

**The Axioms of Petroculture:  
Art and Political Transformation in the Second Age of Oil**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to tackle three interrelated questions; does the genre of contemporary art have a distinct logic to the extent that it can be described as being axiomatic? Do these axioms relate to the socio-political conditions of our era as they are understood to be shaped by the politics of the extraction, sale and burning of petroleum hydrocarbons, and the attendant externalities of this process? And, if these questions can be answered in the affirmative, what is the politically transformative potential for Contemporary Art? The thesis understands the tentacular reach of oil into culture through the political economy of extractive accumulation and how it is reliant on the huge value drawn from fossil fuel exploitation from the early 1970s to now, and the exhaustion of this commodity. It argues that, at an axiomatic level, Contemporary Art has been conditioned by, and conditions, current variants of Liberalism that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century, and that these variants are underwritten by the oil industry. It does this through a reading of economic theory, art theory, critical race studies and their intersections with ecological thought. This approach differs from multiple other adjacent projects in that it attempts to synthesise a critique of the logics of contemporary art and questions of political transformation in relation to the growing literature on the oil industry and climate change, rather than seeking to point to artistic practices that deal with issues of the climate.

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*For my father.*

## Introduction: What is an Axiom?

Capitalism is a totality: its economic components rely, ultimately, on political choices; these political choices in turn rely on a set of cultural meanings; these cultural meanings in turn rely on aesthetic conventions; and these conventions in turn rely on economic fundamentals [...] the social, cultural, economic, political, aesthetic, and ideological components of capitalism all fit together in non-linear and non-causal ways.

(Haiven, 2015: 39)

Insofar as contemporary art is a multifarious field that claims no fundamental ideological adherence, as distinct from other historically or geographically distinct regimes of art, seemingly has no internal guiding principles, there appear to be many contemporaneities – what is specific within one spatio-temporal context may or may not appear within the next – the contemporary moment seems to be characterised by a proliferation of specificities, rather than an universal or general “logic”. As such, is it legitimate to argue for something like an axiom of contemporary art? Whilst artworks might exemplify one or multiple modes that make them contemporary, their specificities seem to forever escape absolute logical categorisation. The proliferations of discrete iterations of particularities that contemporary art exemplifies reduces our capacity to articulate something generic – is there such thing as art *in general*? Does the name contemporary art represent a genre? Can we say that there exists some guiding principles – something axiomatic – in contemporary art?

In this thesis, I develop a set of working concepts, axiomatics, that determine how the field of contemporary art in the second age of oil – what I will call *petroculture* – operates. This field is not isolated from the socio-political-economic-biological-ecological domains from which culture draws both its resources and materials, but also its ideological and psychic elements. Instead,

these fields are seen as interwoven. As Max Haiven (2015) suggests, elements in each field engage and work on each other, producing forms of power that ‘animates and is animated by a host of social institutions’ (Haiven 2015: 39). However, it is important to understand the epistemic differentiation at work here. I will not assert that these fields are the *same*, nor that all elements of these fields can be qualified/quantified by the same measure. This thesis is an attempt to understand how the field of art is, in part, determined by, and in turn, determines, the field of the socio-political. In this instance, I understand the current socio-political world to be dominated by the condition of petropolitical – which is to say, it is the oil industry and its attendant effects, iterations and the resistance to it that form the determining logics of this current conjuncture. The task is to track the varied roles petropolitics has played in the formation of the concepts and logics at play in contemporary art. Which is to suggest that it is not only possible to articulate linkages between contemporary art and the oil industry, but that these linkages are sedimented enough to be able to understand them as logically determining concepts, what Deleuze and Guattari might call coding (2003). Specifically, this thesis understands these concepts as *axiomatics*, and that these axiomatics are constructed through the interrelation between multiple local sites. It is this task that I concern myself with, and it is such a task that is the original contribution made to the field art theory. This project necessarily incorporates many fields of study and as such is epistemically promiscuous, drawing inspiration and applying analysis from unusual spheres, for example, learning the lessons of ecological economics to better understand art theoretical concerns.

To progress here it is important to understand what I mean by axiomatics, or “an axiom”. As the rest of the thesis will concern itself with elucidating the description of axioms of *petroculture*, I shall limit myself here with providing a general description of the axiomatic as it appears in a number of sources.

Within mathematics, according to Alain Badiou (2007), an axiom delineates a fundamental statement that is taken as true, and from which rules, laws and norms emerge. Concepts become articulated as axioms by their liaisons within the system – they take on axiomatic status through their relation to the systems within which they operate. This Hilbertian thesis<sup>1</sup> of formalisation is

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou’s (2007) work offers a reading of David Hilbert’s *Foundations of Geometry* from 1899. This work is a complete refiguration of Euclidean geometry, and takes the axiom as a fundamental element of mathematics, as Badiou quotes Hilbert; ‘only the whole structure of axioms yields a complete definition. Every axiom contributes something to the definition, and hence every new axiom changes the concept’ (Hilbert cf. Badiou 2007: xxvii).

paradigmatic for Badiou, axiomatic systems are thus the formalisation of foundational statements within a system of rules, concepts and notions where formalisation ‘allows mathematical practice to achieve an *indifference* to representation’ (Fraser, in Badiou, 2007: xxxvi). As Badiou suggests:

A formal or symbolic system is nothing but a game of inscriptions, whose rules are explicit and which foretell every case without ambiguity. Beginning with an initial set of statements (the axioms), one derives theorems according to the rules of deduction. The *sense* of the game is bound to its internal characteristics: the game could not, for example, have any sense (any interest) if *all* statements were theorems: one would not have any need to play, so to speak; every inscription being legitimate, the rules of deduction would serve no purpose. It will therefore be required that there exist at least one statement that is not derivable from the axioms by application of the rules. This is the fundamental property of the system’s *consistency*.

(Badiou, 2007: 19)

Within the system of inscription, the actions of constructing axiomatics, and Badiou always understands these in multiple, it is a theoretical practice that inscribes into history the effects of those practices. Thus, the axiomatic operates as a statement that defines a formal system. The game of inscriptions ‘aims at being an experimental mathematical apparatus (*dispositif*), that is a system of inscriptions which obeys specific conditions’ (ibid.: 23). Understood as such, an axiom is what determines the field of inscriptions and representations. A set of guiding principles around which practices and inscriptions can formalise through a mode of deduction. An axiom does not need to be verifiable but comes to operate as a starting point for further theorisation, as such, it becomes the foundation for a chain of reasoning. What occurs in the chain of reasoning does not inflect back on the axiom from which the reasoning embarked, which is not to say that the process of reasoning cannot go on to produce new axioms.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, an axiom ‘deals directly with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realized in highly varied domains simultaneously’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 454). Thus, an axiom is, as Roffe (2016) asserts, in a move that chimes with the Badiouan rendition, ‘a rule indifferent to the nature of what is applied to and to the context of its application’ (Roffe, 2016: 134). Specifically, an axiom determines the field or domain without being determined by it – it exists in a formal system, the expressions of which occur through concretisation. Which is to say, that each particular axiom is

neutral in relation to qualitative or evaluative positions in the domain which it determines, not specific to those domains or expressive of specific relations. As such, axioms have a higher formal unity and constructively determine regimes and domains through their formalisation. In Deleuze and Guattari, 'the worldwide axiomatic, instead of resulting from heterogeneous social formations and their relation, for the most part distributes these formations, determines their relations, while organizing an international division of labor' (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 454). Axioms, as regulative statements that are isomorphic with models of realisation, are taken to be true without needing to be proven and act to structure and delimit what is reasonable and articulable within a domain. The capitalist system that has capitalised nearly every domain is the 'cofunctioning in the same field of immanence of processes of extreme abstraction and utter concretisation' (Massumi, 1999: 133). Which is to say, the system that regulates, demarcates and delimits what is profitable, that 'determines how superabstraction is embodied in particular situations' is the capitalist axiomatic that functions 'by inclusive conjunctive synthesis' (ibid.). As Brian Massumi asserts, when the axiomatic offers an effectively infinite variety of choices, capitalism extends the presence of the commodity relation in every point of time and space – real subsumption. This extension, where everything must obey 'specific conditions' (Badiou, 2007: 23) forces everything in the domain to obey the axiomatic. Thus, we should understand the processes of capitalisation as a continual extension of the axiomatic into novel domains, not just the synthetic inclusion of those domains into capitalist modes of production. Domains are made to obey the rules of the game – forced to obey the axioms.

As subjects to the axioms of capital, the proletariat are 'subjected to the technical machines in which constant capital is effectuated' whereas, the capitalists are subjects of the enunciation, (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 457) which is to say, have the capacity to determine and modify the enunciation (the speech act(s) that puts in place the axiomatic). The restriction of this capacity of the proletariat to be subjects of the enunciation is what underwrites systemic oppression – any project to reimagine the axioms of our current paradigm must include a democratic reformulation of *who* gets to participate in this enunciation. A system that includes democratic control of the enunciation will be known as Democratic Socialism.

As I will attempt to parse later in this thesis, an axiom of contemporary art is what comes to determine the field of contemporary art without relying on specific occasions of "art as such" to construct or ratify it. Thus, an axiom of contemporary art holds true whether or not a specific work of art (the concretisation of the formal system) abides by every axiom that is determinable

– an axiom does not need to be provable, but just operates to “bootstrap” reasoning. Henceforth, then, we should understand a contemporary art axiomatic to be one that codes for the general condition of artworks under the hegemony of contemporaneity, not for specific formations and relations within the field. However, as I will explore, there at one time exists a necessary dialectical relation between the axioms of a particular paradigm and the artworks that exist in that paradigm to the extent that this historically determines the axiomatic. Contemporary art exerts an axiomatic hold over the individual expressions within the system in that each expression is derivable from the axioms, but the axiom allows, or even legislates for, a challenge to that axiomatic.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary art then, conditions for tolerable expressions of disruption, disagreement or non-contemporary art-ness much the same way that, for Deleuze and Guattari, the capitalist axiomatic operates:

[D]oes not the world capitalist axiomatic tolerate a real polymorphy, or even a heteromorphy, of models? [...] capital as a general relation of production can very easily integrate concrete sectors or modes of production that are noncapitalist. (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 455)

Thus, the DeleuzoGuattarian capitalist axiomatic – and my contemporary art axiomatic (as derived from the logics of petroculture that I elucidate in this thesis) – can accommodate alternate models to the extent that they exist as models, either concrete or theoretical, precisely because to capitalise on all modes of production is an axiom of capitalism (and also contemporary art). Within this thesis, of course, I wish to draw linkages between operations of capitalisation – the propensity to accord financial value to natural resources so as to extend the domain of capitalisation – and the capacity that contemporary art has for a methodologically similar process of expansion. Any petrocultural axiomatic, then, must account for this activity of capitalisation, and the preconditions of accumulation and exploitation that make this process not only possible, but normal and seemingly necessary. Congruent with this type of normativity, we must understand axioms as ‘operative statements that constitute the semiological form of Capital and that enter as component parts into assemblages of production, circulation and consumption’(ibid.: 461), which is to say, the capitalist/petrocultural axiomatic must be understood in terms of its instrumental capacity within the domain. In other words, an axiomatic

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<sup>2</sup> Insofar as any hegemonic system exists alongside counter-hegemonies, the challenges or resistances to that system, it can be said that these systems “afford” their counter, however, as I explain later in this thesis, what is particular about the current, neoliberal, paradigm is the way it mobilises those counter movements – this, I suggest is true of contemporary art.

is a “pragmatics” insofar as it constitutes tools for the construction of laws, norms and conventions – *ways* of behaving and thinking.

While axioms are not determined by the subsequent chain of reasoning, they are, unless mathematical, not ahistorical. Insofar as the axioms of a political sequence come to determine the operation of that sequence, the axioms themselves are not necessary, but contingent on formations of socio-cultural conditions and ideological articulations. Any given political axiomatic is posited by a confluence of agents, speech acts, arrangements and institutions, if not explicitly, then through the production of norms, exclusions (who is allowed to speak and what is allowed to be said) and affect. Thus, the rationality of any given political sequence rests on unverifiable, but operative statements that reflect, but also determine, the *spirit* of the times.

It is important not to elide the capitalist and petrocultural axiomatics; whilst they share certain conditions, the task of this thesis is, in part, to distinguish something particular to the petrocultural that is not present in the capitalist axiomatic; or more precisely only evident in the capitalist axiomatic because of how it draws value from the biophysical/petro-energetic world. The operative pragmatics overlap, there are logical similitudes, but their differentiations must be noted.

In short, the petrocultural axiomatic incorporates the logics of contemporary art, understanding the historic trajectory of the field as historically coterminous with that of the political-economy of the latter part of the twentieth century, specifically what we understand as the era of neoliberalism. However, the task of this thesis is to extend an analysis beyond the political and the economic, in one direction into the industrial-ecological and in the other into the cultural. Specifically, I understand the relationship between contemporary art and the oil industry, a relationship that passes through the political-economic realm, as one of *axiomatic entanglement*. The petrocultural is an analysis that articulates the tentacular roots of contemporary culture as buried in the deep seams of energy rich liquid hydrocarbons under the surface of the earth. Whilst it is both far-fetched and incongruous to claim that all contemporary art draws some kind of “inspiration”, or content from the oil industry (although there are works of art, artistic practices or even modes of analysis that do this, however, this study is explicitly *not about this*), the claim I am making rests on the operative statements that structure both the fields. Thus, I understand the petrocultural axiomatic to be a normative pragmatics – an ethical philosophy that ‘pack[s] a potential in the way a crowbar in a willing hand envelops an energy of prying’

(Massumi, 1999: 8). And, precisely a mode of analysis that emerges out of the turbulent coterminous histories of the cultural, economic, political, biophysical, industrial conditions of recent past. Thus, axiomatic statements must be considered primarily through the pragmatic force they assert on the political, cultural and social domains. As such, it is not only a description of the domain or time it is attached to, but a performative operation that seeks to delimit the values inherent in any given system. Of course, in any given axiomatic there exists counter trajectories that seek to deligitimise the axiomatic through critique or counter hegemonic operations. What composes society is a confluence of multiple factors and their interactions, both the axiomatic and the challenge to the axiomatic are incorporated in the composition (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Counter-axioms come to operate as important pragmatic “crowbars” in their own right; society as such, is composed of the double movement of axiomatic and counter-axiomatic statements. Drawing on the work of Polanyi (2001), Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) and Wright and Nyberg (2015) chapter four will deal in some detail with the counter movements and their utilisation.

Thus, the Second Age of Oil is marked, importantly by a challenge to the petrocapiatist axiomatic – in the form of the environmental movement – *and* the more powerful doubling down on the use of extractive technologies, the acceleration of petroleum backed economic growth and increased denial of the limits of exploitation (Di Muzio, 2015, Klein, 2015, Mitchell, 2013, Wright and Nyberg, 2015). This acceleration is more noticeable after the OPEC energy crisis of 1972, where the price per barrel of oil increased 400% (Mitchell, 2013) and the subsequent economic growth was concentrated in the financial services sector (Mitchell, 2014). What this thesis explores is this surge in financial capitalism and the “double-movement” of the 1960s and 70s environmentalism (Wright and Nyberg, 2015). Drawing on Polanyi’s (2001) work, Wright and Nyberg understand this economic expansion and concomitant social challenge to the expansion in increased awareness and institutional responses in terms of Boltanski and Chiapello’s incorporation of critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). For Wright and Nyberg this transmutes into “corporate environmentalism” that purports to offer an ideal scenario, “[u]nlike conventional neoclassical economic thinking, in which environmental protection is viewed as a threat to profitability, corporate environmentalism promotes a “win-win” vision of business augmenting profits by improving their environmental performance; in short, “do well by doing good” (Wright and Nyberg, 2015: 41). As I explore in Chapter Two, this expansion of economic growth underwritten by the biophysical exploitation inherent in the oil industry, lays the axiomatic foundations for what we think of as petrocultural conditions.

While it is not within the scope of this study to evaluate the contingencies or necessities inherent in the relation between other pre- or non-capitalist modes of governance and the burning of fossil fuels – for example, in the Soviet Union in the early to mid-twentieth century or in non-Western paradigms – we can suggest that while all industrialised nations have contributed in vast amounts to the degradation of the planet’s ecosystem, it is the precise confluence of neoliberalised, financialised oil marketization that has created the specific conjuncture I am concerned with in this study. Which is to say, it is specifically the convergence of certain economic forms *with* the fact of the Earth as resource that has led to the production of the specific axiomatics that I will explore. Not to be restricted to a strictly Marxist analysis, we must also understand the role of culture in this formation – that cultural, economic and ecological forms intersect and recursively re-structure society (and each other) in the shape of these axiomatics. It is this tripartite analysis that has been missing from recent studies. While many writers (Bridge and Le Billon 2016, Di Muzio 2016, Engdahl 1992, Malm 2016, Klein 2015 etc) discuss the interrelatedness of the oil industries and economic structures, and some art theorists (TJ Demos, Haiven, Toby Miller, for example) are concerned with how art interrelates with ecology or economic systems, there is a gap in the literature. It is the task here to account for that gap – and more precisely to understand the correlation between cultural tropes and the ideological structures that the oil-economy nexus instituted – and how we might wish to institute otherwise.

A significant inspiration for describing the axiomatics of contemporary art comes from the work of Suhail Malik. He has done more than anyone to articulate a theory of the genre of contemporary art in this way, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to rehearse his arguments in full. However, in these introductory remarks I want to point to the theoretical underpinnings of his understanding of the axioms of contemporary art in order to frame my work in relation to his – I do not so much depart from his work, but seek to approach the same questions from an adjacent, sometimes interrelated position. I see Malik’s work as both a challenge and a productive foil to my work, however, as his book on these issues is still forthcoming, I can only work from fragments of his argument as presented in talks and essays – as such, his work cannot form a central component in this thesis as I do not think these fragments fully flesh out his ideas, and I cannot hope to do justice to them here.

Malik makes two initial claims, firstly, that contemporary art does indeed have a logic (and it can be identified) – while counter intuitive, this claim is coherent with the analysis I present in this thesis – and secondly, contemporary art should be seen not just as instances of artworks, but as ‘a field of activity that not only includes artworks but also common places, idiolects, received ideas, judgments, justifications, social and administrative quasi structures, power operations, and so on’ (Malik 2014). Here, he understands the diffuseness of the field of art to be linked not only to the artworks themselves, nor just their circulation, but to a whole panoply of attendant activities, objects, institutions and power relations – precisely the *ethos* of the field of art. These affects revolve around what he calls the indeterminacy of contemporary art, which ‘as a field draws its legitimations from the affirmation of indeterminacy (ibid.), resulting in all sorts of benevolence, but also ‘all sorts of abuses of power’ (ibid.). It is precisely these abuses of power that will return in this thesis to mark out my critical appraisal of contemporary art. While my argument does not rest solely on this claim around indeterminacy, I do touch on these ideas later in the thesis.

For Malik, contemporary art has a systemic logic that needs to be understood in order for us critically engage with it at the level not of the singular artwork, but the system in general – a co-determining logic between art and its field. There are, he suggests, generic qualities to art that formalise in this logic. Malik’s insistence not to rely on particular concrete examples of art for his argument, but instead speak to the conditions and axioms of art as such, is, for me, a legitimate approach. While in this thesis there may be occasions where I illustrate or exemplify these conditions, and use particular works to do this, this should not be seen as exhaustive – these are merely examples, and any counter argument can come up with an equally persuasive set of examples of art not adhering to these axiomatics in an attempt to undermine my argument. However, my claim here is that this is a heuristic approach, whereby I am attempting to make sense of a set of tendencies within contemporary art that have cohered enough to understand them as forming axiomatics. Malik suggests, as I do, these descriptions of art’s axioms are not meant to claim them as ahistorical, but historically contingent, formed by, as I argue, the historical processes that emerge within the current paradigm. As he suggests, the logic of contemporary art cannot be disassociated from its ‘historically organised structure [...] its sociology and politics’ (ibid.). In my work, I extend this to suggest that these discussions around art cannot be removed from a conception of earth as resource – precisely a capitalist mode of understanding the ecological – as such, we must attenuate Malik’s analysis through a *political ecology*.

Malik's understanding of contemporary art revolves around what he calls the "anarcho-realist maxim", whereby art demands a more sincere, more authentic or more public engagement. The claim made from this critical approach being that already existing artworks and practices are not "real" enough, and in order to escape the conditions of inauthenticity that besets contemporary art, all we need is a retreat into the real. Malik identifies this tendency to desire more authenticity – or, to put it negatively 'less private, narcissistic, inauthentic, socially detached; less abstracted from real, concrete conditions, life; etc.' (ibid.) – as foundational. We might understand this as a form of romanticism, whereby, on the one hand, art is seen as being able to provide access to a realm of life that is divorced from mundane existence under late stage capitalism (as represented by fast pace, abstract relations of capital and power, and complexity), and on the other where there exists a "more true" art beneath, or behind, the false consciousness of contemporary art. As identified later in this thesis, this desire for authenticity besets not just the art world, but also the environmental movement when it articulates a "back to the land" approach that focuses on the prelapsarian beauty of pre-industrial landscapes, or an idea of "nature" as opposed to "culture". This romanticism, I argue, misunderstands the complex power relations at play in our world and provides an insufficient analysis and limited, or limiting, mode of action – at its heart, this approach suffers from what I call myopia. Insofar as multiple contemporary approaches express this desire for the "real", I consider this an axiom of petroculture – we can find this in many forms; the call to resist or escape capitalist relations (autonomy), the desire to appeal to consumers' environmentalist leanings (greenwashing/exemplification) and the expression of value as a mode of investment in human capital.

Another perspective on the notion of contemporary art comes from the work of Peter Osborne, whose important intervention into this debate, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013) represents a formidable exegesis of the theory of contemporaneity as it applies to art. In the opening chapter to this work, Osborne provides an historical overview of the use of the term contemporary, understanding it in a twofold fashion; as a construction, idea or fiction or as the time of the global transnational. As he suggests, what seems to characterise this period most pertinently is the way in which the conceptual grammar of contemporaneity is understood precisely as a 'coming together not simply "in time" with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally "present" temporalities or "times"*, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*' (Osborne 2013: 17 emphasis in the original). As

such, Osborne's conception of contemporaneity relies on the idea of the bringing together in time disjunctive elements under the unifying principle of the *present*. The capacity for art as such to construct this conjoining fiction that unifies otherwise disjunctive elements supposes that despite the inexistence of an actual shared subject position from which the whole scope of history can be lived, it acts as though there is. Contemporaneity, then, supposes a unifying, or totalising positionality whereby the temporal becomes the unifying fiction. Osborne also points to the idea that contemporaneity relies on the construction of a global trans-nationalism, whereby the differences of different cultures, nations, communities and so forth, are presented as though available to a universal viewpoint. Here, art functions as a kind of passport. The artist as a global citizen, capable of traversing borders and boundaries in time and space. As I shall explore in more depth in Chapter Three, for Osborne, art appears as a transcategorical form, no longer bounded by such things as genre, medium or material. Contemporary Art functions as a fictionalising transnationalism that unifies all forms of cultural practice (even looking back and utilising the art historical as conceptual material) into a sense of *presentness*. Thus, it is important to view claims made in this thesis with this in mind; there is a tendency in contemporaneity to quickly universalise. A question that emerges from this, is whether this universalising project emerges in the context of colonialism.

Throughout this thesis I explore these axiomatics. Contemporary art's logics run parallel to and intersect with those of the current socio-political paradigm as it has been shaped by the oil industries – the demand for the “real” that is found in both inferential spheres is fundamental here and Malik's analysis can help us frame this discussion. The axiomatics that I focus on in this study act as statements taken to be true from which a formal system emerges, they are as follows:

- The human is adequately described by the rationality of *homo economicus*
- The earth is calculable as resource with no limit
- “Society” consists of collections of individuals
- Freedom is figured as an escape from coercive norms and laws
- Virtue is articulated as a mode by which individuals can increase their investability
- The individual and the universal relate in one of two ways; i) directly, immediately, or ii) there is no relation.

