thomas Hobbes’ atomistic political ontology, whereby the polity is comprised simply of bodies in perpetual differential motion, the liberal tradition assumes a body to be free to the extent that its actions are not hindered. In this tradition, the will is simply taken to be the ‘last appetite in deliberation’ before a given action (Hobbes, 1996 [1651]: 47). In this Hobbesian liberal conception, liberty is simply the absence of constraint on a body, whether a physical body, personal body, or a body-politic. Freedom in this understanding cannot concern the freedom of a will (*arbitrium*), for the will is not a body, and so to coerce the will is not to deprive a person of their liberty or their freedom to choose (‘de-liberate’) (Pettit, 2005: 133, 2012: 120; Skinner, 2008b: 44). As we can see, tipping does not constrain the action of a given individual and actually contrasts favorably with the limitations and constraints to action established by the institutional and legal form of the wage relation. It is in this way that tipping, according to a (neo)liberal concept of freedom, enhances the liberty of those subject to its effects.

The republican or Neo-Roman understanding of freedom contrasts sharply with the liberal, in that it is concerned not with bodily constraint or interference in bodily action, but with the *condition* in which a so-called free-person (*liber homo*) lives, that is to say with the *potential* interference in a person’s actions. Unfreedom resides therefore in the limitation of a person’s *capacity* to act, rather than in the actions themselves, which of course immediately shifts concern from ‘choice’ onto the *structure* that frames or conditions that choice.

In the republican tradition, liberty is modeled on the distinction between the *liber homo* (free-person) and the *servus* (slave). From its long historical roots in Roman law, as well as its iterations in early-modern Britain and America, neo-republican liberty concerns the ‘status’ of free persons (*de statu hominum*), with the term ‘free’ applicable only to a person who does not live under the will (*arbitrium*) of another, that is to say, the arbitrary will of another (Skinner, 2008a: 83–101). To live under the arbitrary will of another is to be unfree, and therefore a ‘slave’ (*servus*). A free-person is therefore a person without a master (*dominus*), upon whose will that person is dependent. To be a free-person in this concept means to live in a status of *independence* or ‘non-domination’ (Pettit, 1997). The hindrance of one’s bodily freedom then does not in itself take away a person’s freedom. Similarly, a person can be entirely unhindered bodily, but still live in a condition of unfreedom, because that person is subject to potential arbitrary interference from a master who in reality could fortuitously be benign, absent, or incompetent (Pettit, 1997: 21–22, 32).

In light of this neo-republican understanding of freedom, we can see how the prescribed ‘choice’ made possible by the putative flexibility and quasi-informality of tipping contributes little to the freedom of a subject who is placed by that same technique into a *condition of dependence* and thus *domination*. Unlike wages that are fixed in both form and legality, the tipped worker has neither the certainty of the regular wage nor the defined means of recourse to breaches of contract afforded institutionally by the wage-form. In the post-disciplinary idiom of labor control, the tipped worker is liberated bodily from the constraints of this framework and can now move sideways into flexible dependence upon the arbitrary will of customers, rentier bosses, and fellow brigade workers.

What are the implications of this kind of unfreedom for worker subjectivities produced within the matrix of its social relations? The socio-political corollary of this status of dependence and domination was made explicitly clear not merely by Roman historians, jurists, and philosophers such as Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus, but also by early-modern contributors from Machiavelli and Guicciardini, through Harrington and Milton, to Richard Price, John Stuart Mill, and even Karl Marx (Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 2006). Those subject to the condition of the *servus*, will learn flattery, subservience, and self-censorship (Skinner, 2002a, 2012)—which is exactly what is experienced by the tipped worker—not because of active interference in their dispositions, but because of the constant possibility of such intervention under which they exist. A much more demoralizing and erosive prospect than to live as a *liber homo* within properly constitutional limitations placed on bodily action.

The affective, or ‘willing’ (Ahmed, 2014), character of the labor subjectivity produced by this form of unfreedom merely serves further to activate and reinforce the effects of subordination and domination. To be tipped, while performing these tasks, demands that the individual use their emotional and affective being as a productive tool to an everchanging client base. Placing workers into such a condition, where their emotional being is a product (Hochschild, 1983), incentivizes in a manner superior to the wage. We can also understand now how tipping is especially appropriate for Jodi Dean’s re-feudalization of social relations, because the direct and unmediated subordination of the *servus*’ will to the master is clearly more reminiscent of the feudal relation than the impersonal and mediated wage relation under purely capitalistic conditions.

Tellingly, this increasingly common condition of service work bears more than an uncanny resemblance to domestic labor, because it involves producing affects, relationships, and forms of communication familiar from the domestic sphere (Oksala, 2016: 285). In her work on the history of service labor, Dorothy Sue Cobble observes how for restaurant Servers in particular there is a ‘sense of connectedness’ between their domestic labors and their service work for customers: “‘You know when you get up in the morning, put a cup of coffee on the table for your husband? That’s the kind of relationship it was with the customers’”, explained one veteran of the coffee shop’ (Cobble, 1991: 1). It is this ‘connectedness’ and ‘internal subordination’ that incentivizes domestic/

service workers, and which plays upon the sexual division of labor under strategic capitalist social relations. Note the lexical continuum: *dominus* (master), domain, domestic, domination. Capitalizing (literally) on the power of emotion and affectivity, and in combination with the direct and quasi-feudal subordination of the will, tipping creates a self-responsibilizing system that begins to collapse the canonical distinction between the server's commodity labor power and the server-as-commodity at the source of its value production.