While it is somewhat difficult to reduce the complexity of the following chapters to these statements, and certainly I have no expectation that the axiomatics herein are reducible as such –

indeed, my conception of axiomatics does not require them to appear in this way, as easily digestible, short phrases – these sentences act as grounding, or foundational statements. Equally, I do not suppose petroculture to be exhaustively captured by my work herein, the systemic complexity of this paradigm – art in the Second Age of Oil – opens out on to wide vistas, no single thesis is adequate to a total description.

Indeed, the historical and conceptual phrase “Second Age of Oil” does a lot of work in this thesis, the majority of the explanation for my periodisation appears in Chapter One, but it is certainly important now to outline how this phrase operates in conjunction with the idea of “petroculture”. The literature on petroculture has been growing in recent years, in large part due to attention drawn to it by Imre Szeman’s work, specifically his edited volume on the subject with Sheena Wilson and Adam Carlson (Wilson, Carlson, Szeman 2017), however, what Wilson, Szeman and Carlson call the petro-humanities is still a relatively under theorised field in relation to the larger fields of new materialism or posthumanism that it tangentially relates to. Given the overwhelming presence of oil in our daily lives, politics and its effects on the planet, this is somewhat concerning. What the authors in the edited volume on petroculture turn their attention to is the ways in which oil imaginaries have appeared, or in many cases, have failed to appear, in literature, art, film and so on in the modern period. As suggested, they ‘position oil and energy as the fulcrum around which many of today’s most pressing social, economic, and political issues must be analyzed and understood’ (Wilson, Carlson, Szeman 2017: 4). In an attempt to grapple with the consequences of the transformation to almost total reliance on energy drawn from fossil fuels, which has characterised the condition of modernity, the authors are keen to explore the ways in which culture has been shaped by oil. Throughout the essays in this volume there is a focus on the ways oil relates either to specific works of culture, or to how cultural works narrativise the conditions of modernity as shaped by fossil energy and petropolitical power. Attendant to the compelling idea that fossil fuel energy has defined twentieth century politics, society and culture, these essays draw on specific cultural artefacts in order to argue that oil is a resource that has determined the current logics by which we live. The predominant argument could be characterised as the idea that recent cultural artefacts have drawn our attention to the importance of oil in our lives, have taken a critical approach to that fact and have sought to imagine post-petroleum futures. As the editors suggest, ‘freedom, identity, success: our deepest ideals and most prominent social fantasies are mediated and enabled by the energy of fossil fuels’ (Wilson, Carlson, Szeman 2017: 11).

Another contribution to this field is Mel Evans' *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts*, and other work emerging from either a theoretical or an activist space that links the oil industry to the art world through the channels of funding. These contributions, although salutary in themselves, are not the focus of this thesis, and while the way art is funded should be an object of critical discourse, it does not directly relate to the way I understand the formation of the concept of the petrocultural – however, in chapter four, I do expand on the concept of greenwashing to understand how attention economies utilise marketing tactics in neoliberal ways.

While Reza Negarestani's work on oil and cultural logics, specifically his extended study of the 'Tellurian lube' of oil (Negarestani 2008), has influenced my thought, this thesis does not rely heavily on his earlier work. I do return to his work on the concept of inhumanism later in this thesis. However, it is certainly worth noting how oil, for Negarestani, underwrites history. He suggests that oil is the 'undercurrent of all narrations, not only the political but also that of the ethics of life on earth' (Negarestani 2008: 19). This idea of oil's omnipotence is instructive when considering how entangled culture and ecology are, perhaps a later study could articulate a Negarestanian analysis along these lines, but for this occasion that project is not pursued. For the sake of this thesis, I shall hold on to the idea of the historical importance of oil that Negarestani makes us alive to.

What is missing in the above accounts, and what I hope to expand upon in the following pages, is a thoroughgoing analysis of how the petroleum industries and their attendant effects have shaped not just our current political conjuncture, but how they have shaped and are recursively shaped by, specific *artistic* logics inherent in this historical period. I suggest that the intersection of art theory and petropolitics has yet to have been elucidated satisfactorily, instead, many of the theorists of petroculture are content to let "art" remain untheorized in their contributions to the discourse. Contemporary Art, in my analysis, however, must be understood as an historical category that has its own logics and methodologies – its own axioms – and by historical I mean contingent on historical events and movements rather than invariable through time. When we speak of contemporary art, then, we speak of logics bound to a certain European modernist conception that acts as a universal referent for all forms of art today, that have emerged in the last fifty years contiguous with the Second Age of Oil. As Wilson, Szeman and Carson suggest 'the colonial project of the nation relies on the pillage of natural resources and the construction of race, class; and gender, which reify some people as resources to be exploited, resulting in socio-cultural paradigms where some lives matter more than others' (Wilson, Carlson, Szeman

2017: 11). The unrealised promise of this analysis is one in which contemporary cultural forms are analysed as part of this process of colonialism, tied as they are to this European logic. This analysis is unrealised precisely because the concept of art itself is never problematised. Instead, the theorists in this volume (and elsewhere) often argue that it is a *certain type* of cultural, artistic or visual practice that is problematically linked to the petropolitical instead of looking at it as a systemic problem.

It is at this level that my work plays out. Instead of delivering my verdict on one or other instance of art, I seek to understand the systemic nature of this entwinement between art and oil. At its root, this analysis sees contemporary art as both historically contingent and revisable – the truly democratic capacity to determine *ourselves* not just what “counts as art”, but the way the logics of art are structured, indeed the axioms of art, must be asserted. This is not to say our aims here should be to delink art from oil, although perhaps that would be a useful project, but to understand precisely how the historical condition known as the Second Age of Oil has participated in the production of the axioms of contemporary art, and how, precisely because of this fact, these axioms are available to revision – with enough force. The argument could be extended, perhaps something to be attempted in future work, into other inferential systems, understanding how a project to change systemic socio-political conditions could be embarked upon.

This thesis is divided into six chapters, each but the last corresponding to an analysis of the axioms of petroculture. Chapter One opens with a discussion of how oil has shaped our world and worldviews, the ideological components of this paradigm are fleshed out, understanding the oil industries, oil itself and the counter reaction to these phenomenon as paradigmatic features of the latter part of the Twentieth Century. We encounter many of the ideas the rest of the thesis focuses on in nascent form here – concepts such as freedom and responsibility, or *homo economicus* appear. This chapter tells the story of The Second Age of Oil, the time period from the early 1970s until now that is historically contiguous with both neoliberalism and contemporary art. There is a discussion of democracy and its attenuation through the concept of the petropolitical, and a critique of Liberalism is hinted at. This chapter and the next act as an historical overview of the last fifty years, providing a set of working definitions for this period that can help frame a discussion of the petrocultural. I also outline how environmentalist logics that have emerged in the same period determine certain sets of action and behaviour – it is important to understand that these logics are also codified by the axiomatics of this period; the

petrocultural or petropolitical is not just what emerges from the oil industries, but also the counter reactions to that industry – as such, environmental movements should be described as being shaped by these axiomatics, and seen as petropolitical insofar as they adhere to a set of axioms.

Chapter Two introduces an economic analysis, understanding the transition from oil into money, and how this shapes, and is shaped by, conceptions of how the economy works. The analysis of *homo economicus* is extended and I engage in a long discussion of how calculation and economic rationality have come to act as organising principles of our age. This chapter is where I embark on a dive into the concept of neoliberalism, and provide a review of the literature in this area. I introduce the concept of neoliberal virtue in this chapter, understanding how virtuous behaviour participates in the increase in economic value of individuals as enterprise units. Here, economics becomes the proof and alibi for action, whereby value is calculated along economic lines – an action is valuable only if it has a good return on investment. In this chapter we encounter the idea of the entanglement between the market capitalisation of oil and civilisation – putting paid to the idea that we could just exit the conditions of petropolitics by fiat.

No conceptual component of ideology is ahistorical, and the concept of freedom is no different. Chapter Three identifies the shifting ways the term signifies, tracking this through a number of different fields to produce a theory that understands current articulations of freedom through a particular lens. The way the concept of freedom emerges within a Liberal paradigm is seen as coherent with the project of autonomy in contemporary art. This framing helps us see how the differential power produced by oil industrial capitalism feeds in to and from this paradigm – utilising the economic theories from the previous chapter to understand how current economic orthodoxy avows and disavows modes of thought and operation that is coherent with a critical history of Liberalism. This formulation of freedom sees the capacity to extract unlimited resources from the earth and current ideas of autonomy within art to have the same logical root. The idea of the limitlessness of nature as resource (and the assumption by economic theory that capital's debts do not need to be paid, which further exacerbates economic and political inequality) coheres with a view of autonomy in art as a mode of negative liberty. If I am free, it is argued, I understand myself to be uncoerced or unregulated. As such, freedom to extract, sell and burn fossil fuels unhampered by government regulation or restriction due to the potential to cause social or environmental harm, is precisely seen as a mode of reasoning that emerges from

this liberal frame. Contemporary art's understanding of autonomy as an escape from norms and laws is coherent with this liberal signification.

Chapter Four opens with the story of BP's rebranding exercise. This example points to the axiomatics I discuss in this chapter; greenwashing, or what I call exemplification. This technique of marketing is analysed in order to discuss how contemporary art's discursive elements, its content, so often promotes a progressive world view, while the effects of its actions at the level of what it "does", the way it participates in a social world, or in the economy, is antithetical to that progressive content. This contradiction, I suggest, is at the heart of the condition of the Second Age of Oil; what starts as a critical counter to capital, gets taken up by capital in the service of marketing. The occlusion or defence of the illiberal consequences of liberal activity is central to Liberalism throughout history, but in its neoliberal form, this occlusion takes on a new character – whereby the occluded illiberalism is presented as a form of immanent critique and mobilised for the sake of increased legitimacy. This chapter explores how these contradictions emerge in the context of contemporary art, and, in fact form a central axiomatic of this genre of art.

The final axiom of petroculture is presented in Chapter Five – this centres on the idea of myopia. In this chapter I take up the question of the capacity of art to produce political change, specifically asking how the particular can have traction at a universal level. This argument weaves through the abstract and concrete as it seeks to understand the way contemporary art thinks its relation to political change. My argument rests on the claim that due to a dissolution of genres in the recent history of art, the way art gains traction at more general levels of society has changed. Precisely, the anomie felt by many in a neoliberalised society – whereby the social and legal institutions that would ostensibly be there to support an individual's challenge to political power have withered – tracks directly on to the world of art. The massive economic growth underwritten by the oil industries in the latter part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty first centuries has been centrally important for the exacerbation of this anomie. Ratcheting inequalities and the disenfranchisement of significant proportions of society has caused many to lose faith in their political capacities, and retreat into the field of change they do have immediate access to – themselves. This move is coherent with a move in the history of art, to understand this as a form of myopia helps us articulate a critical perspective on political responses and their liberal framing.

The final chapter in this thesis embarks on a critique of Liberalism as it describes images of the human in the world. Holding the work of Sylvia Wynter, Reza Negarestani and Charles Sanders Peirce in constellation, I attempt to address some of the previous chapters' critiques through a properly pragmatic approach that seeks to reinstall ideas of value beyond economic calculation. I also return to a discussion of norms that I had started in Chapter Three. In this chapter I give culture its place in the project of constructing new axiomatic statements. Within culture, we can commit to the ratification and elaboration of what is possible – but only, it must be noted, in conjunction with a material project of systemic change. Here the concept of labour, or commitment to a project, returns and intervenes in a discussion around history and the avant garde. It is my contention that European avant gardist notions of freedom from, or erasure of, history delimit certain conventions and descriptions, denying the labour needed to rework or work on the given environment. Only a project that understands the continuities present in our historical time can hope to provide justice. Here a demand for a revalorisation of the institutional is made, whereby the role of contemporary art is found wanting.

## Chapter One: The Age of Oil

The dominant consciousness in the liberal state includes a characteristic view of the relation between man as an agent or a thinker and the external world, between man and his fellows, and between man and his work or social place. With respect to the first, it emphasizes the subjection of nature to human will as the ideal of action and the choice of the efficient means to a given ends as the exemplary procedure of reason. With regard to the second, it underlines the separatedness of person, the artificial character of society, and the ties of reciprocal need and hostility among individuals. As to the third, it focuses on the ambivalent value of work as a both a manifestation and a surrender of personality. (Roberto Unger, 1975: 19)

### *1.1 Groundwork*

We live in a world both ecologically and politically determined by the oil industry, an industry that runs on the confluence of fetishistic imaginaries of power, wealth and greed (Weszkalnys, 2013). This industry concentrates global wealth into the hands of a small minority of shareholders and CEOs, acting as both a driver of inequality, and the secret excuse for ongoing wars waged predominantly in, and on, oil rich nation states (Beaumont and Walters, 2015). The impacts of the oil industry, in the form of ratcheting economic and political power, disruption to communities and the acceleration of anthropogenic climate change filter, as Kate Ervine (2018) suggests, ‘through the complex and often highly unequal social, political, and economic structures that define human social systems globally’ (Ervine 2018: 29). She continues, ‘efforts to mitigate climate change and ameliorate its impacts are likewise channelled through the very same structures’ (ibid.). Not only have these structures conditioned the ways in which economic and industrial activity operate, they determine our responses to their deleterious effects. Insofar as these structures also underwrite cultural phenomena, we can understand them to be compossible

with the cultural logics of late stage, neoliberal capitalism. It is the challenge of this thesis to understand how these cultural, social and political logics appear in contemporary art and how contemporary art seeks to produce political transformation in relation to them.

As Gavin Bridge and Phillippe De Billon (2013) identify, oil is a political actor on a global scale and any question of political transformation must be couched in relation to oil and its marginal social costs and political effects. Oil, while being understood as a natural resource, becomes, through the acts of discovering, recovery, distribution and use, ‘unavoidably political’ (Bridge and De Billon 2013: 3), and in turn, politics becomes unmistakably oily. Discussions of “nature”, then, must be attenuated through discussions of power and politics. The downstream externalities of oil production and distribution – pollution – and the actions of oil industrial capital reproduce power differentials through, as Ervine suggests, colonial superiority:

Colonizing territories and peoples around the world; privatizing, extracting, and stealing their resources; turning communities and families into slaves to be brutalized and sold like common cattle; and demanding servitude so that imperialist nations could prosper – these were the prices to be paid to feed limitless expansion. Accompanied by discourses of European and American cultural and racial superiority, which lent credence to the belief that colonialism offered the “gift” of civilization and modernity to the world’s “backwards” and “barbaric” peoples, it is the historical processes of colonialism and imperialism, and the specific geography that came with them, that set in motion the evolution of capitalist economic growth as a highly uneven system dependent on exploitation.

(Ervine 2018: 45)

The concept of limitlessness, that legitimises the continued exploitation of land, bodies and labour through “civilising” narratives that hold the “virtue” of economic freedom as justification, forecloses claims of indigenous populations to justice, preventing reparative decolonialist action. However, it is also, precisely these narratives that come to determine well-meaning attempts to mitigate or ameliorate the deleterious effects of the climate emergency – as I will explore in Chapters Four and Five the universalisation of a neutral “referent-we” of much climate activism reproduces the colonial structures inherent in imperial extractionism.

How we conceive of ourselves, our communities, the social world and broader spectra in the light of the colonial extractive economies and critical temporalities of the petrochemical industries is a fundamental question for us today.<sup>3</sup> The future will depend in great part on how we construct our new energy systems, and what sorts of modes of governance can be created by them, or how we fail to produce these systemic changes and have to confront the results of such a failure. Whether we think this future is modifiable by us, as citizens/subjects/individuals, or is hygienically insulated from our involvement, the project of critical transformation is an important question. Culture is often theorised as the site of this transformation; the question of how culture, or more specifically contemporary art, relates to or engages with (or not) the broader sphere of politics emerges from presuppositions about the nature of these two spheres and their interactions. The challenge is to produce forms of thought and action based on an expanded epistemology, learning from critical theorisation about this political conjuncture. This first part, Chapters One and Two, will outline the political conjuncture created by the “Great Acceleration”,<sup>4</sup> the increased extraction and use of liquid hydrocarbons, and how it is related to the ideological and economic project of neoliberalism, taking a few key world events and theoretical ideas as starting points for discussion – this period, from roughly 1973 until now, I name The Second Age of Oil. As I shall discuss in more detail later, the Second Age is characterised not only by the economic growth and expansion of industries underwritten by oil, but a so-called counter movement that sought to challenge global petro-hegemonic power. In this analysis I shall focus on the concepts and ideologies produced, ratified and mobilised during this period and aim to understand how these play into the formation of contemporary politics, power and culture. I understand the axiological nature of contemporary art in a specific way. Neither a fundamental, invariant logic, nor a contingent logic of utmost chance; the axiomatic logics of contemporary art are bound by historical relation to the socio-political contexts they emerge from and intercede into, but also maintain a semi-invariance across those contexts. Thus, in my analysis the Second Age of Oil provides the context for these logics to emerge.

Multiple authors have engaged broadly in questions around critical art practices and the biosphere, oil production and its subsequent deleterious effects on the planetary ecosystem, the

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, any use of the words “us” and “we” here must be put in scare quotes to indicate their problematic usage in the history of discussions such as this. I will address this later in the thesis.

<sup>4</sup> This is a term employed by scientists to describe the dramatic uptick of human impact on the surface of the globe. Generally considered to be congruent with the rapid economic expansion from the 1950s until now, this acceleration has been recorded on the impact to climate, ocean acidification, terrestrial biosphere degradation and fish capture. For more information see: <http://www.futureearth.org/blog/2015-jan-16/great-acceleration>

relation between oil politics and culture, questions of transformation of current political conjunctures and the growth of financialised neoliberalism and its relation to the petroleum market. This thesis is concerned with these issues and more, as a point of entry below is a short, and not exhaustive, review of the growing literature in these fields.

There is an abundance of scholarship on the relation between oil, economics and politics, some such as Bridge and Le Billon (2013), Collier (2010), Di Muzio (2015), Engdahl (2004), Heinberg (2005), Malm (2016), Mitchell (2013) Roberts (2005), Silverstein (2014), Smith-Nonini (2016), Weszkalnys (2013) and Yergin (2008) foreground fossil fuels in discussions of political economy. Specifically, Bridge and Le Billon, Collier, Di Muzio, Engdahl, Mitchell, Smith-Nonini and Weszkalnys understand the relation between current political conjunctures and the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, especially oil, to be intrinsic. Mitchell and Smith-Nonini, as I shall discuss in some depth later, think the emergence of the global economy through the rapid acceleration of oil production, understanding the birth of financialised neoliberalism to be linked directly to issues of energy sovereignty, oil wealth and the development of petroleum hegemonies. Di Muzio, is concerned with developing a theory of capitalism that underscores the importance of the carbon industries, and their effects at a civilizational level. While Engdahl, understands the important links between the “new world order” of oil hegemony and war, detailing how global geopolitical power relies heavily on the manipulation and sabotage of oil markets – something Mitchell is also keen to stress in his work. Equally, Yergin’s extensive study on the relations between oil, money and power discusses how the oil industry has been utilised in the production of mastery over nature and populations. An interesting approach that provided a starting point for this research and continues to haunt it is the multiple works of Negarestani (2008 and 2011). These theory fiction works understand oil as a lubricant of the historical emergence of capitalism – a point ratified by Mitchell – coming from a background of speculative thought these discussions are concerned with, variably, constructing a true to the earth realism, understanding the geopolitical as emerging from the tentacular pipelines of oil and the solar economy as central to the emergence of global capitalism.

Equally significant are ecocritical studies of capitalism from the perspective of growing concern around ecological changes and global warming/climate change, specifically looking at concepts of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. Some important work has been done in recent years from, among others: Argyrou (2005), who looks at the logics inherent in the environmental movement and understanding ecological crises through the lens of postcolonialism; Bommeuil and Baptiste

(2017), whose analysis underscores the shocking nature of the realisation of the human involvement in planetary degradation that came with the birth of the term “Anthropocene”; Costanza, Graumlich and Steffan (2011), whose work extends the discussion started in the early 1970s by the Club of Rome’s important classic *Limits to Growth* and ask questions about the most critical problem facing human life in the next century – planetary degradation due to climate collapse. Moore’s (2015) work on ecology and the accumulation of capital understands the development of global capital through a lens of human and natural co-production, capitalism is seen as a process of organising nature to the extent that the law of value becomes the governing logic of the natural world; Klein (2014) and Stern (2015) take a more journalistic approach to discussions of climate change and the necessity to alter critical aspects of our global economy, while Wright and Nyberg (2015) are keen to stress the role of corporate power in the growing ecological crisis. Bookchin (1994), Cooper (2008), Gorz (2012), Guattari (2005), Robbins (2012), and Schmidt (2014) take broader looks at political ecology, the relation between nature and capital accumulation and the rise of current socio-political conditions. Whereas, Northcott (2013) takes the unusual approach to provide discussions of climate crisis and global capital from a theological perspective. Haraway (2016) and Mies and Shiva (2014) provide important discussions of ecological degradation through a feminist lens, while Vergès (in Johnson and Lubin, 2017), Yusoff (2018) and McKee (2017) provide racialized understandings of the effects of climate collapse, specifically drawing on concepts of decolonisation that will become important in the latter part of this thesis.

The literature on the relation between art and the oil industries is small, but growing in recent years; Bloom (2015), Wilson, Carlson and Szeeman eds. (2017), and artist collectives/activist groups Imagine 2020, Liberate Tate and Platform have engaged this issue, all working on the edges of the art or cultural field to discuss concepts of green/art-washing, cultures beyond oil dependency and how art operates to produce political transformation. But specifically, these theorists and artist groups discuss oil through the lens of its biophysical deleterious effects; missing, is an art theoretical engagement with the modes by which cultural formations appear out of the political conditions created by the oil industries. What is much more prevalent are studies of ecocriticism from the site of art and culture, work on the relation between art and the anthropocene/capitalocene and much more generally, and with a longer historical trajectory, philosophical studies on the relation between culture and nature. The first two areas of critical analysis are provided by, amongst others, Araeen (2010) whose work imagines an ecoaesthetics that transforms aspects of contemporary art and current politics, Demos (2017) whose work

takes a critical look at visual culture and the environment, specifically understanding the former as more than just an awareness raising tool, but one that can be intrinsic in the move beyond the fossil fuel economy, and Miller (2018), whose recent work on the role of culture in the practice of greenwashing complements Wright and Nyberg's arguments about corporate responsibility and marketing.

In a significant sense, this thesis is not concerned with repeating these somewhat limited arguments about the roles of art and culture in combatting climate collapse. There is something myopic about assuming that art or visual culture has significant traction on this complex global issue without providing a nuanced and complex argument as to precisely *how* cultural processes and phenomenon have that political traction. As Gabriel Rockhill (2014) analyses, a significant shortcoming of recent debates around art and politics is how the relation between artwork and the social world has been theorised. Inherent in these discussions, Rockhill suggests, is the risk of bracketing out the 'intricate social relations at work in aesthetic and political practices' (Rockhill 2014: 6). In these instances, the social world is disregarded, focussing on the assumed capacity for works of art to make leaps into the abyss of political action. As he suggests:

By setting aside to a greater or lesser extent the social world – and hence the political realm as it is commonly understood – the politics of art is largely reduced to the magical powers of talisman-like objects to more or less miraculously produce political consequences (or fail to do so).

(Rockhill 2014: 6)

Instead, I attempt here to provide a multiple and variegated discussion about the logics inherent in contemporary art and the political space created by the global oil industry – learning lessons from unusual sources in the literature around political ecology. This is not to suggest that art can, or should, provide the site for climate collapse amelioration, but that we must account for the modes by which culture extends and amplifies logics that emerge from the petropolitical, and how we might attempt to think beyond those logics – or indeed, to mobilise counter logics. Equally, this thesis is not limited to an engagement with the literature mentioned above; as we shall discover later the discussion ranges through multiple discursive fields, during which key literature will be discussed at some length.

No discussion about the nature, politics and downstream effects of the extraction and burning of liquid hydrocarbons for energy would be complete without an acknowledgement of the term “anthropocene”. Highly championed in the humanities as the new framing concept for contemporary thought, the term was coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000 as a way to describe an epoch of geological time coterminous with human activity on the planet. The concept names not only geological and temporal dimensions, but, as it is so often employed in the humanities, a dimension of existential crisis. It throws into doubt our collective future, asking how it is possible to exist on a planet that we are in the process of destroying. It would seem, as McKenzie Wark puts it, to be almost impossible to ‘think of a social or political future without thinking about the Anthropocene’ (Wark, 2015). Indeed, anthropocene names a way of thinking about our world that at one and the same time throws us into a state of shock, and forces us into action or paralyses us with fear (Bommeuil and Baptiste, 2017). However, as there have been numerous, and far reaching studies to date that deal with the anthropocene in exhaustive depth and breadth I shall not attempt a lengthy exegesis here, nor claim that this thesis is within the field of “anthropocenic thought”. Instead, I will focus on the industrial extraction, trade and burning of liquid hydrocarbons, and how these have produced a very specific set of political conditions, not just the downstream externalities of these activities, such as pollution and climate change, but specifically how petrodollars came to be recycled into what we now know as the finance economy and how the conditions of our political situations were in part determined by the geopolitical hegemony formed during the period of accelerated economic growth in the latter part of the twentieth century.

At the heart of the attitude of the agents of oil extraction there is a fundamentalism, what Naomi Klein calls “extractivism” (Klein, 2014), a cultural worldview of dominance over nature.<sup>5</sup> Oil not only produces forms of political organisation, but inculcates a type of subjectivity. Central to my study will be an understanding of oil as the key historical author of forms of subjectivity and of capitalism that, as both the lubricant of accelerated socio-economic growth *and* planetary disaster has accelerated both our expansion and our potential demise.

This double nature of oil is important; at one and the same time it is the historical remedy to economic stagnation *and* the significant actor in global ecological catastrophe – not to mention the cause of (or prize in) multiple, on-going military interventions. Capitalism is intrinsically duplicitous in this way, what it gives with one hand, it takes away with another, leaving both

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<sup>5</sup> For an extensive overview of the literature on the domination of nature see Northcott (2014).

economic prosperity (for some) and socio-ecological degradation (for others) in its wake. As Vergés (in Johnson and Lubin, 2017) points out, climate catastrophe hits the poorest populations (often these populations are racialised) the hardest, however, the effects of ecological decline will have profound and unprecedented socio-political effects on all but a very small proportion of the world's population. As such, the further downstream we travel in the narrative of oil, the greater and greater the level of inequality we find. This is true both when we consider the geographical sites of oil exploitation, as is evidenced by what is often known as the “resource curse”,<sup>6</sup> and those most adversely affected by climate catastrophe. According to a study published in Nature magazine, global economic production is adversely affected by just a few degrees rise in global temperature (Burke, Hsiang, Miguel 2015). The implications of this are huge, the authors of the report describe the effects of climate change on the planet as a massive transfer of wealth from the hotter south to the cooler global north. Journalists, political theorists, and economists from Nicholas Stern to Naomi Klein, from Michael S. Northcott to Timothy Mitchell, agree that current capitalist practices are borrowing not just from the poorest regions of the globe, but from our very future; as the global surface temperatures rise to levels not seen in human history, life on the planet will become increasingly precarious, especially for those in the global south. As Vergès suggests, we must integrate the long history of colonialism into our discussions of the Anthropocene; it is only possible to transform nature into cheap resource through the labour of people of colour, and through understanding how the catastrophic environmental change precipitated by the burning of fossil fuels unequally affects poorer, racialised populations (Vergès in Johnson and Lubin, 2017).

Global economic inequality and racial and gender divisions will be exacerbated by global warming, just as they have been through the capitalisation on the oil market that has led to increased capital accumulation for a small minority and the very basis of the system of exploitation will be ineradicably reduced by environmental exhaustion. However, despite neoclassical economics' inbuilt temporal limit, its “future myopia”, *surely* systemic destruction of the very material resources, both “natural” and human, that it relies on is undesirable? This thesis argues that economic praxis, what Mitchell calls “economentality” (Mitchell, 2014), is precisely the limit to thinking of the natural world as a finite resource of intrinsic value to be protected

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<sup>6</sup> The resource curse names a well-known tendency in oil rich countries whereby what should be seen as a gift, becomes a curse as it impacts governance and democracy, creating often violent or ultra-capitalist conditions. See Paul Collier (2010) for an indepth discussion of this. The important point to remember is that having oil (or any natural resource in abundance) makes your country ripe for colonisation. The curse is not so much a curse, as a target.

and is the condition for (eco)systemic destruction. As such, I shall trace the history of our current period through the twin pillars of the fossil fuel industry (specifically oil) and the politico-economic system developed and employed in the last fifty years, what could be called neoliberalism. I mark the 1970s as the decade of radical change, pinpointing key world events, policy developments, publications and shifts in cultural attention as markers of that change. As artist Stan Douglas suggests in the press release for a 2001 exhibition at David Zwirner gallery, the current global distributions of power were the ‘secret meaning of the 1970s’ (Douglas, 2001). The period from then until now shall be henceforth known as the “Second Age of Oil”. This chapter is an explication of that shift to the Second Age, marking an intrinsic, but increasingly disturbing relation between our socio-politico-economic activity and the “Tellurian lube” of oil (Negarestani, 2008).

Oil isn’t just the backdrop to capitalist realism,<sup>7</sup> but the very lubricant of it. Reciprocally, capitalism’s logics structure the processes by which we extract millennia old, decayed, vegetable matter and burn it for energy, releasing such significant levels of carbon into the atmosphere we risk causing runaway greenhouse effects that are already causing global species death, increased social and economic tensions as migration is increasing due to areas of the globe already becoming unliveable and the terminal destruction of wildlife, habitats and indeed vistas of imagination as our landscapes are changing irreparably. Thus, we may be entreated to replace the term “anthropocene”, laying the responsibility as it does at the door of the whole of the “anthropos”, privatising and localising such responsibility, with “capitalocene”, a speculative term deployed by Moore (2015 and 2016), Haraway (2016) (although she moves beyond it towards a more speculative “chthulucene”) and others to indicate where exactly they see the blame for this crisis to lie. Capitalocene, like the name suggests, indicates how the responsibility should be held by capitalism and capitalists, not the whole of human kind (who have unevenly contributed to the crisis).

As a note here, it is increasingly difficult to discuss these issues without using language that seems hyperbolic, but the urgency of this is such that language at times appears to break down. The emotional responses to severe climate collapse as our species faces a significant threat to its future existence, drives, in large parts, cultural responses. Climate collapse mitigation is deeply complex, and because amelioration relies on a large scale, multilateral agreement that may have to curtail the economic freedoms that many of us assume we enjoy, despair amongst many

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Fisher (2009) provides an extended discussion of this idea

communities seems rampant. Thus, anthropocenic shock results in planetary depression. The way a response to this manifests in individuals is symptomatic of the ideological frame of neoliberalism; privatised responsibility (energy saving light bulbs, reduced personal carbon emissions, recycling, etc), while offering localised, affective amelioration, is at best limited and at worst *limiting*. It is coherent to argue that the ideology of personal responsibility for saving the earth from the climate emergency removes the political dimension from the debate, making it only a matter of ethical personhood. This will be returned to in Chapter Five.

To understand the complexities of the Second Age of Oil, a manifold construction is needed. As a world increasingly shaped by multiple technological, social, geophysical, ecological, political, economic and cultural actors the Second Age is complex in nature and cannot be grasped from one perspective alone. This is important. It is only because of the increasing sophistication of technological measurement and climate modelling that we can understand climate at a macro level, as opposed to only weather at a micro level; computational modelling is vital (Edwards, 2010). Just as vital, is the capacity to combine and extend multiple epistemologies and cosmologies, not just rely on pre-existing and connected knowledges – thus, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. At stake is an epistemic expansion; techno-scientific knowledge about the role oil has played in the construction of our politics is paramount to the way we can move beyond this particular paradigm. But knowledge alone is not enough, we cannot rely solely on the revelation of contradiction or on critique. Any theory of change must combine both theory and practice, so, while this thesis takes a theoretical approach, it is with the understanding that the social world is influenced by our practical interventions.

The beginning of The Second Age of Oil is marked a number of key events that have been important to the construction of our current ideological paradigm and indicate oil's importance in the shaping of this new world. They are: the publication in 1972 of *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome and its subsequent reception (including the increasing popularity of the environmental movement); the Yom Kippur War/Oil Embargo of 1973-4 and resulting “oil shock” which saw the price per barrel rise by 400%; the “Nixon shock”, a series of economic measures undertaken in 1971 onwards that saw the unilateral divorce of the American dollar from its convertibility to gold (the end of the Gold Standard); the entry of neoliberal economic ideas into policy in the 1970s, including, but not limited to, the Chilean experiment, Thatcher's and Reagan's elections in 1979 and 1981 respectively; and, the increasing cultural attention paid to issues of environment, global warming, peak oil and nuclear proliferation. In my reading of

this period three “projects” occur concurrently; the Second Age of Oil, neoliberalism and the historical “genre” we call contemporary art. It is not the intention to draw direct parallels between each project, but to show their linkages, complicities and compatibilities. One important historical development is the rise of finance capitalism and how this implicates both oil and art as commodities, as I shall explore in Chapter Two, this relies less on the production than the circulation of commodities, whereby profit is extracted through transactions within financial, not “real”, markets. The implications for democracy are significant.

### *1.2 PetroPolitics Not Democratisation*

At between 5000 and 8000 feet below the surface of the earth deep wells of liquid hydrocarbon, the decayed and pressurised matter of long dead vegetation, has provided us with almost 200 years of incredibly cheap accelerated economic growth – identified by Jason W. Moore (2015) as one of the “four cheaps”, energy as drawn from fossil fuels has provided opportunities for capitalist accumulation for nearly two centuries. Beginning in the mid 1800s, the Age of Oil is implicated in the development of global capitalism and current forms of governance. Doing justice to the myriad ways this occurs is beyond the scope of this study, but I shall begin by picking out a few key examples of how oil and politics are intrinsically connected. As Timothy Mitchell (2013) asserts, ‘fossil fuels helped create both the possibility of modern democracy and its limits’ (Mitchell, 2013; 1). Mitchell identifies not only a deficit of so called democracy in countries that are rich in oil, in the Middle East for example, but the way that the very extraction and trade of “black gold” is intrinsically tied into the construction of democracies around the world.<sup>8</sup> We might wish to amend the term democracy here, that in fact the form of governance we experience with the birth of the oil age is not *simply* democracy, but rather a version of democracy conditioned by oil backed capitalist accumulation. Indeed, as Mitchell suggests, energy is a significant factor in the production of a new form of governance, that of the economy. In what follows I will begin to unpack how this form of administration via the economy emerged from the industrial scale resource grab in the early part of the Twentieth Century.

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the “resource curse” and expansion of “democracy” into resource rich nations, see Collier (2010)

Mitchell traces an historical narrative through the radical transformation of the energy industries, from coal to oil and, to a lesser extent, unconventional forms of extractive technologies, such as hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and strip mining. Modern democracy and the use of fossil fuels at a global scale are both recent phenomena, both appearing, according to Mitchell, in the late 1700 and early 1800s. The birth of the new age of extractive technology, and famously the start of the Industrial Revolution came in 1775 when Boulton and Watt pioneered a new form of efficient steam engine that made the extraction and transportation of coal quicker, safer and easier (Mitchell, 2015: 13). Heralding an age of exponential supply, energy was freed from its locality. For the first time in human history energy was easily transportable great distances, allowing for massive infrastructural and political expansion, not to mention a level of personal freedom previously not experienced. No longer were populations tied to large areas of land required for the production of grain for their animals, or woodland for fuel (ibid.: 15).

With the advent of the ability to distribute a large quantity of energy in the form of coal, came the concentration of the production and ownership of that energy into the hands of a smaller proportion of the population. This ‘apparatus of energy supply’ (ibid.: 19), the infrastructure required to transport coal, built the democratic politics of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Not just concentrating enormous wealth in specific geographical locations, but within the hands of specific individuals. As energy became a necessity, coal producers, much like oil producers today, had a monopoly on the market. Unlike today, however, the politics of coal played an important role in the *democratisation* of the labour force, and wider society. Whereas, as we shall see later, the exploration and extraction of oil required the colonial spread of a brand of Westernised “democracy” to oil producing nations, coal production intrinsically relied on a level of worker autonomy that came to challenge the control of private employers. By exploiting the ability to ‘slow, disrupt or cut off [the] supply’ of coal, miners were able to leverage industrial action as a mode of political power (ibid.: 19). Levels of militancy and strike action rose considerably between 1881 and 1905. Relying heavily on the internal architecture of mines themselves, workers were able to defend their autonomy precisely because they were, in the depths of the mines, separated from supervision. Capable of making their own decisions and forming close bonds within the labour force, Mitchell suggests, miners made significant demands on the democratic power of the day. Precisely because coal was intrinsically tied into the means of production, networked so extensively through national and international infrastructure, and miners could leverage new forms of political consciousness that was emerging, these demands forced power to listen. Thus, democratic politics became structured around industrial action as

the *method* of political change. Except in unionised industries, the political landscape is considerably different today. In part, as we will discover, this is due to changes to labour power enacted by a shift from coal to oil.

As oil is liquid energy, drawn from the earth as crude and refined into multiple forms, kerosene, petroleum, polymers, it is transportable in much greater quantity far more efficiently than coal. It is driven to the surface under pressure, and does not need large quantities of human labour to extract it. As such, once oil is discovered, labour power is considerably reduced, workers are in closer proximity to supervision, and power within the production and transportation of this precious commodity is greatly concentrated (Mitchell, 2015: 36). The introduction of pipelines made it increasingly difficult for workers to disrupt or cut off the supply of energy, making industrial action or militancy near ineffective (except, as we shall see later, as part of a purposeful self-sabotage by the oil companies to reduce supply on to the global market). Furthermore, oil was far more easily shipped worldwide, making it a key player in geopolitics, not to mention in military expansion. As Bridge and Le Billon (2013) explain, oil has a much higher calorific value than other sources of energy, it ‘packs a greater energy punch than coal or natural gas: nearly twice as much as coal by weight, and around 50 percent more than liquefied natural gas by volume’ (Bridge and Le Billon 2013: 8). Meaning that greater quantities of energy can be transported more efficiently and reliably than ever before, and can be used to fuel faster and more powerful engines. At the beginning of the twentieth century oil not only provided the means by which to accumulate significant wealth, and to expand the global reach of power, but was precisely the commodity capable of *delinking labour power from political power*. No more could fossil capital be held to account by labour. Through the simple introduction of a new source of easily extracted, cheap energy, the face of local and global politics shifted decidedly in the favour of capital.

Governing this new resource relied on a concerted effort of control and manipulation. Comparatively few regions of the globe give easy access to usable oil fields, the Middle East being one of the largest such oil fields, and as such, new forms of democratic politics had to be developed to convince those nation states to grant the already industrialised nations access. As Mitchell asserts, large scale military power, while available, was too expensive and ineffective a method of control (Mitchell, 2013: 68). Instead, a new instrument was used; self-determination. Made rich by the accelerated growth endowed upon them by coal, industrialised nations in the global north were able to exert their imperial power over much of the world. Utilising a political

instrument that was developed during industrial action, that of *autonomy*, these developed nations could export a form of democracy to oil rich nations as a way to usurp ruling ideologies in those nations. Self-determination, or individual freedom, became an ideological concept that came to undermine pre-existing non-democratic power. This form of liberalisation bore with it the aggressive programme of accumulation known as capitalism. Mitchell tells us:

The principle of self-rule was not [...] in contradiction with the idea of empire. On the contrary, the need for self-government could provide, paradoxically, a new justification for overseas settlement and control, because only the European presence in colonised territories made a form of self-rule possible.

(Mitchell, 2013: 71)

Drawing on J. A. Hobson's study of imperialism, Mitchell shows how a minority of European imperialists were able to put a large portion of the world under a "democratic" form of rule, precisely because they believed that these "backward" nations were unable to govern themselves and needed training in this regard. Thus, came the linkage between the oil industry and racialised domination. According to Vandana Shiva, because natural resources needed to be developed by human activity – technology, inventiveness and industry – oil gave the alibi for colonial expansion. As she suggests, '[s]ince nature needed to be 'developed' by humans, people had also to be developed from their primitive, backward states of embeddedness in nature' (Shiva in Sachs 2010: 229). For nature to be manipulated into useable material resource, Western powers had to "civilize" those deemed to be "wild".

European and American interests had to build a governing body that could administrate these nations newly under political and economic control. In 1917 The Labour Memorandum on War Aims was drawn up. Expressly devoted to the project of expanding individual freedoms abroad in line with similar expansions at home (in response to industrial action and social disruption at home and the two Russian revolutions) the Memorandum called for "the complete democratization of all countries" which required "the placing of foreign policy, just as much as home policy, under the control of popularly elected Legislatures" (Mitchell 2013: 76). One innovation of the Memorandum was the League of Nations, which would become the administrator of dependent territories, the required governing body was born. It operated as 'an

economic mechanism to replace, not war between states, but its taproot – the conflict over material resources’ (ibid.: 75).<sup>9</sup>

The list of war aims expressed in Labour’s Memorandum were translated by the Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George into a principle of self-determination based on the “consent of the governed”. The Labour document had mentioned neither principles, but had spoken of a process of democratisation. As Mitchell says, ‘[d]emocracy had been won at home not by manufacturing the consent of the governed, but by developing the means to *withhold consent* – in particular through the threat of general strike’ (ibid.: 79, my italics). Lloyd George’s translation of the memorandum explicitly exported a form of democracy that required no process of democratisation to occur, instead, applied it as a set of logics to be followed, thus allowing restructuring programmes to employ concepts of democracy as a mode of *manufacturing consent*.

One key aspect of the desire to expand the international oil trade to these dependent territories was the necessity to exert political control whilst simultaneously occluding it. As such, democracy born from the manufactured consent of the governed became the tool to secure the agreement vital to international trade. This form of governance was parachuted into multiple Middle Eastern countries as a cut and paste set of operations, without recourse to the specifics of the nation state nor its culture. As Cornelius Castoriadis suggests in his analysis of the relation between governance and the individual, this conception of democracy as a ‘mere set of “procedures”’ is so closely tied to ‘what is rather ridiculously called contemporary “individualism”’ that it is unable to think democracy as a process of socialisation (Castoriadis, 1997: 1). Instead, this form of democracy is intrinsic to an imperial project of political and economic liberalisation that holds central the concept of individual freedom as a totem rather than a *process* of liberation. Giorgio Agamben describes this form of democracy as the economic-managerial paradigm. Instead of being a process of legitimation, democracy became a ‘technique of governing’ (Agamben, 2009: 1), suggesting it would be naïve to imagine democracy as a way of constituting politics through an intrinsic relation between people and the law. Human freedom is imagined as a subset of democratic rule, that can be applied without the concurrent “democratisation” of the social. Politics, then gets reduced to the application of procedures, not a battle between the people and the state as constituted by the law. Opposed to this conception,

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<sup>9</sup> After the Second World War the League was replaced by the United Nations, which sought to control international finance and investment through The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, but without the democratic elements the labour movement proposed in the Memorandum (Mitchell, 2013: 77).

Castoriadis describes “democracy as a regime” as a substantive and ongoing project of reproduction, a project of social modification that involves a collectivity. “True” democracy is thus an open regime of participation, not a postulate given over to individuals from above. He asserts there can be no democratic society without socialisation and the recursive instauration of democratic institutions.

Democracy as a regime is therefore the regime that tries to achieve, as far as it possibly can, both individual and collective autonomy and the common good such as it is conceived by the collectivity in each particular case.

(Castoriadis, 1997: 16)

The democracy exported to the Middle East as put forward by Mitchell is the form described by Castoriadis as a *mere set of procedures*. We must understand this as a project inherently tied to the exploration and mining of fossil fuels and other precious resources, but overwhelmingly to liquid hydrocarbon extraction. Democracy thus becomes a *tool* in the arsenal of major oil importing corporations and nations, heralding in a new age of individualism precisely as a mode of economic expropriation, hand in hand with liberalism’s imperial tendencies. As Domenico Losurdo (2014) tells us in his far-reaching counter history of liberalism,

While for some peoples it involved subjection to a form of servile labour, for others “master-race-democracy”, which was now on the point of becoming established on a planetary scale, issued in decimation or destruction.

(Losurdo, 2014: 229)

Liberal politics, born from a domestic project of winning freedom against one’s masters, instrumentalised this freedom as an article of faith to be professed by the “liberating” European and American forces. However, as Losurdo suggests, recalling John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, freedom really only applied to those with the required level of maturity, and not for the inhabitants of nations under British colonial rule. As Jodi Dean has written more recently, democracy employs the same logic as capitalism; she asserts, ‘contemporary democratic language employs and reinforces the rhetoric of capitalism: free choice, liberty, satisfaction, communication, connection, diversity’ (Dean in Bowman and Stamp, 2011: 74). These sets of axiological relations between capitalism and democracy allowed, historically, the introduction of

the former under the guise of the latter, heralding in the association between liberal democracy and capitalism.

Linking democracy to a form of economic thinking, Kirsten Ross' (Ross in Agamben and McCuaig 2012) analysis understands the way democracy has come to indicate a numerical calculation – the rule of the greatest number – as opposed to a conception of it as a form of 'potentiality or enablement: the capacity of ordinary people to discover modes of action for realizing common concerns' (ibid.: 89). The obsession with democracy as an expression of calculation rather than a mode of political struggle that foregrounds the ability of anyone to participate in the process of governance is, as Ross points out, a modern development. Counter to the modern, liberal frame, ancient democracy was conditioned by the power of the demos, which was 'neither the power of the population nor its majority but rather the power of anybody. Anybody is as entitled to govern as he or she is to be governed' (ibid.). The cold calculus of modern democracy, bound by majority rule, shares its DNA with the liberal conception of the individual. As Noberto Bobbio (2005) explains, the relation between liberalism and democracy revolves around the ways they understand the relation of the individual to society. As he suggests:

Liberalism amputates the individual from the organic body, makes him live – at least for much of his life – outside the maternal womb, plunges him into the unknown and perilous world of the struggle for survival. Democracy joins him together once more with others like himself, so that society can be built up again from their union, no longer as an organic whole, but as an association of free individuals. Liberalism defends and proclaims individual liberty as against the state, in both the spiritual and the economic sphere; democracy reconciles individual and society by making society the project of a common agreement between individuals.

(Bobbio 2005: 43)

However, as Bobbio continues, liberal democracy, a form of democracy differentiated from, for example, socialist democracy, foregrounds a defence of the individualist insistence on private property and economic freedom. Liberal democracy, thus, in an analysis shared by Roberto Unger (1975), is bound by the conception of the individual as separated from the society that she is democratically mandated to participate in forming. Socialist democracy, in Bobbio's eyes, is therefore preferable to liberalism precisely because it is (a) bound by a mandate devised by the

people in ways that liberal (or, as he calls it capitalist democracy, is not), (b) allows the all men and women to participate in decisions of an economic nature (whereas liberal democracy forecloses this process from the people), and (c) expands not just political power to the people (as in liberal democracy) but a more equal redistribution of economic power as a mode of redistributing political power. Liberalism, because of its insistence on private property and economic freedom cannot provide the basis for this economic redistribution. Instead, it privileges the demands of capital over the demands of the people, and redraws democratic commitments to the individual's capacity to intervene in the creation of society in line with capitalism's wishes to be exempt from control by the people.