In terms then of the 'real subsumption of labor', we see therefore a continuum of dependence and subordination being reinforced across society, especially along gendered lines, but one that has replaced the disciplinary 'formation of habits' with the more productive and pliable 'mobilization of energies' (Rancière, 2012: 32). Irrespective of the neoliberal rhetoric in our 'new planetary vulgate' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001), when ethnographic experience of the unfreedom in tipped labor is activated by a neo-republican concept of liberty and a marxian critique of political economy, we can penetrate to a clearer understanding both of how that unfreedom is engendered and why tipping might once again be an increasingly popular technique of control in the neoliberal government of accumulation.

Conclusion

What we have tried to achieve with this particular piece of research is a better understanding of the effects of tipping in regard to labor autonomy, how it engenders new lines of inequality and social subordination, how that unfreedom is experienced, and to indicate how this new unfreedom is connected to broader social transformations in global political economy. It has not been directed 'at establishing a definitive "truth" about an external world but at the continual improvement of existing theory' (Burawoy, 1998: 28), in this case theory regarding both how we understand our mode of production and how we understand freedom in the neoliberal discourses around tipping, service labor, and the informalizations of gig work.

Tipping does seem to destabilize many of the familiar and conventional categories and concepts of capitalism as a mode of production and paradigm of accumulation. While definitive statement on this connection would be reckless at this stage, the gradual substitution of tipped work for the 'waged' and 'freely-contracted' labor so definitive of capital-labor relations does give us good reason to explore the practice of tipping as a potential threshold of post-capitalist social relations. At the very least, the qualitative features of tipping that are at the core of a quantitatively expanding structure of social relations in gig work can allow us to see that capitalism is transforming in ways that place it in contradiction with many of its hitherto defining constitutive elements. Whether the direct subordinations, redistributive dispossessions, or extra-economic coercions in tipped service work constitute a 'neo-feudal' inflection is debatable. What does seem clear is that the increasingly common experience of tipped labor, as articulated by those subjected to it, seems to resonate with the theoretical articulation of a chronically crisis-bound capitalism variously tagged as 'rentier' (Christophers, 2020), 'post-growth' (Jackson, 2021), and even 'neo-feudal' (Dean, 2020, 2021)

However we choose to define this capitalism, or arrange and present its various hybridities, the experiences on the ground are vital for assessing and reassessing these theoretical and interpretive constellations regarding capitalism as a mode of production. Of nothing is this more true than the experiences of freedom and unfreedom in labor, work, and value-producing activities in general, for the critique of capitalism is principally oriented around the emancipation of the lifeworld. It is by engaging in ethnographic research at an intimate scale that the neoliberal discourse of liberation around tipping and other techniques of informalization in service labor can be most effectively challenged. Further ethnographic research can bring out the experiences of dependence-inducing power and unfreedom that neoliberal theory marginalizes, experiences that in turn can be articulated more

effectively and accurately by non-liberal traditions of political thought. In this way, theoretically informed ethnography can put some iron into the glove of our reassessments of neoliberal capitalism in a way that more powerfully enunciates the lived experiences of those subject to it.

As the neoliberal discourse around tipping defends and legitimizes the practice, it relies upon conceptualizations drawn from the liberal tradition of political thought pertaining to freedom. Our argument is that this discourse of freedom is profoundly problematic, and that the practice of tipping itself engenders dependences that are actually incompatible with free living when this is understood from outside of the liberal concept of freedom. Only by stepping out of the liberal paradigm can the unfreedoms embraced by tipping be perceived, and the generation of new subaltern social positionalities be appreciated sociologically. This article concludes that we will have to move away from what are fundamentally liberal concepts, if we wish effectively to critique neoliberal political economy, because the conceptual predicates of liberalism are unlikely to furnish appropriately critical means for the critique of neoliberal capitalism. We must therefore search for other idioms or paradigms of critical thought more suitable for such a critique, while simultaneously searching for more appropriate and effective means of articulating our social experiences of that political economy. If more and more of us are living and laboring within the dependence-inducing, directly subordinating, and arbitrary social relations of a 'neo-feudal' capitalism, we argue that a republican discourse around liberty developed through a marxian critique of the contemporary mode of production can allow us to articulate and understand our experiences of unfreedom effectively into critical struggle.

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Notes

1. The 'formal subsumption of labor' alludes to a situation where 'capital incorporates under its own relations of production laboring practices that originated outside its domain'. Posterior to this, the 'real subsumption of labor' is where 'the integration of labor into capital becomes more intensive than extensive and society is evermore completely fashioned by capital' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 254–256). Real subsumption is therefore part of the 'social production of labor-power in capitalism' (Rikowski, 2002).
2. While the term 'unfreedom' is somewhat unwieldy, it is fairly widespread in discourses and debates around neo-republican liberty (see Carter, 2008; Dahl and Nexö, 2014; Kramer, 2001, 2008a, 2008b: 272–357; Pettit, 1997, 2005; Schmidt, 2016; Skinner, 2002a, 2008).
3. Tipped workers usually receive a tipped minimum wage, which is most often well below the regular minimum wage. See Ross and Welsh (2021) for a detailed explanation of the tipped minimum wage and its relation to tipped income.

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