Democracy's modern liberal framework, as described by Chantal Mouffe (2005), foregrounds the central notions of liberal discourse. As Mouffe suggests, liberalism and democracy, although bound together in this historical period, are constitutively different. The liberal tradition, exemplified by 'the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty' (Mouffe 2005: 3) should be disentangled from the main ideas of the democratic tradition; 'equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty' (ibid.). These two competing logics, Mouffe argues, are incompatible in the last instance, providing liberal democracy with an unreconcilable tension between liberty and equality. It is the contingent hegemonic stabilisation of this tension that provides each era with its particular character – neoliberalism then, emerges as a specific interpretation of this tension, challenging the viability of democratic institutions with an insistence on individual liberty over equality. However, as Mouffe suggests, the particular rendition of this stabilisation in neoliberalism, specifically the Clinton-Blair nexus, relies on a deliberative consensus. Drawing on Rawls and Habermas, Mouffe, in a well-known formulation, critiques the neoliberal, deliberative model that seeks to avoid, occlude or resolve tension between individual rights and equality. Her claim to agonistic pluralism poses a counter to the third-wayism that dominated this era, precisely understanding agonism as the site of political discourse and recognition. She argues that third-way politics delimits the demos to those who *apriori* agree with the rational principles of deliberation, understanding rationality to be the deciding factor in determining who is "in" or "out" of political discourse. Under this rubric, then, those deemed "unreasonable" would be disincluded. As I will outline in Chapter Six, this disinclusion so often happens along racial, class or geographical lines as certain subjects are seen as "unreasonable". In many senses, the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable also falls along lines demarcated by neoliberal capital. As I will explore in Chapter Two, rational economic interest delimits engagement in the game of politics insofar as those who

appear not to follow economic logics – perhaps because other values are more important – are seen to be irrational and thus incapable of participating in democratic politics. Thus, democracy as such, when seen not to be adhering to economic principles, gets undermined. As Mouffe suggests, the deliberative model that seeks consensus, and in the process occludes the power relations at play, jeopardises democracy (ibid.: 31). As democracy gets emptied out by liberal consensus politics, it signifies not struggle between opposing forces, but a non-adversarial form of technical management – a feature of neoliberalism – coherent with the above description of democracy as a set of procedures to be followed no matter what national context they are applied to. Technical management emerges here as a form of expertise applicable within petropolitical contexts, providing pragmatic or economic legitimation for extractive activities, whereby the management of resources outside the frame of adversarial politics adheres to logics of economisation.

Drawing on Rimaud’s poem “Démocratie”, Ross (Ross in Agamben and McCuaig 2012) understands how democracy has shifted its meaning over time, from the idea of democracy as ‘the demands of the *peuple* [sic] in a national class struggle’ to a situation whereby democracy is being used to ‘justify the colonial policies of the “civilized lands” in a struggle on an international scale between the ‘west and the rest, the civilized and the noncivilized’ (Ross in Agamben 2012: 95). This shift has occurred, it is clear, coterminous with the preponderance of *liberal* democracy; precisely in line with capital’s demands for the expansion of its territory. As such, democracy acts as a banner or slogan; a proof of civilisation, a marketing tool in the toolbox of colonial capitalism. International development, the spread of democratic forms, and global governance utilises the term and idea of democracy in order to justify their extractive and exploitative behaviours.

Insofar as it shares a set of features, liberal democracy is tied to the petropolitical, the two are mutually reinforcing; the liberal focus on consensus and economic rationality provides the conditions for greater exploitative expansion, without the radical demands that democracy would bring. Thus, Petropolitics becomes a politics only in name, a politics devoid of adversaries, a managerial mode of governance tied closely to the administration of the economy and the generation of consensus.

Petropolitics is a reduction of the political to forms of consensual, managerialism, reliant not on the concept of disagreement between parties but the preprescribed association between resource

and capital value. Constructed on a global scale to intervene in the body politic of nations rich in natural resources, it brings with it both economic rationality (what we might term market fundamentalism) and the promise of individual freedoms for the population. But, sworn over on the back of these promises, it extorts and plunders, expropriating surplus value from below the surface of the earth and turns this value into, on the one hand, capital assets for a relatively small number of shareholders and CEOs, and the on other, negative downstream externalities in the form of CO2 emissions that further degrade the commons, disproportionately affecting the poor and populations of the global south. It is a politics won not through withholding consent, such as in industrial action, but through the manufacturing of consent by a ruling class for their own financial benefit. Accordingly, petroleum has weakened the democratic agency that was gained during the period when coal was the predominant energetic resource, resulting in the organisation of politics according not to the general will of the population, but to an instrument of organisation known as the economy.

Oriented towards a certain, and perverse, sense of the future as an unlimited horizon of growth, the economy acts as though there is no natural limit to its expansion. As I shall examine further in Chapter Two, neoclassical economics treats all areas of the earth as available for the extraction of surplus value, whilst maintaining the myth of inexhaustibility. This form of pathology infects our current political institutions just as much as it did those of the early twentieth century, how we respond to the twin horrors of global inequality and existential crises such as those produced by climate collapse will determine our collective future. As Castoriadis' prescient analysis points to, political leverage that relies solely on the instrument of individual freedom will never be adequate to the task of constructing a democratic politics that is more than a mere set of procedures. Instead, we must mobilise forms of political analysis and action that can expand our logical, political and technological capacities whilst simultaneously prevent us from rehearsing the colonial past. These capacities must be developed in our response to these crises of energetic resources. To do this, we need to first understand how the pathology of petropolitics has developed from the association between human freedom and the marketisation of nature.

### *1.3 Freedom on an Indifferent Globe*

Just as the oil industry, backed by Euro-American imperialism, mobilised the concept of self-determination for the sake of spreading a form of democracy, so too the ideological insistence on individual freedom is inherently tied into the very pathology required to extract and burn carbon at such ferocity. What Klein (2015) calls “extractivism” is a mentality that allows the continual exploitation of the resources of the earth without attempting to replenish those resources. It is ‘a non-reciprocal, dominance based relationship with the earth, one of purely taking [...] the reduction of life into objects for the use of others, giving them no integrity or value of their own – turning living ecosystems into “natural resources”’ (Klein, 2015: 169). Relying on the belief in the inexhaustibility of natural resources and the concurrent disavowal of the marginal social costs of the use of the resources, extractivism is the ideological counterpart to petropolitics. Moreover, it is a fundamentalist, almost fanatical, association between nature and profit that disavows the market effects and externalities of its actions. According to Klein, this association belies an economics based on ever expanding growth that was never viable to begin with (ibid.). To a greater extent than coal had before, oil promised ever increasing freedom from the restrictions of the terrestrial bounds of the earth (literally, in the case of air and space travel). The emergence of the market economy concurrent with the fossil fuel economy was no accident (ibid.: 173). Individual freedoms were multiplied by, for example, the capacity for escape from exhausting manual labour that was given by the development of white goods, from the availability of time efficient (if not energy efficient) personal transport technologies and from the abundance of new consumer goods. There is a very real relation between the rise of commodification and the increased availability of cheap oil, seen as the expansion of personal freedom allied with the concept of economic freedom. Oil became then a progenitor of what Isaiah Berlin calls both negative and positive freedom, (negative freedom is the freedom from coercive restrictions and positive freedom is the expansion of individual capacity). Berlin suggests ‘[t]he “positive” sense of the word “liberty” derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master’ (Berlin, 1958: 8). Of course, the expansion of our freedoms was won at the expense of the contraction of the freedoms of other nations.

If, as Castoriadis argues, individual freedom and collective freedom are recursively interlinked, there cannot be one without the other, the continual burning of fossil fuels marks the rejection of the claim to collective freedom. It holds positive individual economic freedom (the freedom to consume, to increase wealth) against the negative freedoms (the freedom to be without limitation on a full life) of the global population who will experience greater and greater restrictions on their freedoms as the social and political effects of the externalities of the oil

industry are felt.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the petropolitical model is inadequate to the task of increasing collective freedoms.

However, expanding and very real *individual* freedoms give extractivism its alibi and its political rhetoric. Voters at home would be very unlikely to give up their personal freedoms in favour of limiting the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, so much so that up until recently no serious political candidate (certainly in the US and UK) would have based their manifesto on the reduction of fossil fuel usage. Even today, the British Conservative Party's "green" agenda, as far as it exists, is based not on the growth of sustainable energy, but investment in carbon capture technologies. The assumption is that renewables still don't provide sufficient energetic output to leave the safety of fossil fuels.

What drives the extractive industrial capitalists behind the major oil companies to continually increase production as though oil reserves were limitless? The limit point of the extraction and burning of oil is not solely linked to the actually existing reserves in the ground, what we would know as Peak Oil, but to the proposed amount of carbon that can safely be pumped into the atmosphere to give us a 50% chance of maintaining a global temperature increase below 2 degrees centigrade. A 2 degree rise above pre-industrial temperature levels is the benchmark set by numerous reports and protocols over the last four decades, these include the Stockholm Environment Institute in 1990, the Rio Earth Conference 1992, the Kyoto Protocol 1997, the Cancun 2010 summit, the regularly produced IPCC reports, and the Stern Report in 2006. Indeed, Stern's (2015) recent work on this matter identifies many of these key moments in the history of the debates around climate change, and translates many of the findings from his report into a book for general audiences. Stern calls climate change a market failure, one that presents a significant and unique challenge for economics (Stern, 2015). It is important here to note that "limit" should be understood as *both* the geo-physical limit of reserves of extractable oil left in the ground *and*, more pressingly, the amount that must remain there to keep us within a safe spectrum of global warming.

According to the robust scientific consensus, if that limit is breached, there will be disastrous consequences for the global population.<sup>11</sup> Thus, an economics that proceeds according to a

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<sup>10</sup> The difference between positive and negative freedom is outlined in Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty".

<sup>11</sup> NASA recently published a report that indicates there is 97% consensus amongst the world's climate scientists - <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

limitless supply of burnable oil, or other forms of fossil fuels, dangerously condemns the very system that it draws its value from to decline. Moreover, that decline hits certain populations hardest. Paraphrasing Ivan Illich, Michael S. Northcott, argues that '[a]ccess to and use of energy comprise one of the main drivers of inequality in industrial societies' (Northcott, 2014: 15). According to Northcott, the fanatical chase after energy reserves stored in the form of oil binds us into a dependent lifestyle, sustaining political ideologies and economies of extraction (ibid.). The winners of the extractive industries comprise a tight group of some of the wealthiest people on the planet, it is in their interests to push at, and indeed deny, any supposed limit to their economic activities. Not least because any regulatory restrictions on the production of future oil will drastically limit their capacities to fulfil already made commitments. Northcott:

The capital and stock value of fossil fuel companies, which are the most powerful of modern economic corporations, rest in part on their claimed reserves of fossil fuels. If, as climate scientists claim, the burning of these reserves will destabilise the climate, extinguish myriad species, inundate coastal cities, and lead to the desertification or flooding of much farmland, then the value of these reserves is contentious.  
(Northcott, 2014: 17)

In the name of maintaining stock price, and thus shareholder value, any limit to growth, whether it exists or not, must be denied, climate disaster be damned. As Klein, Northcott, Stern and many others argue, the limit to the amount of oil that should be drawn from the earth has to be respected if we have a hope of avoiding radical climatic decline. However, capitalisation on global oil reserves has led to disastrous consequences. As Moore suggests,

For oil, gas and coal, the transition from appropriation to capitalization has brought with it a monstrous turn towards toxification on a gigantic scale – from unprecedented oil spills, to the “hydraulic fracturing” of natural gas exploitation, to coal’s mountaintop removals, energy production in late capitalism increasingly manifests as a qualitative erosion of the conditions of human, never mind extra-human, well-being  
(Moore, 2015: 149)

Market capitalisation on oil resources results in the erosion of the lifeworld we rely upon. According to Mitchell (2013), this is not a geological issue, our energy needs can be adequately met by the available resources, but an economic and political one. To force the hand of the oil

producers to leave the oil in the ground, to resist the downward pressure of declining oil revenues if they do so, requires both political will and economic regulation. It requires the curtailment of the economic freedoms of key oil capitalists and the attendant industries.

As far as a worldview consistent with the expansion of economic freedoms on the surface of a globe to be exploited goes, Kant's short essay on cosmopolitanism, *A Perpetual Peace*, is paradigmatic. Kant, enthusiastic for humankind's emancipation, asserts the right of men to share terrain 'by virtue of their common ownership of the earth's surface' (Kant, 2003: 16). In this declaration Kant characterises the globe as commonly *owned*. For Kant, commerce is made possible by the right to ownership of the earth's surface that 'belongs in common to the totality of men' (ibid). Kant's comprehension of cosmopolitanism, one that relies on a conception of the globe as commonly *owned* and that ownership to be the prerequisite for the possibility of trade, defines a politics attenuated through Enlightenment thought that leads humanity to reason. Thus, human emancipation comes at the expense of the division and ownership of the land as "natural resource", simply put, privatisation. Kant posits commercial interest, as determined by antagonism, competition and envy, as a determining factor to avoid military conflict. Libidinal mimesis, the desire to emulate one's neighbour, is here given its place as the driving force of capitalism's liberating force. As Kant proposes in "Idea for a Universal History", the state of nature, as the condition of pre-legislative competition between beings, is to be thanked for creating the conditions for progressive sociability. And thus, for commerce, which, for him, is the ideal strategy to ensure peace. As he writes: 'thanks be to nature for the incompatibility, for the distasteful, competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and also to rule' (Kant cf. Saint-Armand, 1996: 153).

In the epilogue to his *Laws of Hostility*, Saint-Armand (1996) outlines Kant's insistence on commercial competition as the actually existing progenitor of peace, creating an interdependence between nations required for trade.

Commerce seeks to deny confrontation; it inaugurates forms of reciprocity that are cognizant of the violence inherent in human relations; it is enlightened. Commerce deflects human violence towards objects of the world, thus averting the possibility that people will take each other as objects of conflict [...] Direct identification is averted. Mimesis, diverted onto things, is absorbed into competitive acquisition of objects. (Saint-Armand, 1996: 155)

Contra to both Kant and Saint-Armand, who saw capitalism as the rightful administrative paradigm through which an everlasting peace would be obtained, the economic historian Polanyi insists that the emergence and subsequent degradation of the self-regulating market in the nineteenth century had disastrous consequences for social cohesion (Polanyi, 2001). Tracing the historical precedents for the First and Second World Wars, Polanyi identifies the reliance on *haute finance* as the progenitor of a series of crises that engulfed the world twice in the last century. For a hundred years prior to the outbreak of WW1, the peaceful accord maintained between nations by a sophisticated trading mechanism relied on four institutional pillars: the balance of power system; the international gold standard; the self-regulating market; and the liberal state (ibid.: 3). For Polanyi, these interconnected institutions were what gave the world a hundred years of peace between 1815 and 1914, but at their heart was the international economic system. A system that relied on the assumption of economic self-interest. As Polanyi suggests, freedom in the self-regulating market is freedom to act in one's own self-interest, based on the assumption that 'in his economic activity man strove for profit, that his materialistic propensities would induce him to choose the lesser instead of the greater effort and expect payment for his labor' (ibid.: 257). Known as economic rationality – a guiding principle of economic thinking that asserted the spontaneous emergence of markets based on the free will of economic actors – this view relies on individual responsibility for conscious, rational choice. Under this rubric, *homo economicus* can be held accountable for their own choices in a market guided by the assumption of freedom from constraint.

However, this economic view – what we might call economism (a belief that attacks planning and regulation as a denial of freedom, and lauds free enterprise and private ownership as the essential ingredients of freedom (ibid.: 265)) – belies the truth that economic rationality just doesn't translate into what we know about human behaviour. Following Frank H. Knight, Polanyi asserts that human motives are never specifically economic, implying that spontaneous markets cannot arise from the basis of "natural" human behaviour (ibid.: 258). With the mechanism of rational choice, it is possible to convince a population that societal orientation is natural and spontaneous, that they willed it that way by making free choices. If populations can be convinced they chose a course of action freely, they won't *feel* coerced. Yet, because economic behaviour is subject to variably irrational desires, rather than purely rational decisions, it is capable of being manipulated. I shall return to this later, but for now it is important to note that

the myth of economic rationality allows the *burden of responsibility* to be shifted on to the general public. Predominantly figured as consumers, we are entreated to make ethical choices through our purchasing decisions – organic food, energy saving light bulbs, low carbon means of transport etc. – yet these decisions provide the excuse for not making larger systemic changes. This is broadly the argument posed by the political centre-right in this country; the population are considered to be individual economic actors making rational purchasing choices, rather than political subjects engaging in the discursive articulation of opposing positions.<sup>12</sup>

Stengers (2015) mobilises a similar narrative. The tragedy of the commons (from a book of the same name by Garrett Hardin), is, for Stengers, a fable that came to legitimise the enclosure of land (Stengers, 2015: 79). Based on the assumption that users of common land would pursue their own economic self-interest, tragic over exploitation is the “natural” outcome. This pessimistic view of human behaviour allows land to be privatised and profit to be drawn for the landowner, or as Stengers, channelling Marx asserts, primitive accumulation of capital (ibid.: 80). The Enclosures Acts between 1604 and 1914 matter today because contemporary capitalism relies on, extends and actualises this logic. As Stengers suggests, ‘[t]he privatization of resources that are simply essential to survival, such as water, is the order of the day, as well as that of those institutions which, in our countries, had been considered as ensuring a human right, like education’ (ibid.). Thus, privatisation is legitimised by the assumed tragic exploitation of the commons by the supposed rational economic activity of all. However, this does not prevent private interests acting to exploit the commons for their own good, it is possible private companies operate significantly more like *homo economicus*, determined as they are by the wishes of their shareholders.

Because, as Polanyi (2001) asserts, human behaviour is not economically rational, markets need to be, and historically have been, imposed, a result of ‘conscious and violent intervention’ (Polanyi 2001: 258). Freedom of the market – and its corollary, freedom of the individual – a central claim of capitalism, is, in fact, the result of a governmental imposition that produces a dialectical relation between the two. On the one hand, the freedom of market actors is truthfully only afforded to sufficiently powerful capitalists (the subjects of the enunciation), while the very freedom that neoliberal capitalism would tell us is universal is refused to the subjects of the axioms of capital accumulation, for want of a better word, the proletariat. By occluding its

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<sup>12</sup> As I shall explore in chapter two, this market fundamentalism dangerously colours the climate change debate, perhaps preventing action at the highest level.

coercive nature with the unrealisable promise of individual rational choice, capitalism prevents us from seeing the ways in which it denies freedom to significant portions of the population.

Polanyi: 'It appears that the very means of maintaining freedom are themselves adulterating and destroying it' (ibid.: 262). For Polanyi, then, the self-regulating market, largely based on the myth of economic rationality, could never last, precisely because it continually destroys itself through the exploitation of its base. Nineteenth-century civilization disintegrated 'as the result of [...] the measures which society adopted in order to not be, in its turn, annihilated by the action of the self-regulating market' (ibid.: 257).

The logic of capitalism that absolutises personal freedom, as expressed by economic rationality, relies precisely on the extraction of surplus value, not just from labour, but primarily from the earth itself. Because we are able to use as "resource" a portion of nature, we can mobilise vast energetic and technological innovations in the pursuit of human happiness and economic growth. This relies precisely on economic evaluation. As Polanyi suggests, "land" is 'an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's institutions' (ibid.: 187). The naming of an area of the surface of the earth as "land" isolates and marketises it, bringing it within the logic of the pricing mechanism. The production of "land as resource" is both reliant on, and the progenitor of, economic value. Without it there would have been no capitalism. As such, any theory of capitalism, and concurrently, theory of post- or anti-capitalism, requires a theory of ecology so as to understand the inextricable relation between economic value and nature. And subsequently, any theory of ecology, requires an economics. Therefore, economic freedom (what the ideology of individual freedom has been in practice based on under capitalism), is locked into the use of nature as a resource. Furthermore, the emergence of the catastrophe of global climate collapse, throws into crisis the evaluative process of economics. It is no longer based on a nearly free, and abundantly available, natural resource, but must understand the critical relationship it has to ecology. Thus, nature provides the occluded evaluative structure for the entire economic system and in the time of the anthropocene the failure of that economics precipitates climatic collapse.

Up until the mid-1930s economic evaluation *was* based on a natural resource, gold. But, under pressure to stimulate the economy in the wake of the depression, the Federal Reserve moved to loosen the relationship between dollar currency and the Gold Standard. Under orders from congress, all banks handed their gold reserves over to the U.S. Treasury in exchange for gold certificates. This allowed Roosevelt to depress the value of the dollar against gold to encourage international trade in the hope of stimulating the domestic economy. Money became

conveniently manipulable in ways that it had never been previously. As I shall explore in Chapter Two, the birth of financial evaluation delinked from metallic reserves had significant effects on the global market, not least because in the early 1970s the introduction of fiat money – born from the evaluation of another natural resource, oil – had global impacts for both real and financial markets.

Personal economic freedom is not only intrinsically entwined with, and thus limited by, global scale industrial extractive activity, i.e. with the resources drawn from the earth, but is given as the very reason for these activities in the first instance. Still suffused with the rhetoric of individualism and liberty, capitalism took a significant ideological shift in the early part of the 1970s. Chapter Two will deal in more depth with the development of neoliberal ideology and policy in this period, attenuating it through the OPEC oil crisis of 1973 and the current reaction to the crisis of climate disaster, but first we need to account for how environmentalism attempted to build a cultural and political movement to limit economic activity in the name of planetary stewardship. What Polanyi called a “counter-movement”.

#### *1.4 The Problematic Logic of Environmentalism*

In 1972 the Club of Rome, a global think tank of heads of state, politicians, UN bureaucrats, economists, scientists and others, published *The Limits to Growth*. As warnings to humanity go, this was the one of the most serious, most dire. Led by environmental scientist Donella Meadows, the team examined five variables to model possible outcomes of global growth trends. These variables were world population, industrialisation, pollution, food production, and resource depletion. The first chapter listed the three main conclusions:

- If the present growth trends in world population, industrialisation, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.
- It is possible to alter these trends and to establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future.

- The sooner the world's people decide to strive for this stability, the greater will be their chance of success.

(Meadows et al. 1972: 24 cf Meadows, D.L. 2007)

In the subsequent decades after the publication of this urgent report many of the predictions about global growth trends came true. Ratified by both independent scientific studies and the mainstream media, there has been significant and growing concern about species collapse, oil depletion, climate change and other major ecosystem malfunction.<sup>13</sup> If the last forty years have been bookended by the *Limits to Growth* at one end and the most recent IPCC report (among other major reports on climate change) at the other, both providing conclusive prediction and evidence of climatic breakdown and societal collapse, you would expect the world's leaders to be awake to the dangers inherent in continuing with these growth trends. And yet this has not historically been the case. In response to increasing demand we have been globally tied into ever more damaging extractive industries (for example, the unconventional extraction of oil and gas by means of hydraulic fracturing – fracking – and strip mining, Alberta Tar Sands for example) to the point where global investment in unconventional fossil fuel production outstrips the investment in renewables by a ratio of three to one (Klare, 2013), and governments worldwide, including our own, are committed to ever increasing levels of economic growth. As fast developing nations such as China and India experience unprecedented growth to rival those of the OECD countries, and growth in those developed nations shows no sign of slowing, we are set on a destructive course.

Why, if so few climate scientists deny the existence of anthropogenic climate change, nor the correlation between it and industrial economic growth, are we still at an impasse when it comes to mustering the political will to make significant changes in our habits? As Dennis Meadows (Meadows ed. 2007), one of the *Limits'* authors analyses in a subsequent report from 2007, there was a vested interest in reducing the impact of the original report when it was first published. He focuses on a review published in the New York Times by three young economists – Peter Passell, Marc Roberts and Leonard Ross – who, as he points out ‘claimed no shred of expertise in either the biological or the physical sciences’ (Meadows in Meadows ed. 2007: 408). Two of these authors had conflicts of interests, as they were about to publish a book which would lose

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<sup>13</sup> As a caveat to this argument, it is important to point out that the Club's predictions that foreground questions of runaway population growth could be utilised for a neo-Malthusian argument that this thesis will not be pursuing. Any form of population limitation historically favours powerful actors over those with less power, often on class, race and gender lines – this would be an unacceptable conclusion to draw from this research.

its rationale and audience were the claims made in the *Limits to Growth* validated (ibid). But, importantly, these economists' views reflected an ideological tendency that was as prevalent then as it is today; the denial or obfuscation of the scientific truth of the environmental impact of economic activity. The book review denied the claims of the report precisely because a world view, the conclusion of which is there are "limits to growth", must be suppressed. Under the prevailing logic of neoliberal capitalism, economic growth must be of primary concern, and any model that challenges that must be denied.

The Paris climate agreement, COP21 (the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of Parties), has as its manifest aims the stabilisation of greenhouse gas emissions to avoid 'dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' as asserted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014: 19.1). The motivation behind this global, and near universal, response to imminent climate catastrophe is broadly figured into two camps: the economic argument and the moral argument. According to Stern these are not mutually exclusive, apparently, we can have economic growth with green technologies and structural change (Stern, 2015). The moral case for a significant technical response to the climate emergency can be made from the position of environmentalism. However, as Vassos Argyrou (2005) argues, the environmental movement, in the attempt to undermine the assumed dominance of man on the surface of the earth (the neo-colonial spirit of extractivism), creates a new problematic logic.

Argyrou describes the cultural conditions required for thinking a shift from "man" as a dominant figure on the surface of an earth that he exploits for the furthering of humanity's escape from the bondage of nature, to "man" as human being within and part of an environment. This shift, he proposes, produces the environment as a tragic victim to be cared for by man the steward, and any "facts" within this system to be filtered through the cultural hegemony of environmentalism. Previously, the modernist paradigm held man as distinct from and in command of a nature that must be escaped and mastered in the service of human freedom.

Nineteenth century European "man" perceived himself to be thoroughly cultural, in control of his body and his passions and through the power of his reason and his physical power, increasingly invested in machines, in control of external nature as well (Argyrou, 2005: 11)

This cultural figure understood himself as distinct from the surface of the earth precisely because he had escaped the bonds holding him to it, his freedom was won through the mastering of himself and the world with the power of reason. European man understood the ground beneath his feet to be solid and free from obstruction. The picture that European man created of the world was one whereby legitimacy was granted not by a transcendental god figure, but internally by man himself. Man rejected the Christian god and ‘assumed the role of creator and guarantor of the world’ (ibid.: 94), becoming the universal determination of the world itself rather than an object within it. Man, as subject of the world became the measure of all things, universalising his own status as human. Thus, human finitude came to determine the limits of the real, delimiting the possibility to think outside of the human relation. Within environmentalist discourse this is seen as both arrogance and hubris; *the defining cultural conditions for the exploitation of the globe*. Indeed, as Shiva (2014) argues, against a patriarchal Prometheism, the worsening global climate crisis and injustice is the ‘destructive Anthropocene of human arrogance and hubris’ (Shiva 2014: xix). As such this universal, modern European man is blamed for ravaging the planet and creating the global ecological crisis. As we will see, Argyrou argues that this blaming of European man is used as a weapon in political power play at the highest level, as ecological concerns come to dominate the field.

The last half-century of thought has done much to de-centre man from his post-Enlightenment position, but also, as Argyrou suggests, place him in a tragic relation to the sacred earth, crossing out “nature” in favour of an environment that must be protected if it is to support life. The environmentalist logic that is the subject of Argyrou's critique proposes an attempt to return to some form of prelapsarian totality, or unity between man and nature, the unproblematically conceived claim of oneness, sameness or identity between human culture and the natural world – the authentic or more “real” nature.<sup>14</sup> Modernity's humanism attempted to dissolve all divides between people in the name of a universal human subject (although problematically, as we are aware, returned the European male subject to the centre, claiming to eradicate difference under the guise of unity, only to dangerously occlude particularity in favour of a unification based on a western ideal – an idealism challenged by ecofeminist writings). According to Argyrou, against this humanism, environmentalism posits the dissolution of the final great divide, the divide between human and nature. It rejects many of modernity's claims of dominance and mastery, yet, furthers the very logic of unity via an expansion of the idea of the Same, into a conjoined man and nature. Perversely, and no doubt unwittingly, this final unification threatens to re-embed an

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<sup>14</sup> Recall here the claims made in the Introduction around art's appeal to something more “real”.

animistic humanism in nature, unknowingly reinstalling the human measurement that it sought to efface, i.e. value as handed down by man. This final occluded act is performed by an ecocentrism that attempts a radical expansion of 'life', or human qualities into non-teleological animals or the inorganic, and thus paradoxically recentres the human. This form of animistic humanism is prevalent in discourses that attempt to reconcile humanity and nature into a vibrant material whole, or place human intentionality within non-human objects, or claim “we are all stardust” and so on.

Environmentalists, according to Argyrou, perform a double move, on the one hand to propose a final unification and on the other to posit the human as the protective steward; no longer conceived as a trap to escape, nature is seen as a supportive and nurturing but fragile system to protect and care for. Thus, the logic of environmentalism creates a totalising unity between man and nature, but then returns man to the outside of the globe by conceiving of it as something that must be protected by him – nature becomes victim, but also the site of an authentic encounter with our own true selves. For Argyrou this double move is the unthought of environmentalism that means it is destined to repeat what it seeks to reject in modernity, namely the assumption of unity, that finally resolves in an occluded division.

Thus, we have a double logic at play. The European spirit of capitalist accumulation on the surface of a globe man thought himself to be distinct from and dominant over, what we might call, following Walk, the metabolic rift – the distinction between nature and culture (Walk, 2015(1)). And the obverse tendency in the latter part of the twentieth century to try to stitch up the wound created in the rift between culture and nature under the name of environmentalism. For Argyrou, both these tendencies have their problems, and neither are adequate to the task of thinking the problem of anthropocenic shock created by the deleterious effects of the burning of fossil fuels. For us, we must learn the lessons from this assessment. We must find ways to motivate socio-political change on the basis of an expanded epistemology that protects us from repeating the mistakes of the environmental movement whilst also taking forward their spirit. I will argue that cultural strategies can be mapped across from this movement as a way of producing political transformation. Culture here should be understood as a mode of thought and operation that validates, valorises, legitimates and ratifies human expression – how the human is conceived, is thus pertinent for the question of culture. If, on the one hand, the dominant mode of conceiving the human – as an economic individual, divorced from the responsibilities they have to their environment – and on the other – as a part of an undifferentiated nature whereby

we are all part of the logic of the Same – coexist, then culture emerges as an expression of both simultaneously in varying degrees. These two world views are fundamental axioms that shape many of our ways of conceiving our relations to the world, to each other and so on. But we can identify a third mode of relating the human to the world, or “nature”, whereby the human is seen as a plague, a disturbance, or a violence on an innocent nature. It is these kinds of narratives that are behind the *Limits'* authors' assertions about runaway population growth, the persistence of the term Anthropocene, whereby the whole of the Anthropos is to blame for climate change, and romantic claims to authenticity. This view occludes or prevents a political challenge to power, instead replacing it with blame meted out on a universal humanity – giving credence to the idea of limiting human populations, a somewhat Malthusian approach to the issue – thus providing the alibi to more authoritarian political formations (the undergirding of ecofascism). Assumptions that there are undifferentiated responsibilities, it must be noted, often result in ways that favour not just the most powerful, but those who have gained the most from creating the crisis conditions in the first instance.

The three logics go; Human as separate from and dominant over nature, human as intrinsic and the Same as nature, human as plague on nature whereby nature exists as something prior to and separate from the human as an intrinsically “good” location and the human as a destructive force. These logics are of course, poles of attraction, most worldviews tend to include features of each, yet, I would argue, none of them are sufficient descriptions of the world, nor are they normatively desirable. In Chapter Five I take up the questions of the relation between the particular and the universal – understanding that discussion as an example of the battle between these three ideologies is important.

It is precisely in the valorisation process that these ideologies emerge – what is seen as important depends on the framing device through which we look and experience the world. As Northcott argues, ‘in modernity “values” in the earth system are only recognised when they become part of the human economy of making and production and are given monetary equivalence’ (Northcott, 2014: 128). Economic evaluation of the ecosystem is based on the usability of nature for human agency, rather than an intrinsic value. Capitalist economy requires nature have equivalent value, but neo-classical economics (the dominant economic school) has prevented us from understanding value as anything other than a usable resource for the increase of private wealth. *If* we wish to stitch up the metabolic rift, then we must find new methods of evaluation. However, what if we do not wish to stitch this wound? What if we do not think that stitching up the

wound is the way to redistribute wealth, to reduce economic and socio-political inequality, to create ecological justice? Instead of attempting the production of unity between us and nature, which would reduce politics to the administration of energetic flows and give capitalism a free ride, how can we understand our role in relation to nature, and more precisely, how can we reconcile the intrinsic value of a natural material such as oil with its indifference to value? That is to say, how do we draw equivalences across the oil still in the ground and the marginal social costs to society as a result of burning that oil?

Argyrou's critique of universalist environmental discourses that seek to, one, place the figure of the human as the protector of a fragile earth-as-victim and, two, understands the only way to do this through a reversal of modernity's scientific and technological developments in favour of a prelapsarian retreat to a form of eco-localism, allows us to understand the conjoined challenges we face. This thesis aims to understand the project of political transformation not as an escape, retreat or relapse, nor as a project of protecting the earth-as-victim in the name of a more authentic personal experience, nor, indeed as a project of returning a universal referent to the centre of political discourse. Instead, as I will outline in the following chapters, the project of reengineering that lays ahead is one that requires a complex understanding of the socio-political dimensions of the relation between culture and nature; insofar as this relation is, and must be conceived of, as mediated by the political rather than by the technical, the project returns questions of democracy, redistribution, justice, equality, and value to the centre.

## Chapter Two

### Petro-economic Rationality

[The modern economic] order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt  
(Weber, 2005: 123)

This means that the genre-specific preprescribed truth of economics must itself analogically elaborate an ethno-class *descriptive statement* mode of *material provisioning* that can, law-likely, be only that of *homo oeconomicus's* single absolute model of free-market capitalism. This model's imperative supraordinate telos of increasing capital accumulation thereby predefines it as the *only* means of production indispensable to the enacting of the economic system of free-trade-market capitalism's unceasing processes of techno-industrial economic growth. In this mode of material provisioning, therefore, there can ostensibly be no alternative to its attendant planetarily-ecologically extended, increasingly *techno-automated*, thereby job-destroying, post-industrial, yet no less fossil fuel-driven, thereby climate-destabilising free-market capitalistic economic system, in its now extreme neoliberal transnational technocratic configuration.  
(Wynter in McKittrick ed., 2015: 22)

## 2.1 Economics: Emerging out of oil

Emerging in the mid twentieth century as a new form of governmentality, the economy – as a model of calculation that determines and distributes ‘scarce resources to alternative ends’ (Foucault, 2008: 269) – started to gain dominance. Mitchell (2013 and 2014) understands this new “object” as intrinsically linked to the flow of fossil fuels. Economic growth, underwritten by the extraction and burning of fossil fuels for energy, and the emergence of the theory of economic analysis went hand in hand. Referring to a distribution of resources, but also as a mode of administration, this new term designated not only a way to understand financial activity, but the ‘efficient management of human lives and material resources’ (Mitchell, 2014: 481). It came to determine not just a system of governance, a way of doing things, but *a way of being human*. Historically, the fathers of modern economic theory, Jevons, Ricardo, Smith, paved the way for a new understanding of fossil fuels as the source both of new forms of growth and of calculation, but it wasn’t until Keynes that the value of money was bound to the movement of oil rather than coal (Mitchell, 2014: 123). This chapter understands how, in the post war era, economic expertise developed in direct relation to the hydrocarbon age. Whilst, neoclassical economic theory attempts to delimit its understanding to “human affairs”, there is an historic precedent to the intrinsic linkage between money flows and oil flows. The current cycle of capitalist accumulation is importantly and dangerously linked to the capacity to drill, sell and burn fossil fuels. In this chapter, I shall start to understand how human subjectivity is determined by these processes, developing a theory of petro-subjectivity bound to a cultural analysis that depends on theories of contemporary art.

As Mitchell asserts, the shape of democratic politics from the 1930s onwards was determined in large part by the application of new forms of economic expertise (ibid.: 124). As this new mode of analysis gained significance, the role of administration and calculation grew, spreading the mechanisms of economic planning and practice to wider spheres of life – ‘[t]he deployment of expertise requires, and encourages, the making of socio-technical worlds that it can master’ (ibid.: 124). The economy became both a tool for understanding markets and, significantly, the machine for producing the world in its image, becoming the central object of democratic politics in the West (ibid.: 125).<sup>15</sup> Drawing on Polanyi, Mitchell understands the economy to be a self-regulating system that subordinates other social systems. As we shall see later, this characterisation is also found in Foucault and Andre Gorz amongst others, whereby economic

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<sup>15</sup> It is possible here to understand this as an axiomatic procedure

practice comes to determine the social, political and cultural spheres. My claim (in agreement with Mitchell) is that economic practice rests not just on the value drawn from oil, but the *values* and *norms* generated by the oil industry. Political formations, and the attendant socio-cultural tropes, operate according to these values and norms, proceeding as they do from the conditions of energy production and expenditure prevalent in any given historical period. The world of the coal economy of the nineteenth-century, according to Mitchell, produced ‘writing about political economy [that reflected] the world of coal mines and steam engines. The mines and the engines, however, did more than provide objects of reflection. They helped form a world of calculation, circulation and control of which the doctrines of political economy became a part’ (ibid.: 127). The gold standard, for example, was made possible because of the steam-powered rolling mills that produced coinage – the highly transportable abstraction of bank held gold. This in turn drove colonial expansion, spreading certain political forms around the globe and determining politics back at home. The political theory of liberalism then, relied significantly on the material conditions of coal, and later oil, power. In the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism we encounter different conceptions of economic valuation, calculation and determination that reconfigure our relation to natural resources. Importantly, this finds its prominence in the conception of the limits of these resources and to what ends they can feasibly be put. It is a battle over these limits that defines our contemporary period.

To understand how the nature of economic analysis inflects our cultural, social and political worlds, we must attend to a number of significant developments in recent economic thought. As Mitchell understands it, the “economy” as an object is distinct, both conceptually and historically, from “political economy” – a mode of governance that administers society in accordance with certain ideological conditions – and distinct from a process of “economising” – as in, making prudent use of resources. During the early part of the twentieth century the word started to be used to designate an activity that conceptualised the flow of monetary circulation and specifically about *future* activity. Mitchell:

We can show how the economy appears to be a new object: a thing made up of aggregate price levels, wages, consumer spending, money supply, purchasing power, and savings, all of which could now be estimated, thanks to new business procedures, banking reports, household tax returns, and other forms of accounting (Mitchell, 2014: 483)

Importantly, these forms of accounting were used to divide the world into a series of units, and to determine how these units relate to each other on both micro and macro-economic scales. Thus, the economy became about the partition of the world into discrete chunks, manageable, governable and calculable. *What* is calculable is just as important as *how* it is calculated – what is *available* to calculation. When Marx and Engels wrote in their manifesto that ‘[capital] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation’ (Marx and Engels, 1985: 82), they were keen to articulate the overbearing presence in our lives of the role of calculation. Calculation that hubristically seeks to determine, partition and delimit the world, thus articulating what is available to calculation and what is not. We could understand the history of capitalism as the continual expansion of what is calculable. The economic actor gives power to calculation precisely because of its assumed objective nature, that, delimits the subject from ‘giving meaning to decisions and from accepting responsibility for them’ (Gorz, 2011: 127). As Andre Gorz suggests:

The imperialism of “cognitive-instrumental” reason and particularly of economic rationality, in its capacity as a guide to decision-making, draws its force, at the individual level, from the apparent objectivity of the criteria of judgement provided by calculation. (Gorz, 2011: 127)

Economics then, is assumed to be the best mode of analysis to provide objective, non-ideological, grounds for decisions – the subject is not required to give reasons for a decision, as calculation is the final ground. As we shall see, this methodological assumption – the objectivity of calculation – comes to configure the basis for all spheres of activity within a neoliberal paradigm.<sup>16</sup> It also provides the basis for the Hayekian ratification of Adam Smith’s free play of market forces, specifically the theory of the “invisible hand”, and the proclamation by Milton Friedman that society has no need to wrestle with ethical problems – these are the domain of the

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<sup>16</sup> It is not sufficiently clear whether this rationality *still* holds. While the economic crisis of 2008 was arguably the greatest challenge to orthodox economics, the response was firmly within the “playbook” of neoclassical economic thought – it is however, more and more apparent that this playbook is losing legitimacy. At a time of significant political upheaval in the Anglo-American world, not to mention increased proliferation of radical right- and left-wing movements around Europe and the Middle East, the rise of the economic power of China and the BRIC nations and the shifting sands of political movements centred around on the one hand identity politics and on the other a renewed class analysis drawn from descendants of Marxist thought, we could argue that the ground is set for an overwhelming challenge to the orthodoxy. However, this study falls on the brink of this moment and concerns itself mostly with an analysis of this recent history – a further study might account for what comes next.

individual only (Friedman, 2002: 12). The assumed consequence of this rational (non)guiding force without ideological commitment is to allow the actor to operate freely within a rational field; Friedman was keen to insist that it is only economic freedom that provides the basis for personal freedom. Accordingly, this results in a superior rationality and efficiency. Individuals are ‘free optimally to adjust their actions to the changing situation’ (Gorz, 2011: 128). Planning, or calculation then, does not exist on a systemic or operationally structural level, not at the level of society, but at the level of the individual – in this way, each individual working towards his or her own self-interest will, it is assumed, optimally create the best possible outcome at the level of society. As I shall explore later, this is a deficient mode of analysis that prevents economic thought from thinking the consequences of economic action – precisely at the level of externalities such as pollution.

The economy was the name of the system of valuation that made possible the ‘mathematical measurement of progress, rates of growth, and the depletion of resources’ (Mitchell, 2014: 130). In the age of oil, the economy becomes an important arbiter of capacity, limits of growth and projected profit, seemingly perfectly suited to describe and manage the flows of oil out of the ground. However, as Mitchell notes, the historical phenomena of economic practice became an arbiter in the relation between human activity and natural resources, between culture and nature as it were – ‘economics became [...] a science of money; its object was not the material forces and resources of nature and human labour, but a new space that was opened up between nature on the one side and human society and culture on the other – the-not-quite-natural, no-quite-social space’ (Mitchell, 2014: 132). This space between human society and so called “nature” that the economy occupied importantly allowed economic analysis to remove nature and material resources, transforming it into simply “price”. The machinery of calculation then, attenuated or framed natural resources through the conditions of a means to an end (economic expansion) rather than an end in itself – economics was not just the mediating force between culture and nature, but what allowed culture to utilise nature for its own ends. This mode of valuation has determined for over two centuries an approach to the natural world that finds calculation as the final determinate operation; Foucault identifies this form of rationality as a “realism” that understands the economic as the final arbiter, conditioned by nothing but its own logics (Foucault, 2008: 269). To act in an economic way is to act rationally, without recourse to ideology, and determined only by a cost benefit analysis that calculates return on investment (ROI). Neo-classical economics, importantly, places outside of that analysis any social marginal costs – externalities – that could occur due to economic activity. To attempt to include human

labour or nature in self-regulating economic systems is, as Polanyi asserts, a utopian dream (Polanyi, 2014: 136). To try to include the marginal social cost in economic analysis would be seen to be bound by an ideological commitment, rather than economic rationality and would be seen as incompatible with this form of reasoning.<sup>17</sup> Thus, to be operative, neo-classical analysis must refuse to be bound to anything other than calculation – to bind it to an *idea* would be another form of rationality.

As Ha-Joon Chang suggests, the birth of the term “economics”, as distinct from the previously used term “political economy”, was an attempt to purify the field; ‘the Neoclassical school wanted its analysis to become a pure science, shorn of political (and thus ethical) dimensions that involve subjective value judgements’ (Chang, 2014: 120). As such, economics as a discipline imagined its relation to the real to be one of objective description, but as Donald Mackenzie suggests, economic valuation is performatively linked to the real, and thus ‘*does* things, rather than simply describing [...] an external reality that is not affected by economics’ (Mackenzie, in Mackenzie, Muniesa and Siu, 2007: 54). This analysis challenges the assumption that economics acts as a pure science, understanding instead the mechanisms at play as *productive* of real world effects – one of which is the way the futures market binds us, through the method of discounting (which adjusts for future value), to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. The language of neoliberal economics, as Susan Buck-Morss suggests, is deeply inadequate, ‘the abstract models of which exclude the referential world of human bodies and material nature that appear in the discourse as “externalities”, bracketed out of truth claims by these models’ (Buck-Morss, in Hlavajova and Sheikh, 2017: 161).

Similarly, Charles Hall and Kent Klitgaard (2006) suggest that current economic systems, specifically the neo-classical school, are inadequate for dealing with the sites from which value is originally drawn – ‘one question rarely asked in economics is the relation between energy and any economic activity’ (Hall and Klitgaard, 2006: 5). Identifying the occlusion of the fact that economic activity requires a commensurate increase in the use of energy, Hall and Klitgaard critique current economic modelling as having a limited conception of the world it tries to describe. In contradistinction to this they propose a “biophysical paradigm” for economic thought as a mode of redressing imbalances.

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<sup>17</sup> For a substantial appraisal of what a zero marginal cost society would look like, see Jeremy Rifkin (2015).

Historically, there has been an inadequate theorisation applied to the linkages between economic practice and political theory in neo-classical economics, as Meiksins Wood asserts:

[There has been a] rigid conceptual separation of the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ which has served bourgeois ideology so well ever since the classical economists discovered ‘the economy’ in the abstract and began emptying capitalism of its social and political content.

(Meiksins Wood, 1981: 66)

Concurrent with this separation is the separation between economics, politics and the biophysical world.<sup>18</sup> As Sandy Smith-Nonini suggests, following Hornborg, economic analysis misses the ‘underlying exchange system based on energy that allows complex societies to exist’ (Smith-Nonini, 2016: 57). Identifying the way that global power was shaped by neoliberal ideology and speculative finance, Smith-Nonini’s analysis draws attention to the paucity of academic studies (until recently) that focus on the relation between energetic resources and global finance. The literature in this area has, she suggests, been marginalised, attention instead being placed on debt, overaccumulation, inflation, and capital flows.

So, despite being an inadequate system for analysing the uses of natural resources, the economy (as determined by the rules of the neo-classical school) has been foregrounded in this role. Economics has ‘superseded law as the technical language of administrative power’ (Mitchell, 2013: 137), dominating all fields of activity – even to the extent that academic literature until recently has missed the relation economics has to ecology. Mathematical evaluation, the reduction of all value to price, has reproduced its own logics and structures across other spheres of activity and institutional forms. Specifically, how it determines what is of value in terms of resource value, how it delimits activity, how it accounts for the marginal social costs of this activity, and the way it constructs an idea of the human. Mitchell connects the assembling of the economy to a transition from a coal to an oil based society (ibid.: 139), understanding Keynesian economics as precisely a form of “petroknowledge”. In this analysis Mitchell identifies a recursive relationship between the economic models used to represent the world and the world itself, echoing the work of Mackenzie (2007), signalling the performative nature of economic theory. As such, petro-economic analyses come to determine the functioning of the economy as

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<sup>18</sup> Recent analysis in the field of ecological economics such as the work of Moore (2015) and Hall and Klitgaard (2006) has sought to address this separation.

a whole, articulating a transformative potential in the language used to describe the economy. Price, then, comes to delimit evaluations and thus what is considered worthy of valuation. The conditions given by adhering to economic rationality frame the relationship humanity has to the “natural world”, as such determining how it is treated.

Wendy Brown (2015) identifies this as a new form of political rationality that models all behaviour on economic practice. Drawing on Foucault, she understands this practice as a product of economisation, a process of the expansion of economic rationality into previously non-economic spheres; education, healthcare, and so on. As Mitchell, and others, show, this political project, neoliberalism, relies specifically on an axiomatics of petro-economisation and seeks to determine all behaviour according to its rationality. The emergence of the petro-political world order comes to determine the modes of governance and economic procedures, but those modes and procedures cannot, in turn, adequately account for the source of value extraction – land and labour. The task of this chapter is to understand the construction of these forms of political economy, and how they emerge in the cultural logics we adhere to.

## *2.2 Neoclassical Economic Thought and Neoliberalism*

Among others, David Harvey (2007) and Wolfgang Streeck (2014), have analysed the economic origins of the historical transition to neoliberalism in the 1970s and early 80s, focusing on fiscal crises and “stagflation”, the loss of legitimacy of Keynesian economic policies and the declining productivity of the market. In response to declining wages and increased social demands, governments responded by finding ways to relieve employers of their (costly) social and political responsibilities and introduce restructuring processes. As Streeck asserts,

Beginning in the early 1980s central elements of the social contract of postwar capitalism were gradually revoked or called into question in the societies of the West: politically guaranteed full employment, collective society-wide wage formation negotiated with free trade unions, worker participation at workplace and enterprise level, state control of key industries, a broad public sector with secure employment rights as a model for the private sector, universal social rights protected from competition, tax and income policies that kept inequality within tight limits, and government cyclical and industrial policies to secure steady growth.

(Streeck, 2014: 28)

Market expansion and increased competition was given as the justification for the introduction of these policies both at home and abroad (where the IMF and World Bank were instrumental). The restructuring programmes allowed capitalist countries in the West to ‘shed the responsibility they had taken on in mid-century for growth, full employment, social security and social cohesion, handing the welfare of their citizens more than ever over to the market’ (Streeck, 2014: 31). Despite a focus on the political and economic roots of these axiomatic shifts, political historians, including Harvey and Streeck, and Daniel Stedman-Jones (2014), Jeremy Gilbert (2013), Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2013), among others, reserve a scant few pages for a discussion of the biophysical basis for global economic shifts. It is important then, to understand how not just economic prosperity, but economic logics and functions derived historically from the oil fields. In what follows, then, we must understand how the economic and political conditions described by these historians are isomorphically related to the petro-political. As Gavin Bridge and Philippe Le Billon suggest,

the politics of oil [is] more than a zero-sum game over a fixed and declining resource – a scramble at the end of the “Age of Plenty” for nature’s unclaimed gifts. Instead, the politics of oil concerns the relationships of competition, conflict, and cooperation that define the social and geographical distribution of the various “goods” and “bads” that can be produced through oil

(Bridge and Le Billon, 2013: 3)

I am not, then concerned with understanding the production of the current conjuncture only through an economic lens, but instead with outlining three specific aspects of this conjuncture as it relates to the biophysical world. One, the relation between, or transmutation from, neoclassical economics to neoliberal thought. Two, the modes by which extractive technologies and oil play into the construction of a political and economic orthodoxy. And three, how the activities and institutional formations produced in this era, including specifically the cycle of capitalism known as financialisation, result in associative rationalities and cultural logics. Oil saturates each level of these analyses.

To begin with I shall provide an overview of the literature in the field, giving a somewhat broad description to the terms, focusing specifically on Foucault's reading of neoliberalism through his College de France lectures, and subsequent readings of Foucault from Brown (2015), Gilbert (2013 and 2014) and Mitchell (2014), and historical/critical studies from Fisher (2010), Gorz, (2011), Harvey (2007), Phillip Mirowski (2014 (i) and (ii)), Steadman-Jones (2012) and Streeck (2016). The aim of this overview is to draw out a set of associated logics that we could determine as *proper* to neoliberalism, these can then be applied to the three analyses named above to build an argument that draws together ideas around extractive technologies and ideologies (the petropolitical) and neoliberalism that can later be mobilised to produce the concept of the *petrocultural logics of neoliberalism*.

Gilbert (2013) describes neoliberalism as a 'broad family of ideas' (Gilbert, 2013: 7) originating from the Mont Pelerin Society centred around liberal theorists Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and, proxy architect of the economic restructuring of Chile after the Pinochet coup, Milton Friedman – it is understood in critical scholarship as both a set of ideas *and* as a set of political and economic policies. Policies variously applied in such scenarios as the Chilean experiment under Pinochet, the governments of Thatcher and Reagan in Britain and the US respectively through the 80s and early 90s, IMF and World Bank restructuring programmes globally, through to Blair's New Labour, Obama's presidency, Cameron's "Big Society" and even the current ethno-nationalist variants that adhere to political phenomena such as Trump, Brexit, Johnson, Bolsanaro and so on. The various different variants of neoliberalism associated with different political regimes or institutional activities appear somewhat diverse, but share certain characteristics and themes. Gilbert asks we think of the project in multiple ways,

[A]s an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies, and what Deleuze and Guattari call and "abstract machine"

(Gilbert, 2013: 8)

What in the middle of the twentieth century was seen as the 'scribbles of academics' (Stedman-Jones 2012: 2), emerged as a response to the demise of the post war settlement, which had been 'hastened by a series of catastrophic events: the Vietnam war, the first oil shock of 1973 and the near collapse of industrial relations in Britain' (ibid.: 1). As Friedman (1962/2002) himself

asserted '[o]nly a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around' (Friedman, 1962/2002: xiv). From near obscurity, neoliberal ideas have become the global orthodoxy in less than half a century. This hegemonic achievement has had many supporters and detractors over the years. Diverse as these figures are, however, what is clear, is that economic structural adjustment in line with a suite of policies and a shift in global culture, and a shift in the *relation between* local and global culture, has been in ascendancy and in concert since the mid-70s.

Brown suggests neoliberalism

'is not simply a set of economic policies; it is not only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player'

(Brown, 2015: 39-40)

This hegemonic rationality impacts all forms of life to the extent that market rationality, what Mark Fisher calls a business ontology (Fisher, 2009), seemingly dominates all our actions and behaviours – it is, as Foucault asserts 'a whole way of being and thinking [...] a type of relation' (Foucault, 2004: 218). However, it is important to note with the above that Brown understands the processes and effects of neoliberalism to be *not only* economic. Whilst the economy is an important mode of analysis, we must be sure to keep in mind that a restricted view of this as a problem of extending markets will only limit our understanding. Brown's claim is specifically about how the *values* inherent in market ontologies are extended. Further to this check on our analysis, we should look to the long history of feminist critique that Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako (2015) invoke in their "Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism". Their 'alternative approach focuses on the full range of productive powers and practices through which people constitute diverse livelihoods (and from which capitalist inequalities are captured and generated) as they seek to realize the potentialities of resources, money, labor, and investment' (Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako, 2015). The authors have found that an "economic logic" becomes the driving force in analyses that try to encompass diverse ranges of fields of

study, to the point where '[t]he economic is repeatedly and relentlessly imagined as a singular logic that is derived from a pre-made domain and expresses itself in historical and cultural realities' (ibid.). The modes of analysis that centre capitalism seem to repeat capitalist dreams – they tend to recreate the assumption that “there is no alternative” – thus creating totalising frames through which to view the world. Against this mode, the authors of *Gens* are not invested in a singular origin point, their aim is to provide an understanding of capitalism as ‘formed through the relational performance of productive powers that exceed formal economic models, practices, boundaries, and market devices’ (ibid.). Despite, at times, eliding “the economy” with “capitalism” (they stress how capitalism exceeds economic models, but then replace the word economy with the word capitalism), this analysis is an important check to both Brown’s and Mitchell’s methodologies. *Gens* approaches the problem of capitalism through the lens of anthropological study, asserting that the economic should not, and does not, have dominance over all modes of life – instead, they suggest that capitalism is formed from heterogeneous processes of ‘aligning multiple projects, converting them toward diverse ends that include (but are not limited to) the accumulation and distribution of capital’ (ibid.). As such, we need to be alive to the importance that non-economic analyses have in this particular frame; my thesis is keen, for example, to foreground not just the economic, but the biophysical and cultural aspects of this argument. I claim that the “multiple projects” approach is correct, and in what follows, it is important to remember that the assertion of Foucault’s understanding of the extension of economic interpretations into non-economic domains does not restrict us from articulating the importance of other projects in the formation of the neoliberal conjuncture. In fact, as I will show, it is precisely biophysical and cultural critiques that limit capitalist accumulation within neoliberalism, and come to form equally important spheres of analysis in this thesis. I embark on this process by utilising analyses from multiple sources, not for example by centring a Marxist analysis, but by importing critical perspectives from multiple and variegated discursive fields.

### *2.3 The Economic Individual*

Neoliberal ideology interpellates us not just as consumers, as competitive individuals, but, significantly, as entrepreneurs of ourselves; for Foucault, the theory of human capital provides the ‘possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic’ (Foucault, 2008: 219). It must be remembered here of course that Foucault

has been vital in the historical analysis of multiple ways of approaching the current conjuncture – through sexuality, punishment, madness and so on. So, the centring of the economic in the College de France lecture series is not directly counter to the claims made by the Gens manifesto outlined above. In fact, we could understand the idea of self-entrepreneurship as an adequate formulation of a *non-economic* economic analyses. By asserting the concept of interest, Foucault is not assuming that this is purely economic interest, in fact, it could be classified as social, cultural, sexual and so on; it is only that the logics of economic analysis come to attenuate these particular spheres. As he suggests, ‘interest is the criterion of utility [and] interest is now interests, a complex interplay between individual and collective interests, between social utility and economic profit’ (Foucault, 2008: 44). And further, at length

On the basis of the new governmental reason – and this is the point of separation between the old and the new, between *raison d’Etat* and reason of the least state – government must no longer intervene, and it no longer has a direct hold on things and people; it can only exert a hold, it is only legitimate, founded in law and reason, to intervene, insofar as interest, or interests, the interplay of interests, make a particular individual, thing, good, wealth, or process of interest for individuals, or for the set of individuals, or for the interest of a given individual faced with the interest of all, etcetera. Government is only interested in interests. The new government, the new governmental reason, does not deal with what I would call the things in themselves of governmentality, such as individuals, things, wealth and land. It no longer deals with these things in themselves. It deals with the phenomena of politics, that is to say, interests, which precisely constitute politics and its stakes; it deals with interests, or that respect in which a given individual, thing, wealth, and so on interests other individuals or the collective body of individuals.

(Foucault, 2008: 45)

Under the neoliberal conjuncture all of our choices are assumed to be within the market, such that, as Mirowski (2014: i) amongst others, has analysed, when faced with difficult ethico-political judgements, such as how to best combat the deleterious effects of climate change, we are compelled to make decisions based on a series of seemingly free choices provided by the

market.<sup>19</sup> Stern (2015), despite being an advocate of reimagining the conditions of extractive technologies, still cannot think outside of this paradigm when he calls climate change a “market failure”. His analysis rests on the assumption that this crisis can also be an opportunity – but an opportunity that can provide new markets, new sites of capital accumulation and extraction and so on. Under current rationalities of course, the market becomes the key actor in the process of climate change amelioration; as such, a number of market based instruments (such as carbon tax) have been developed that seek to make small adjustments to ameliorate systemic crises, instead of challenging the system as such. What is true of the analysis at the level of the economy is true at the level of individual. If we adhere to the concept of the competitive individual – which becomes not just the base unit of calculation in liberal economic doctrine, but significantly the sole actor through which responsibility for tackling crises is taken – we understand ethical personhood to be articulated *only* through a market logic. We are obliged to make personal sacrifices/choices so as to “feel” as though we are participating, while, due to the framing of choice through the market, the system itself remains unopposed.

The competitive individual, as Gilbert (2014) asserts, has long been the base unit around which economic systems are designed, and subsequently, under neoliberalism, has come to construct, in interesting ways, the field of the political not just the economic. Gilbert’s study describes how Hobbesian conceptions of society still persist in many political and social institutions. Leviathan politics makes the assumption that no lateral, horizontal bonds exist between members of a society, and the only bonds that exist are vertical ones to the ‘central or superior locus’ (Gilbert, 2014: 50). As he asserts, the fear amongst the liberal elite that collectivity, which in this conceptualisation can only be seen as some form of meta-individual, will turn into mass demagoguery tended towards a suspicion of democratic forms that place too much emphasis on the power of the people. Indeed, as the arch-neoliberal Friedman, while asserting the necessity to fight for individual freedom against the backdrop of fascist collectivities in Europe, demands that ‘collectivist economic planning has [...] interfered with individual freedom’ (Friedman, 2002:11). This fear of collectivity and state intervention in socio-economic policy has become the defining myth, or as Gilbert calls it the ‘popular delusion’

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, that we might ourselves make non-rational decisions (from the point of view of neoclassical economics), and chose to follow other guiding principles, such as a desire to be environmentally friendly, can be theorised in terms of the concept interest, as I start to do below, and continue in more depth in Chapter Four. The important aspect is that neoliberal logics provide us with choices through which to exemplify our interests. For an in-depth discussion about an alternative to the rational self-interest argument put forward by neoclassicism, see Brian Massumi (2015).

(Gilbert, 2014: 53), of our times. However, as we shall note later, state intervention, while being abjured in the popular rhetoric is an intrinsic part of the neoliberal conjuncture, forming one of the key differences between classical liberal and neoliberal political economy.

Where the theory of the competitive individual of classical liberalism as *homo economicus* focuses on the rational behaviour of isolated actors in relation to capital through the method of the market where *homo economicus* is a partner in an exchange, Foucault (2014) understands recent formulations of *homo economicus* through the lens of human capital to understand that the basic element of neoliberal economic analysis is not the individual, but the *enterprise*. The concept of competitive individualism found in Hobbes then, is combined with notions of entrepreneurship, to give us the “entrepreneur of the self”; the neoliberal subject operates not as a rational, bounded economic individual, but as an enterprise-unit that is concerned with increasing his/her interest (Foucault, 2010: 225). This entrepreneur of the self becomes a source of his/her own earnings, ‘he produces his own satisfaction’ (ibid.: 226). As such, the neoliberal subject as entrepreneur of the self is invested in an “environment” within which he/she subsists – governmentality, or the conduct of conducts, is concerned primarily with orchestrating this environment. Under classical liberalism the individual is left alone to pursue his/her own rational decisions, so that it ‘converges spontaneously with the interest of others’ (ibid.: 227). The neoliberal subject, instead is a figure

who responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment, appears precisely as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment. *Homo economicus* is someone who is eminently governable. From being the intangible partner of laissez-faire, *homo economicus* now becomes the correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables  
(Foucault, 2010: 270-1)

The Foucauldian conception here is instructive; if *homo economicus* is to increase their value, or interest, they must do so within the frame described above: the competitive free market. Their worth is tied precisely to their own governance because they respond to modifications in their environment. The neoliberal subject is one intrinsically intervened upon by governmentality whilst concurrently being assured their freedoms are being upheld through the popular delusion of the classical liberal concept of *homo economicus*. And, thus, judges their own value in direct

relation to these rationalities. It is precisely in this context that Foucault asserts that this subject was ‘already a certain type of subject who precisely enabled an art of government to be determined according to the principle of economy’ (Foucault, 2010.: 271).

As such, every activity or personal ability comes into the process of the art of governance, be it economic or not, and determine the subject’s current or future investability; abilities or qualities thus become elements in the formation of human capital that produce both interest and income (either in the moment or due to future returns on investment). We can understand then, displays of abilities or qualities to be *calls for investment*; we advertise our own enterprise-units as good returns on investments. Thus, virtuous actions, such as those performed seemingly in the service of climate disaster amelioration, are seen not as *only* ethically determined actions, but as part and parcel of our image as enterprise-units – we must be *seen* to be environmentally concerned; it is part of a *feeling* that articulates us as personally responsible for systemic crises. It is this *visibility*, conditioned by our own interest in personal investment that comes to build a picture of us as virtuous beings – it is important to indicate our virtue to other enterprise-units so they might invest their scarce resources in our enterprises – be this in time, money, love, attention or otherwise. As we shall discuss in chapter four, this display of virtue as self-marketization is a fundamental axiom of contemporary socio-cultural conditions. The very structure of neoliberal virtue then is bound to conditions of advertising – morality must be publicly performed if it is to be considered a “good investment”. As Chapter Four will discuss, we are not just people who recycle but “recycling-beings”, the ethical consumer performs their ethical nature as a mode of personal advertising. The concept of neoliberal virtue relies precisely on the construction of neoliberal subjectivity as one of self-entrepreneurship (Foucault), which in turn is conditioned by the economic ideologies inherited from the neoclassical school. As such, we must attend to the transmutation of neoclassical economics into neoliberalism.

As Mirowski (2014(i)) asserts, the orthodoxy of neoclassical economics, while challenged in popular media in recent years, has continued, and indeed, strengthened its grip on economic thought since the crisis of 2007/2008. At a moment when the orthodox would seem to be failing, neoclassical economists doubled down on their belief in the correctness of their theories. For Mirowski (2014), this, as we can understand from Brown (2015), ratifies the Foucauldian conception of economisation where economic rationality impinges on everyday life. As the former suggests, ‘card-carrying neoclassical economists come convinced they possess a Theory of Everything at the End of History, and they apply their so-called economic approach to

everything great and small under the sun' (Mirowski 2014 (i): 23). While neoclassical economics should be thought of separately to neoliberalism, Mirowski asserts some similarities. Certainly, neoclassical economics as a theory and a practice predates the emergence and instrumentation of the collection of ideas from the Mont Pelerin Society in the middle of the twentieth century. However, it is with neoliberalism that we could argue that the economic form found its most vital, if not purest expression. Specifically, *how* the logics of neoclassicism get taken up in the current conjuncture is important, and to understand this we must understand how liberalism shifted into its "neo-" variant.

Andre Gorz (2011) understands the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism through a specific formulation. Precisely because, as he suggests, the limits of economic rationality are not naturally determined, but must be 'imposed from the outside' through 'value judgements', economic rationality is in truth an ideological formulation (Gorz, 2011: 127). As such, we must understand the ratification of economics into the construction of neoliberal logic as one of imposition by political will, enforced by institutional support and cultural power. Economic rationality is *not necessary*, but contingent on the value judgements and ethical decisions by a series of political and non-political actors over capitalism's lifespan. Gorz's formulation relies on two separate lines of argumentation; 'an economic line of argument in favour of free play of "market forces", and an ideological line of argument in favour of freedom of enterprise which is said to "mobilize the creative energies of individuals for society"' (Gorz, 2011: 128). The first line of argumentation is, synthesising Hayek's work on Adam Smith, the claim that economically liberal societies must allow all rational economic actors to determine their own actions free from social or moral concern for the collective. Politics thus, is abdicated by economics – the scenario described above in Foucault's understanding of *homo economicus* under the conditions of liberalism. This is the nature of what Gorz terms "economic thought". Distinct from this notion of economic thought, is the concept of "economic ideology". In this argument, 'entrepreneurs are creators of society and of culture' (Gorz, 2011: 129), their activity is one of discovery and innovation – they mobilise themselves in service of society, precisely so as to form society, axiomatically, in their own image. As Gorz suggests, 'one should no longer seek to integrate the economy into society but, on the contrary, to "develop policies which integrate society into the economy", that is [...] to make society conform to the requirements of economic rationality' (ibid.). We can recall the work of both Polanyi and Foucault in this formulation, and Gorz is keen to situate his analysis in relation to the latter, who's work allows him to understand how political intervention has superseded *laissez faire* policies to provide the best possible grounds for capitalism to proceed

successfully. Without using the name, Gorz is describing the conditions of neoliberalism, whereby economic activity is promoted by state intervention, even, as he suggests forms of welfarism, or ethical supports, that seek to create ‘enclaves in the heart of economic rationality’ guaranteeing the good running of capitalism (ibid.: 131).

The transmutation of neoclassical economic rationality into neoliberal ideology is, to use Gorz’s analysis, the ratification of economic rationality at the level of governmentality. Precisely to reform the latter in line with the demands of the former (and subsequently use the latter to enforce the former). So, if we take seriously the Foucauldian analysis that Brown reiterates, and the understanding of transformation that Gorz’s work allows us to think, then the expansion of the economic into previously non-economic domains can be understood through the concept of the axiomatic as a mode of *expansion of axiomatics*, not *just* the extension of logics. Which is to say, it reformulates everything in its own image, economic rationality thus becomes the law by which we ought to live. The foundational axiom of the economic is normative in this sense, it applies to the system *and* the individual. This should be fully understood as a procedure that conforms to the logics of the axiomatic as described in the introduction; expansion of economic rationalities into the position of hegemonic ideology is precisely a product of axiomatic forcing.<sup>20</sup>

According to Brown (2005 and 2015), neoliberalism does not assume that the economisation of life occurs naturally (in counter distinction from classical liberals who assumed that *laissez faire* policies would produce the best possible situation for society if individuals and firms were left alone), instead, institutions are implicated in the production of normative and constructivist policies that provide rewards for enacting the vision and punitive measures for refusing to (Brown, 2005: 40). Political intervention and orchestration is required to invent conditions for the optimum environment for economic rationality to thrive. These interventional strategies are not restricted to the realm of politics, of course, but are found in many institutions – schools, universities, law, healthcare, and so on, not to mention the firms and organisations that make up global capitalism. The state becomes ‘animated by market rationality’ Brown asserts,

not simply profitability but a generalized calculation of cost and benefit becomes the measure of all state practices. Political discourse on all matters is framed in

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed analysis of the concept of “forcing” see Badiou (2007), Fraser (2006) or Hallward (2003): 135-39. As Hallward asserts ‘[t]he last major step or component of a truth procedure is the operation whereby a truth changes the situation in which it is included, so as to impose of “force” its recognition in a transformed version of that situation’ (Hallward, 2003: 135).

entrepreneurial terms; *the state must not simply concern itself with the market but think and behave like a market actor across all of its functions, including law.*

(Brown, 2005: 42)

As Brown asserts, the market becomes the regulative principle of the state and society in three ways: the state responds to the needs of the market through monetary or fiscal policy, immigration policy, treatment of criminals; the state must behave like a market actor, fostering entrepreneurial activity; and thirdly, the health and growth of the economy is the sole justification basis for state legitimacy and basis for action.

In these scenarios political will to, for example counteract the critical exhaustion of the atmosphere, ecosystems and people, is subsumed under economic rubrics; the battle to take much needed measures against the oil industries will always be fought against those that demand increased energy return on investment (EROI). And to complicate matters, as we have seen, there is a coterminous and recursive relation between the petroleum industry and the growth of the mode of analysis that undergirds this specific formulation and political sequence. The economy itself, because of its assumed rational objectivity is deemed the most viable arbiter of value, however, because this assumption is based on a founding myth, economic analysis has failed to provide adequate care for what it deems as externalities. An assumption that has critical consequences, not least for the planetary biosphere. The neoliberal subject in turn both intersects with, and is culpable for, the creation of this conjuncture; this should be understood as a recursive relation whereby the emergence of one is dependent on the emergence of the other.<sup>21</sup> Attenuated through a logic of economisation both humans and biophysical resources are articulated as capital investment in various ways. And, importantly, the construction of political commitment is bound up with the problematic notions of ethical personhood and neoliberal virtue. Real political commitment is, of course, in evidence in, for example, the meeting of the Conference of Parties. However, we should be very wary of assuming that a growing admission by political elites that human activity, especially that of burning fuels for energy, is detrimental to the planetary environment will usher in a new age of environmentalism, and usher out the Age of Oil. We need to be attentive to the ways in which the logics described in this thesis work paradoxically to maintain power relations despite their surface level assertions to do otherwise.

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to insist here that I do not assume that the individual subject itself is to blame for the situation they find themselves in, however, when we understand these ideas we do so through a specific *frame*, suggesting that power is articulated on and through subjects – that subjects engage in varying degrees of complicity with the modes of governance we find ourselves in.

The economisation of life, the increased relevance of markets, and the transmutation of neoclassical economic thought into neoliberal rationality is to be understood through the frame of the biophysical basis for these procedures. Which is to say, we must rethink the preceding analyses through the lens of the petropolitical; all economic activity relies precisely on its ability to withdraw value from land and labour, as Polanyi (2001) asserts, and to externalise the run off. But furthermore, we must understand the formation of economic rationality (as described by Brown), as a petroeconomic rationality. The theory of human capital, for example, as I shall explore further in Chapter Four, is to be interpreted as a question of EROI, whereby not only is economic and personal value withdrawn based on an expenditure of biophysical energy, but that the most predominant frame through which “goodness” is performed is in relation to the environment. Therefore, it is not enough to make *only* economic claims about the nature of life, but we must extend these claims backwards to the biophysical world from which value is withdrawn, and forwards to the biophysical world in which the outcomes of economic activity will be deposited. It is only through an understanding of this as a long chain of extraction, exploitation and expulsion that we can come to terms with the global crises we’re living through.

#### *2.4 Petro-alchemy*

Today, world oil demand outstrips supply by several million barrels per day (Weszkalnys, 2013), prompting a frantic scramble for further extraction sites and expansion into unconventional methods such as oil sands and fracking, but also an increased pressure to explore alternative sources of energy. First presented in 1956, Hubbert Peak Theory (more commonly known as Peak Oil), named after American geophysicist M. King Hubbert, names this natural limit to economic growth based on oil production. As I discussed in the previous Chapter, similar claims around natural limits were ratified with the publication of the 1972 book *Limits to Growth*, a pessimistic calculation of the future prospects of a population reliant on the energy won from extractive technologies. Combined with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, these concepts have come to shape aspects of an environmental movement that looks to limit economic exploitation of the planet. Critical race theorists, such as Vergès (in Johnson and Lubin, 2017), or eco-feminists, Mies and Shiva (2014) for example, saw these concerns intersectionally, understanding that the populations most likely to be heavily affected by the downstream externalities of the oil industry were going to be women, people of colour and those

on or below the poverty line. Recent events, too numerous to name here, but including natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, the decimation of natural habitats and fishing stocks by the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010 and the precarious Ganges Delta (a regular flash point of natural disasters as sea levels rise and tropical storms increase in frequency) confirm this analysis – the poorest populations are least protected, the last to receive aid and often live nearest to sites of disaster or precarious locations (or the very sites of extraction, transportation and processing – proper names that have appeared in our lexicon recently such as Flint, Alberta or Dakota index the sites where populations are directly affected by extractive activities). In Chapter Five I discuss how notions of humanness can attribute value to certain sites and populations but not to others, thus providing adequate legitimation for neo-colonial extractive operations along racial lines.

While compound economic growth was radically brought into question in the 1960s and 70s, and recent events (the 2008 economic crisis for example) ratify claims made during this period, ‘traditional economic theory suggests that the problem represented by the existence of biophysical constraints on the expansion of the global economy will be solved by the markets’ (Alcott, Polimeni, Giampietro and Mayumi, 2008: 2). Consequently, a “business as usual” model has held sway over our political imaginations the last forty years, relying on both technological magic bullets and market solutions to solve these issues. Despite the overwhelming evidence that fossil fuel use leads to ratcheting ecological degradation, the political impetus to find solutions to these problems has stalled. Precisely because the rewards are so high, because the payoff is so great, and the *narratives are so strong*, energy is still drawn from petrochemical compounds found deep below the surface of the earth. Bound to a form of petropolitical epistemology, the consequences are huge.

However, the International Energy Agency reports that changes are being made to the make-up of the economies of resource extraction. With the necessity to supply a global network with constant (and increasing) energy, plastic and chemical goods, the global energy outlook will be radically transformed over the next few decades. According to the International Energy Agency, growth globally in the renewable sector has increased, with a greater political commitment, lead by China, to low carbon fuels (IEA). This growth will have an impact on demand for, and supply of, fossil fuels. However, with the US accounting for ‘80% of the increase in global oil supply to 2025 and maintaining near-term downward pressure on prices’(IEA), the era of oil is *far from over*. Importantly, the majority of this oil will come from unconventional sources. The story of

contemporary American oil interests has a long heritage; recent presidencies have, in their own way, been committed to economic expansion in line with their predecessors, despite their acknowledgement or otherwise of COP agreements. The American ideology of personal liberty was not born with the discovery of oil, but the former certainly emerges in the latter.

This section and the next will explore the growing influence petroleum has over the world political economy, understanding this as a transformation, ushering in an age unlike any other before it, but also a continuation of certain previous logics. What is unique about the Second Age of Oil is the nature of how this political economy emerged in response to ecocritical counter narratives. I shall claim that the transformation from oil into money is so productive, the narrative attached to it so pervasive, and the ideology so naturalised that counter narratives have been, so far, not only inadequate, but mobilised (in a counter-revolutionary manner) against their proponents' own interests. While, confidence in the power of progress is ideologically intoxicating, preventing the pursuit of alternative economic models (Alcott, Polimeni, Giampietro and Mayumi, 2008: 2), and the belief in perpetual economic growth suits those with the most to gain from that growth, there has been a need to identify, undermine and indeed, exploit, critical narratives, dissenting voices and the production of alternatives. The way this occurs in the latter part of the twentieth century is important to the analysis of this period.

Discussing the global economic crisis precipitated by the events of 2007, Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan (2011) identify a fear that besets all capitalists, a fear of "losing their grip" when systemic crises threaten the existence of their profit base. This fear manifests in the well-founded belief that their power has increased to approach its asymptote – and, as capitalism is grounded in the future, they have 'good reason to fear that, from now on, the most likely trajectory of this power will not be up, but down' (Bichler and Nitzan, 2011: 21). Whilst not concerning the oil industry, this analysis could certainly be applied to it – oil extraction has either reached its limit, or in response to global political pressure a significant proportion of it must be "left in the ground" as stranded assets, thus oil industrialists' profits have reached their asymptote. In response, capital looks to two courses of action; one, as Bichler and Nitzan put it '[capitalists] realize that the only way to further increase their distributional power is to apply an even greater dose of violence' (ibid.: 48); or two, as I shall explore later in this thesis, through a strategy of *marketing*. It is interesting to note that the increased capitalisation of oil futures is concurrent with the approaching asymptote of oil supply; one could argue that this financialisation is a form of violence meted out against the future – tying us into an economic promise to provide and burn

more and more fuel to meet the inalienable demands of finance capital.<sup>22</sup> As Suhail Malik asserts, ‘the derivatives markets presents a *systemic* risk to national and world economies’ (Malik, 2014: 629), as such, the exposure to risk that dominates the derivatives market puts not just financial transactions, but livelihoods in danger. The derivatives market is structured around trade not on commodities, as Mackenzie suggests, but on value derived from contracts between two parties that ‘derive their value from the level of the index and thus permits what might be called “virtual ownership” of large blocks of stocks’ (Mackenzie, 2006: 4). According to Jameson, this stage of capitalist accumulation is a virus and its development an epidemic of epidemics. Financialisation occurs at the very point that productive capital gives out – when the value of a commodity is no longer reasonably extractable in conventional terms and capital must ‘jostl[e] for more intense profitability’ (Jameson, 1997: 251). As he suggests:

During its cycles capital exhausts its returns in the new national and international capitalist zone and seeks to die and be reborn in some "higher" incarnation, a vaster and immeasurably more productive one, in which it is fated to live through again the three fundamental stages: its implantation, its productive development, and its financial or speculative final stage.

(Jameson, 1997: 251)

So, the financialisation of the oil sector, first occurring in any meaningful way during the 1970s and 80s, is a result of the necessity to capitalise on a market that is losing its capacity for value extraction in the face of growing public animosity towards the industry and the realisation that assets won’t be so easily realised in the future – the end of cheap nature (Moore, 2015). As Smith-Nonini suggests, ‘the 1970-1 peak and subsequent decline of petroleum production in the United States should be seen as a prime cause of the rise of deficit financing in the neoliberal era’ (2016: 57). Her assertion is that the rise and spread of global finance is best understood in relation to the geopolitics of oil. Specifically, the extension of debt financing is seen as a response to the loss of US global power and legitimacy in the wake of the 1970s oil shocks. Restoring profitability to multinational corporations, ‘leveraged deregulation, privatisation and outsourcing of heavy industry to low-wage countries’ (ibid.: 58), became the preferred strategy of neoliberal restructuring. These geopolitical measures allowed the US to maintain a strong

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<sup>22</sup> For an extended discussion of the violent nature of finance see Marazzi (2011), for an analysis of the relation between financialisation and time see Esposito (2011) who understands finance capital as a process of binding the future in the trading of risk.

currency and political influence over the global south, despite losing its domestic oil advantage. Precisely because global oil prices surged after the 1973 crisis, resource constraints were being reached and the US had lost global dominance in oil production, there was a necessity to find ways to resist the downward profitability of the sector. Declining energy return on investment (EROI) required countermeasures. These came in multiple forms, not least the growth of the financial sector. As suggested above, this is characterised as a violence directed towards the future. As Jason W. Moore (2015) indicates, financialisation on oil commodities has increased over the last few decades in line with rising exploration and production costs; due to rising marginal costs, the production of a barrel of oil rose tenfold between 1991 and 2007 (Moore, 2015: 148). The rising attractiveness of financial speculation over investment in the “real” economy resulted in ‘protracted “underinvestment” in the extractive apparatus proper’ (ibid.). Global oil markets responded to the increased financialisation of the oil industry by increased price and market volatility. As Moore suggests, ‘financial activities are more profitable than investing in exploration and extraction, [they render] the latter insufficiently profitable, an effect homologous to (and reinforcing) the rising costs of production stemming from depletion’ (ibid.: 149). The logic of financialisation moreover, demands varieties of cost cutting – many of which have left the drilling and production apparatus dangerously under-maintained. Financialisation, therefore, marks not only the moment of the attempt to reverse the declining productivity of the industry – “delaying the crisis”, as Streeck (2014) suggests when discussing debt financing – but the increased production of risk. As a countermeasure to declining profits, it inscribes a form of violence unequally on proceeding generations whose planetary ecosystem suffers.

The second countermeasure took the form of the production of a narrative to resist the *idea* of loss of EROI. Precisely because financial markets rely on confidence, equally necessary to counteract this exhaustion of profitability is the need to build a narrative that “defangs” the burgeoning ecocritique and asserts the continued productivity of the global petroleum industry. The practice of marketing is precisely this narrative production.

Proximate to the controversially proposed start of the geological era of the Anthropocene, the story of The Second Age of Oil began in the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Tied to explosive, fossil fuel driven economic expansion on the one hand and a counter movement exemplified by the green or environmental agenda on the other, this age is marked by the

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<sup>23</sup> For an in-depth discussion about the “Golden Spike” of the Anthropocene see Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017, Northcott 2013,

necessity to occlude the deleterious effects of economic activity via techniques of marketing and campaigning. The necessity of this occlusion has increased in recent years as publics have become more aware of the impact of releasing carbon into the atmosphere, however, this technique of governance finds its roots in the tradition of Western liberalism. Explored in more detail in Chapter Four, this strategy is a change by degree rather than one of kind, what is significantly different from before is not the necessity to paper over the downstream externalities, but the *methods* by which this is performed. The economic pressure to resist the downward trajectory of the rate of profit has never been so prominent than with the hydrocarbon industries. The loss of legitimacy for fossil fuel extraction heralded by an increased public acceptance of green narratives – ironically, written, in part, by oil industrialists of the 1970s in response to the growing nuclear power industries (Engdahl, 2004) – combined with the increased scarcity of supply, is a threat to the very profitability of the sector. A profitability, that in previous decades was more easily given an alibi by a social contract with the public that included increased abundance and personal freedoms; a profitability won on the back of a blindness to exploitation and extraction, and significantly a blindness to the limits of the capacity to expand. As that abundance and freedom has been funnelled upwards, to be held in the hands of a smaller and smaller population, and the blindness is somewhat clearing, the social contract is dissolving. In a later work, it may be useful to explore how the unbinding of this contract might have lead, in part, to the various political crises of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But for now, I will explore the making (and subsequent re-making) of this contract as it is written by oil, and precisely how the narrative of economic expansion, expansion underwritten by the hydrocarbon industries, both constructs a particular form of global geopolitics and creates a socio-cultural *necessity* for exploitation and extraction. Indeed, as Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz suggest, an understanding of the Earth as a system, where economic and ecological concerns are entwined, is key to any contemporary analysis (2017: 20). To the extent that these two fields are entwined, we should think of the current cycle of financialised capitalism as intrinsically, even necessarily, tied to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. And further, the *exorbitant, accelerated* burning of non-renewable energy drawn from deep below the surface of the Earth as only possible, or probable, because of the fact of the economic school of thought known as neo-classicism and the concurrent arrangement of ideas and cultural tropes that arise in the West in the last forty years; neoliberalism. To this end, we could say that the emergence of something like neoliberalism is only likely because of a combination of Anglo-American global interests and the state of the global oil industries and markets in the 1970s. And, concurrently the modes of analysis that arose with the emergence of the economy calculates the Earth as

commodity not just for exploitation through extraction and burning, but as part of an asset class from which financial value can be derived on a speculative stock market. As such, this ties future extraction into the very running of the economy itself to the extent that reducing trade has disastrous knock on effects at a civilizational level (Di Muzio, 2015). It is precisely this condition that determines the era – the global financial markets’ reliance on oil as a commodity only occurs after the Nixon shock of 1971 that cancelled the direct translatability of dollar to gold – thus allowing dollar convertability to be tied to oil reserves. And, as Engdahl, Mitchell and Smith-Nonini assert, it is the oil crisis of 1973 and the subsequent vast expansion of the Anglo-American money markets, that ushered in a new age of financialisation. If we are to follow the analysis presented in the introduction, the oil industry does not just intrude into every element of our lives, but *reforms* them axiomatically. Which is to say inscribes into the logics of our current socio-political realm its own sets of conditions, norms and cultural articulations. Oil here comes to form and reform the models of realisation that provide the ground for the possible, structuring what is realisable within a particular domain. As we shall see in the next section, the *fact of entanglement* between the social, economic, political and biophysical domains restricts what political options are available to us – we cannot, for example, just delink our current economic system from the burning of fossil fuels by fiat. This is how axiomatics operate, as regulative statements about the functioning proper of the system.

## 2.5 Oil and Civilisation

Like so many studies in recent years that deal with the relation between the extraction and trade of fossil fuels and politics (Argyrou, 2005; Bridge and Le Billon, 2013; Collier, 2010; Hall and Klitgaard, 2012; Klein; 2015; Stern, 2015), Tim Di Muzio’s *Carbon Capitalism* begins with a warning. In both 2005 and 2007, former high-ranking government officials in Washington modelled the global reaction to a hypothetical 4% reduction of the world oil market; the resulting modelled crisis saw an increase from \$58 per barrel to \$161. The “Oil Shockwave” war game predicted massive socio-economic turmoil as a result of this drastic spike, scenarios such as the reintroduction of the draft, increased unemployment and petrol rationing were countenanced as possible outcomes alongside ratcheting war in the Middle East (Di Muzio, 2015: 1). The lesson from this? The global oil trade and the economy are so intrinsically interwoven that any change in the former has massive implications in the latter, but furthermore, because our very way of life is entangled in the economy, the knock-on effects of oil price changes have serious

socio-political and security implications. This is at the heart of Di Muzio's study; the scale and scope of the crisis would be so significant as to affect us at a "civilisational" level. Entire populations rely so heavily on fossil fuels that price increases, such as those seen in the 1970s, bring into sharp focus the geophysical basis of our global economy (and the economic basis of our social world). This three-part relation between the social, the economic and the geophysical realms is broadly ignored in neo-classical and neoliberal economic literature.

As we have seen, other writers have addressed this deficit in the literature. Moore (2015) describes the dualism inherent in this form of irrationality – the dualism between Nature and Culture, whereby each exists as an independent realm – as inherently wrongheaded. For Moore 'capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is a way of *organising nature*' (Moore, 2015: 2, italics in original). Capitalism exists not as an independent realm on the surface of a biophysical world, that withdraws value from that world, but as an intrinsic world making activity – economics and ecology are intertwined so significantly they cannot be disentangled. The perceptual lie neoclassical economics tells us is that capital accumulation can exist separately from the ecological resources that wealth is accumulated from. Hall and Klitgaard (2012) address a similar issue, suggesting that a question that rarely gets asked in economics is about the relation between energy and economic activity. Their answer to this question is a thoroughgoing redesign of the field of economics to include, as they call it, a biophysical-based paradigm.

Di Muzio conceptually articulates the source of global economic power as fossil fuels; his signal difference with Moore's, Hall and Klitgaard's and Mitchell's work is his reliance on the "Capital as Power" thesis proposed by Bichler and Nitzan (2009). The central claim in Bichler and Nitzan is that capitalism should be conceived not as a narrow economic entity or a mode of production, but as a symbolic quantification of power. Capital is thought of as commodified differential power, where accumulation becomes the accumulation of differential wealth (and thus power). In this way investors and capitalists gain relative power over others through differential market capitalisation. As Di Muzio notes, the oil and gas industries are the largest in the world in terms of capitalisation, thus also of relative power. Since wealth is a matter of creative potential to alter social reality through the exercise of differential power, the extractive industries are conceptualised as the dominant organisational power. This marks Di Muzio's original contribution to the field, a new account of globalisation from the perspective of the Capital as Power thesis; what he calls the energy-capitalisation-social reproduction nexus. In this study, the

production and reproduction of social reality is linked, via market capitalisation, to the capacity to draw value from the earth.

This new theory of globalisation attempts to explain the rise and fall of carbon capitalism and a civilisation based on the petro-market, making a series of arguments that place the importance of energy at the forefront of global economic power. This is a “counter-history” to the dominant narratives that think of the rise of capitalism as ‘unproblematic, autogenerated and, on balance, of benefit to most of humanity – all the while ignoring the biospheric consequences of human activities’ (Di Muzio, 2015: 8). This attempt to construct an economic theory that accounts for the marginal social costs of its activity rests on seven interconnected arguments:

- Civilisation is unequally and transitionally based on fossil fuel extraction and consumption, which means that current forms of social reproduction are both historically unique and, crucially, non-sustainable. Because our civilisation is so heavily reliant on (predominantly) oil there will come a point where civilisation won’t be able to reproduce itself in its current form. As such, there is a limit to civilisation as it exists now.

- Without the discovery and use of fossil fuels the extent of capitalisation would have remained severely limited. Because we live in a period of high-energy consumption, what Di Muzio calls the carbonisation of everyday life, the hierarchical forms of world order are the result of exploiting and consuming fossil fuels. This pursuit of politics through the economic function of resource exploitation is an imposition from above, and precisely one that oppresses the lower classes through differential accumulation.

- The next two claims are epistemological; we need an expanded understanding of both the way energy has been monetised (and precisely how money is created) and how energy is a key factor in the emergence of power. Here modern money must be understood as capitalist credit money – debt – whereby banks capitalise on borrower’s capacity (or not) to repay loans with interest, this capacity relies on their ability to increase their own income through activity that relies on high energy usage. Because this is both socially unjust and dangerous on a finite planet, Di Muzio suggests that any significant post-carbon economics must include monetary reform in its agenda. The argument about power runs as follows: a political space that tries to safeguard its public is in contradiction to the accumulation of capital, systemic chaos and war are almost inevitable results of this contradiction, and from this, new hegemony are prone to emerge.

- The final three arguments rest on the power of petro-markets to create the world order and what challenges face us in their declining years. Whilst this, in another author's hands, may be seen as a hopeful moment – a world beyond petro-capitalism – Di Muzio is here right to remain alert to the looming crises of social reproduction. Militarised conflict, which accounts for a large proportion of the petro-market, is bound to increase, and as such so is demand for oil – holding short of doom-laden predictions, the ratcheting nature of this vicious cycle is at the forefront of the argument.

The bulk of the study is structured around an explication of these main arguments, taking a detour through meticulously researched histories of English and American contexts (slavery, war for independence, industrialisation) to make the significant claim that powerful logics have worked to construct carbon capitalism rather than it obtaining necessarily. Things could have been otherwise; the rich and powerful applied, and continue to apply, downward pressure on populations to increase their differential wealth through uneven capitalisation on natural resources, through taxation, economic policies and austerity. These activities can no longer continue at the same rate as before if we wish to live in a broadly agreeable biophysical world. If economic activity continues to capitalise on the earth in such energy-intensive modes, the irrevocable alteration of our world will result in crises of social reproduction.

Di Muzio understands the world order as reflexively produced by its entangled relation with the petro-market, hierarchical because of radically unequal access to fossil fuels, and centuries of domination by the West. Petro-market civilisation is 'an historical and contradictory pattern of civilizational order whose social reproduction is founded upon non-renewable fossil fuels, mediated by the price mechanism of the market and dominated by the logic of differential accumulation' (Di Muzio, 2015: 5). While the relation between civilisation and the petro-market is given significant attention, the idea of civilisation itself remains under theorised. As such we are left with a broad argument, attributed to Jared Diamond, of how elites perform their wealth accumulating activities in direct opposition to the broader interests of the rest of society (ibid.: 170). Despite being an interesting mode of analysis, this still leaves open the question of how Di Muzio understands "civilisation" as such. In other studies carbonisation is linked variously to democracy, capitalism, industrialisation, economic growth, modernisation, but a link to civilisation as such is peculiar to Di Muzio. Furthermore, this link threatens to undermine the specificity of his argument, as the civilisational order is not usually directly attached to market

capitalisation. Instead, we have to make an historical distinction between civilisation as such, as an historical condition, and the growth of the petro-market in the late 1800s.

An argument that draws a continuity between the petroleum age and the previous age (what Di Muzio distinguishes as the “age of efflorescence”), is put forward by Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff in their essay for the Energy & Society Special Issue of TCS (2014). In this essay, the human use of fire is given prominent position in the history of human activity, as such pyrotechnology is seen as the unifying condition of historical growth within a broader economy. There is a combustion centred analysis, and one that understands the petroleum age as part of a longer process of the shaping of energy flows. Channelling Bataille, Clarke and Yusoff, understand the movement of energy as the site of connection between human social life and the rest of the solar system (Clarke and Yusoff, 2014: 205). Fire itself is the linkage between the human and the cosmos, between the intimate and the monstrous. It is part of the long history of human activity that shaped our lives, and continues to do so today through the exploitation of fossil fuels.

One could theorise the condition of civilisation through Roland Robertson’s essay *Civilization* (2006), where he attenuates a reading of Norbert Elias’ work through both Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* and Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilization*. Here, Robertson makes a clear distinction between civilisation as a sociocultural complex on the one hand, and as a process on the other. Not only did civilisation become a standard of behaviour – to be more or less civilised – but as project of civilising other races (where “barbarian” becomes an antonym for civilised). Robertson suggests that civilisation has been considered ‘as an aspect of Western imperialist gaze, relating to the subjectivizing [sic] project of “mission civilisatrice”’ (Robertson, 2006: 422), and is intrinsically linked to the theme of imperialism. While his analysis of the pursuit of political power via economic means, precisely capitalisation on petro-markets, understands in some detail the complex, hierarchical nature of the global order, if Di Muzio were able to understand his petro-market civilisation through Robertson’s frame, he could theorise the complex processual nature of the petro-market as a dominating Western force continuous with other such imperial projects. As is, the term civilisation without the hyphenated “petro” modifier doesn’t appear in this study and receives less attention than it should.

What a culture does with its energy is an important question when discussing the socio-cultural implications of energy production. Elizabeth Shove and Gordon Walker (2014) ask the question

of energy utilisation, suggesting that studies often take the societal “need” for energy for granted (Shove and Walker, 2014: 41). Instead, their work seeks to understand the linkage between energy supply and demand as part of social practice. What drives the exploration for and extraction of fossil fuels, especially when the task is so expensive, and often so dangerous? Di Muzio would conclude it is the drive for differential accumulation and therefore power by a small number of capitalists, whereas Shove and Walker urge us to think more broadly about energy demand at the level of the socio-cultural. Whether the economy drives the energy system or vice versa, the authors contend that importantly it is social practice that defines an emergent society. What this means then, is energy is seen as an ingredient of the complex make up of societies, driven by the practice of the social at the level of material and normative commonality (ibid.: 46). To the authors, energy cannot be regarded as a privileged driver of practice, but that the practice instead produces demand for energy. Without certain social practices, there would be no need for energy (ibid.: 49). However, for Di Muzio, petro-market capitalisation exists primarily as a motor for the increase in private profit rather than as a result of demands from social practice. While they do intersect, while the socio-cultural conditions of our globalised world are preconditioned to run off fossil fuel and inherently reflexively engage with the exploitation of the “natural” world, at root market capitalisation is a matter of increasing market share, and as such is a matter of supply rather than demand. At root, Di Muzio’s study seeks to correct those analyses that would place blame at the level of the social, instead, focusing his attention on the powerful actors and their desire to increase differential accumulation. It is for this reason his analysis is, in my view, most adequate here.

Di Muzio asks whether technology could keep humanity on the course of increased consumption and economic growth, or whether our desires for lifestyles commensurate with those we’ve grown accustomed to are inherently antithetical to the climate stability of our biosphere. Here it seems important to stress that while increased standards of living and mass democratisation historically occurred in correlation to a mass carbonisation, the linkage between growth and carbon could be unbound. The world beyond carbon capitalism looks very different from the one we live in currently, and the transition will see rapid and exponentially increasing socio-political traumas as a result of both the climate emergency and the economic effects of the changes in the costs of oil extraction. What this study makes very clear is that the accumulation of relative wealth will allow the rich to insulate themselves from the worst effects of their actions, providing them with the motivation to continue to damage the planet and the most vulnerable populations precisely because it increases their differential power. As such, we must

be alive to the classed, raced and gendered power differentials inherent in oil-based capitalisation; fundamentally, this form of accumulation exploits both land and people throughout its chain – both at the level of the construction of differential social relations due to class power gained by capital accumulation and at the level of the differential effects of the downstream externalities felt predominantly by non-white populations of the Global South.

It is precisely the differential aspect of global hydrocarbon production that must be understood here – certain actors have not only historically been able to produce and reproduce their unequal market capitalisation through historically high levels of EROI, but they are then able to insulate themselves against the worst climatic results of the burning of these fossil fuels. As discussed later, this differential power rests on the conceptual articulation of a certain mythos that exists across our cultural and social worlds. This double bind of unequal distribution and unequal insulating capacity is axiomatically bound to the conditions of neoliberalism at, as Di Muzio asserts, a civilizational level – to tamper with it would result in significant punitive responses. As such, the global capital chain of accumulation that includes oil production and debt financing commits us through the threat of violence to acquiesce to this system. Any attacks at a systemic level are met with force (for example, see the response to the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests, also known as #NODAPL). This happens at the level of the social contract but also at the level of subjectivity; we are, as Foucault suggests, produced and reproduced by the environments around us. These environments are intrinsically tied into the petroleum industries and their global political, not to mention their geophysical effects. It is important, then, for us working in and on culture, to understand precisely how cultural tropes feed into and feed from the axiomatic logics at play within these conditions. This is not to suggest only that cultural phenomena (artworks, for example) themselves partake in the cycle of global finance capital, although of course we know they do, nor to assert that somehow culture is bound into the processes of oil industrialisation, which would be a stretch, but to understand how certain political rationalities that have gained prominence in recent years are coterminous with those intrinsic to our cultural world. The rest of this thesis will be dedicated to that task.

## Chapter Three:

### Autonomy

Restraint on trade, or on production for purposes of trade, are indeed restraints; and all restraints *quâ* restraint is evil

(Mill, J.S. in Carter, Kramer and Steiner, eds. 20007: 129)

#### 3.1 *There Will be Blood*

In the final scene of Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*, the fictitious oil tycoon Daniel Plainview, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, kills Paul Dano's Pastor Eli Sunday with a bowling pin. As he is chasing the religious man around his bowling alley, Plainview menacingly tells Sunday that he "drinks his milkshake" invoking the action of an oil well as it sucks its precious crude from the earth, draining it dry. Sunday, who has come desperate to Plainview's mansion years after the main action of the film to beg the rich man to buy up his land, is out of luck. Years before they had battled to win the hearts of the local townsfolk, religion on the one hand, capitalism as exemplified by the new oil industry on the other. Plainview triumphed, leaving the pastor with neither a flock of parishioners nor profitable land.

In this final, fatal, scene, Plainview tells Sunday that he had bought up his small patch of land from his brother years ago and had sucked it dry, bellowing "drainage" at him. As a prescient image of predatory capitalism, the "long straw" of Plainview's character that sucks the oil from the ground of Eli Sunday is instructive. A certain imaginary of freedom is invoked with Plainview – the freedom to exploit others – that has been integrated into the conditions of the

neoliberal conjuncture as “individual freedom”. What the sucking dry represents is not so much greed, or the plain fact of accumulation, but, as Bichler and Nitzan’s *Capital as Power* thesis has it, as discussed earlier, the accumulation of differential wealth and therefore differential power. Freedom (individual, not universal freedom), under these conditions is the expression of inequality.

Two intertwined claims; freedom, in this political imaginary, is the reproduction of exploitation and that, in as much as this creates it, freedom is *contingently* linked to inequality. As an expression of unequal market capitalisation, then, petropolitics maintains a normative association between freedom and the further exacerbation of both wealth and power disparity. Any task that takes seriously the promise of universal freedom must understand this linkage and seek to delegitimise it.

Through the image of the Plainview character, it seems possible to understand how this figure exemplifies a certain early 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of freedom – an image tied up with the robber baron/frontier capitalism of the industrial era. In Mody C. Boatright’s *Folklore of the Oil Industry* (1963), the author has researched a number of significant figures involved in the oil industry in this era. As this book was written as an historical study of the industry in its “golden era”, it has some limitations, it doesn’t, for example, account for the significant shifts in the industry after the 1973 energy crisis, nor the economic accelerations and contiguous expansions into new oil rich nations of the latter part of the last century. It does however, describe a certain subjectivity that we can utilise in this argument. Most pertinent is the figure of The Driller:

“The traditional image of the driller – an image that appeared early and persisted late – was that of a footloose and fancy free wanderer, physically tough and indifferent to danger, competent, and in the knowledge of his competence proud and independent, often to the point of arrogance, yet a man of few words”

(Boatright, 1963: 118)

A spirit that runs through much contemporary insistence on the “freedom of the individual” narrative finds its corollary here. Both at one and the same time dandyish in his abandon and macho in his outlook, this self-image, this form of subjectivity, is articulated as a solo male, independent from both the reliance on others within a community and the natural world. In Anderson’s film, Daniel Plainview is actively aggressive towards both – his

rejection of the Christian church, which mirrors the secular trajectory of twentieth century capitalism, and his rapacious approach to land acquisition indicate a man motivated by personal profit alone. Accordingly, Plainview exemplifies a paradigmatic spirit of capitalism that emerges during this period and determines what is legitimate today; the capacity of the individual to exorbitantly exploit what is previously held in common for their own benefit. It is only possible now, I would argue, to understand the ideology of neoliberalism as underwritten by the oil industry's socio-political imaginary. Oil, extracted, burnt, and as globe warming effluent, must be understood as a power relation; not only does it work to construct and legitimate the world we live in, but it delimits what is articulable.

The frontierism exemplified by Plainview is a complex entanglement of the two types of freedom identified by Isaiah Berlin (1959). Berlin's analysis rests on a distinction between negative and positive liberty (he uses liberty and freedom interchangeably), indeed, he purposively restricts himself to only discussing it in these terms, acknowledging the array of literature that already deals with the sense of the term. Negative liberty is broadly described as a form of freedom from coercion or interference – if I am coerced into or restricted from doing something, I am thought to be unfree. The condition of being without these impediments is one of negative liberty. Coercion is seen as the deliberate interference by another person impeding my ability to act, whereas being incapable due to external pressures, such as limited financial resources, is only considered coercion when it is deliberate – these limitations are considered an aspect of negative liberty. Individualistic accounts of the restriction of freedom would only consider deliberate intervention by another person as the occasion of coercion, and not by the material conditions within which we find ourselves. Berlin acknowledges the material conditions inherent in the limitation of freedom, however his discussion rests predominantly on the way one person restricts or interferes with another. He takes account of the ways that the liberty of one, often 'depends on the misery of other human beings' and that 'the system which promotes this is unjust and immoral' (Berlin, 1959: 5), however, negative liberty, as described by Berlin, is articulated as the absence of deliberate restrictions, and not as absence of the "accidental" preconditions for living a productive and full life.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> As will be discussed later in this chapter, Nancy Hirschmann (2003) provides a far more complex, systematic understanding of how the freedom of one does not guarantee the freedom of others, and Domenico Losurdo (2014) unpacks the liberal assumptions around freedom and its relation to slavery, taking into account particular occasions of liberalism in action.

As noted by Rob Larson (2018), negative liberty is the only type of freedom theory considered by the neoliberal thinkers of the twentieth century. Precisely because they have no account of power, the freedom from coercion that neoliberals see as the aim of any political project, cannot give meaning to Berlin's second term, positive liberty. We will call this the paradox of negative liberty; the concept of negative liberty is incapable of accounting for the ways unfreedoms are produced, moreover, it becomes a myth that occludes its own structural failings. If, as Milton Friedman asserts, economic freedom is an end in and of itself, but also an 'indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom' (Friedman, 2002: 8), then the negative liberty that is foregrounded in his political project, allied to economic theory, is the mask for the inequities produced by capital accumulation on a free market.<sup>25</sup>As Jodi Dean suggests:

In neoliberal ideology, the fantasy of free trade covers over persistent market failure, structural inequalities, the prominence of monopolies, the privilege of no-bid contracts, the violence of privatization, and the redistribution of wealth to the "have mores". Free trade thus sustains at the level of fantasy what it seeks to avoid at the level of reality – namely, actually free trade among equal players, that is, equal participants with equal opportunities to establish the rules of the game, access information, distribution, and financial networks, and so forth. Paradoxically free trade is invoked as a mantra in order to close down possibilities for the actualisation of free trade and equality.  
(Dean, 2009: 56)

This paradox is central to the ideology of neoliberalism.

Positive liberty is what Berlin understands as the capacity to be one own's master; it is broadly associated with the term autonomy.

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer - deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of

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<sup>25</sup> For a cogent analysis of the way "free" market capitalism produces inequality see Piketty (2013), Hickel (2017) or Larson (2018).

playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them.

(Berlin, 1959: 8)

The danger that Berlin identifies with respect to the concept of positive liberty is one of despotism; if powerful individuals can associate positive liberty with the condition of rational behaviour, all behaviour perceived to be irrational is seen to be expressive of a lack of personal freedom. If we are slaves to our “base desires”, then they assume justification in intervening to create the conditions more conducive to “rational” behaviour (such as the types of market intervention seen in neoliberalism). As such, desire to create certain behaviours coherent with an autonomous individual, as discussed in the previous chapter, can act as the legitimation for interventionist policies at home or abroad. Thus, the concept of positive liberty is used as an alibi for “civilising projects”. We will call this the paradox of positive freedom; freedom used as a cover for restructuring, intervention and expansion. Furthermore, the notions of positive and negative liberty intertwine on both their actually existing and mythic levels. Positive liberty is clearly reliant on a certain amount of negative liberty; as a subject of freedom we must be free from the limitations on our actions in order to be able to perform them, to realise our potential. Equally, a mythos of negative liberty so often employed by neoliberalism to declare the freedom of the markets occludes not only, as we have seen, the factual inequality produced by markets, not only the lack of freedom, in the form of state intervention (as seen in the shift from classical liberalism to neoliberalism) of these markets, but also, importantly, acts, alongside positive liberty, as the legitimating narrative for the interventionist strategies inherent in structural readjustment projects of the last century.

In Hayek (2006) and Friedman (2002) (who draws significantly from Hayek), the concept of liberty is restricted to the conditions of non-coercion – or as Berlin would understand it, negative freedom. The task of a policy of freedom, as Hayek sees it, is to ‘minimize coercion or its harmful effects’ (Hayek, 2006: 12). For him, freedom is not power, or capacity – something that may be associated with positive conceptions of freedom, but simply, the ‘relation of men to other men, and the only infringement on it is coercion by men’ (ibid.). As is evident in Nancy Hirschmann’s (2003) work, this analysis relies on an understanding of restriction or coercion as coming solely from active human subjects, rather than from systemic conditions that prevent action – as such, Hayek’s understanding of freedom and coercion is non-systemic, purely individualistic (I will return to a discussion of this later in this chapter). For Hayek, to conceive

of liberty as the absence of obstacles, rather than the condition of non-coercion by an active subject, is ‘equivalent to interpreting it as an effective power to do whatever we want’ (Hayek, 2006: 16). Liberty ‘describes the absence of a particular obstacle – coercion by other men’ (Hayek, 2006:18) and by coercion ‘we mean such control of the environment or circumstances of a person by another [...] to serve the ends of another’ (Hayek, 2006: 19). In this sense, Hayek guards against the danger outlined above of using freedom (in its positive formulation) as an alibi for oppression. For him, positive liberty is only what we do with freedom once we already have it. It is this understanding that allows Hayek to make the problematic assertion that the ‘penniless vagabond who lives precariously by constant improvisation is indeed freer than the conscripted soldier with all his security and relative comfort’ (Hayek, 2006: 17), eschewing any claim that liberty relies on a certain level of stability or support. Not only an intellectual justification for the declination of the welfare state (Thatcherism is famously based on the ideas of Hayek), this conception of freedom is severely limited. As many commentators have noted, the denial that freedom can be limited by systemic conditions, that freedom could also mean something other than non-coercion and that someone without economic resources can be most free leads to an understanding of society that resists supporting its weakest members, suggesting instead that their position in society is their own fault. Thus, the free-from-coercion-vagabond is guilty of making bad usage of his freedom (bad choices), what he does is his sole responsibility, and not conditioned by the context within which he finds himself. As David Chandler (Chandler and Reid, 2016) has analysed, Hayek’s understanding of private, individualised free subjects creates the conditions where

Problems themselves, from conflict to underdevelopment or environmental degradation and global warming, are constructed from the bottom-up; as problems of the subject’s inability to govern itself on the basis of its choices and actions.

(Chandler and Reid, 2016: 28)

This, Chandler suggests, inscribes governance into life itself, reducing it to ‘the generic or “everyday” problems of individual behaviour and practices’ (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 29). This privatisation of responsibility reduces human collectivities to a collection of individuals that are seen to only be responsible for their own actions and not the way they impact on others. As Chandler suggests,

Nothing exists outside our actions and consequently our actions are everything. If there is a problem to be addressed the only sphere of engagement can be with the sphere of human action, understood as decisional choices of individuals.

(Chandler and Reid, 2016: 41)

As individuals capable of making choices, our transforming capabilities are reduced to an internal world, the external world has been closed off to our intervention – the autonomy of the individual has granted us as masters of our own destinies, demanding self-help and self-construction. Chandler, channelling Anthony Giddens, understands this as a retreat into the internal world whereby the only transformation possible is that of the individual's inner world.<sup>26</sup>

Charles Sanders Peirce's rejection of nominalist philosophy could be seen as a critique of Hayekianism *avant le lettre*. I will return to Peirce's work in Chapter Five, but for now let us consider the following question:

The question of whether the *genus homo* has any existence except as individuals is the question of whether there is anything of anymore dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the *community* is to be considered as an end in itself, and if so, what the relative value of the two factors is, is the most fundamental practical question in regard to every public institution the constitution of which we have it in our power to influence

(Peirce cf. Forster 2011: 3)

Understanding freedom through the narrow framework of liberal individualism, whereby we do not consider our own actions and desires as intertwined with something like a community, disavows the ethical or political commitments inherent in projects such as socialism. Inherent in Peirce's logic is an understanding of how the individual relates to society; rather than thinking this relation as one of freedom from each other, he entreats us to understand it as a form of commonality. I will return to this later.

In this chapter I want to understand how the conditions of individual freedom have come to shape the way we understand, on the one hand, the complex cultural formations emergent in the

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<sup>26</sup> I will return to the question of transformative potential in Chapter Five.

last forty years, and on the other, how narratives of freedom have been used to justify the differential accumulation through exploitation inherent in the oil industry – precisely at an historical moment when the capacity for and legitimacy of that exploitation has been challenged. The second age of oil is marked by an axiomatic adherence to a mythos of personal freedom that paradoxically reinscribes a declination of general freedoms – the way contemporary art participates in, or critiques this project is central to any study of the interrelatedness of these inferential spheres.

### *3.2 Freedom to Extract*

Together, the paradoxes of negative and positive liberty, and their intertwined mythos, form a key ideological component of neoliberalism. It is my contention that this double paradox emerges within the context of and through the relation our economic systems have to the extraction and burning of petrochemicals and their effects. This double paradox is what marks a key difference between the first and second ages of oil – under classical liberalism, coterminous with the first age, broadly speaking, while there may not have been a greater coherence between the mythos and the fact, under Neoliberalism, and thus the second age, the growing difference between these two is exemplified by the promise neoliberalism makes to us to have resolved this distance. Instead, the insistence on negative liberty, the deracination of the individual from the community, that is seen in neoliberalism as a form of *rationality*, is indeed utterly irrational.

Both one and the same time positive and negative freedom, the desire for deregulated access to natural resources, what Heidegger identified as “standing reserves”, is both a freedom *from* restriction and a freedom *to* exploit nature (Heidegger, 2013). This complexity must be understood; it is not as simple as suggesting that the type of freedom expressed in the Second Age of Oil is purely freedom from regulation; oil drilling and the industrial scale exploitation of the earth is a promethean project of world building. Equally, neoliberalism has been a constructive and enframing project that builds worlds as much as it’s central proponents desire freedom from state regulation. Indeed, neoliberalism required a shift from the *laissez faire* politics of classical liberalism, to one of large-scale state intervention (however, importantly, this shift is occluded from view by the insistence on the concept of the free market, which prioritises the concept of negative liberty). The shift from the conditions in Plainview’s era, the “golden age” of capitalism, to today requires an understanding of a complexity of entangled concepts of

freedom. Plainview strived in the conditions of classic liberalism, with its hands-off approach to his extractive activity, however, a different type of industrial oil extraction exists today – at home with a variety of government intervention that both occasionally limits its activities, but importantly, and more often, provides the conditions for them through incentives, regulations and deregulations. Thus, petropolitical freedom today, is formed of an array of regulations and deregulations, tax incentives and tax cuts, free market competition and government interventions. It is this complexity that creates the conditions for the paradoxes outlined above. The mythic component of freedom, and its uses as a narrative to cover over neoliberal inequality (how governments intervene to create the conditions for increased market dominance by monopolistic corporations), underwrites the conditions of the Second Age of Oil. Freedom, as Dean (2009) suggests, under these conditions is a myth, or a façade that occludes the truth of its production.

As journalist Thomas L. Friedman (2009) asserts, there is a negative correlation between the price of oil and the quantifiable freedoms enjoyed by citizens – freedom of the press, free speech, free and fair elections, rule of law, independent judiciary, independent political parties – suggesting that when oil price rises (and firms increase their market capitalisation), these freedoms are eroded. He calls this the First Law of Petropolitics (Friedman 2009). Thus, whilst petropolitics might claim to express certain freedoms, such as the freedom to pursue one's own economic activity free from governmental interference, in practice, the increased market capitalisation on oil results in the degradation of citizen's freedoms. Furthermore, as we are aware, the extraction and burning of fossil fuels has resulted in a huge increase in pollution and a warming climate in the form of negative downstream externalities, or marginal social cost. The extractive industries produce enormous externalities that have to be dealt with socially, that is by us; degradation to our water supplies and air quality, decimation of environments and the warming of the planet all point to limitations on our freedoms. Thus, the freedom to profit from the oil industry is won off the back of the contractions of universal freedoms – we have to pay for the economic freedom industry enjoys through the damage to our world, and the taxation that is needed to ameliorate that damage.

Discussing the deep-rooted associations between liberal ideals of individualism and private property rights, David Harvey (2009) links commercial and military interventionist strategies with the invocation of personal freedom and democracy. Wars and extractionist colonialism share, for Harvey, the Wilsonian idealism of freedom of expansion, where the “doors of nations

must be battered down” (Wilson cf. Harvey, 2009: 4). Colonialist tendencies in American history provide us with a frame to understand this interlinking of conceptions of freedom and free trade. As described by Harvey, the successive liberalisation of trade that occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century is just a continuation of forms of commercial expansion that expropriates value from the Global South that emerged with early settler colonialism. Neoliberalism exacerbates rather than curtails this colonial project, but this time under the banner of expansions of personal freedoms. As explored in Chapter Two, the alibi for intervention was so often the spread of democracy underwritten by the ideals of self-determination. The belief in military supported capitalist expansion has been carried forward into contemporary politics. The use of core American ideologies, freedom, liberty and democracy, in current political speech are a cover for global dominance, especially in the name of geological procurement. As Harvey suggests, George W. Bush's ‘willingness to violate “the sovereignty of unwilling nations” and the enunciation of a “preemptive strike” military strategy whenever U.S. interests (commercial as well as military) are threatened, sits firmly in this Wilsonian tradition, as do his frequent associations of personal freedom and democracy with free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2009: 4). The utopianism of personal freedom has, as Harvey suggests, worked as a ‘system of justification and legitimation’ for the colonial project (Harvey, 2005: 19).

It is this use of the ideal of freedom as justification and legitimation I want to hold on to. It is a core liberal tenet and, I would argue, central to any understanding of contemporary art. Art “frees” us to think differently, artistic expression should be “free” from constraints, art allows a “free” play of ideas to emerge. These ideas are inherent in discourse about art’s relation to freedom inherited, as Brian Holmes suggests, from the avant garde (Holmes in Sholette and Ressler, 2013). And, they act, as I will show later, as a cover for structural inequities that emerge in the name of art.

The artist of the last fifty years has been as footloose as the driller in Boatright’s narrative, a freedom-oriented agent focused on the differential extraction of value from existing resources. I understand contemporary art’s axiological theory of autonomy precisely through this frame. Under the conditions of petropolitical contemporaneity artworks seek to uphold conceptions of autonomy that privilege certain positionalities that have the capacity to extract value in specific ways. Precisely, I claim, it is due to the self-understanding of artists as free, autonomous agents (a conception that draws from, but misunderstands Adornian autonomy), that contemporary art axiomatically reproduces normative statements and behaviour that reiterate the idea of freedom

as differential rather than universal. Here it is important to remember that these claims do not suggest that *all* contemporary artworks operate in this way. It is perfectly reasonable, to head off some of the potential criticism of this position, to claim that *some* artworks operate in one way, while others do not. What I want to assert is not that this condition *is* universal, but that it is *universalising* – which is to say it is part of an axiomatics that seeks to be the universal condition of all artworks. It seeks to be hegemonic.

### 3.3 Missuses of *Autonomy*

Autonomy is a concept that is often applied interchangeably with freedom, in this chapter I will not conflate them but understand them as entwined concepts – indeed it is the way they are entwined, and so often conflated, that I am interested in. Contemporary art website e-flux, for example, lists numerous exhibitions that cite “freedom” or “autonomy” as content. One of these is an exhibition listing from 2009, *Radical Autonomy* at The Grand Café in Saint Nazare, France, where the concept of autonomy is framed as one where ‘art could be a sanctuary for futility, obscurity, insight, ambivalence, joy and unease’ (*Radical Autonomy*). Or the write up for an exhibition, *Exercises in Autonomy*, at Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz, 2016, which, as the curator explains, explores practices that ‘could potentially become helpful in the process of acquiring autonomy from technocratic state organizations and an economy based on uneven capital accumulation and predatory exploitation of natural resources’ (*Exercises in Autonomy*)

These conceptions are not outliers, the colloquial understandings that are produced within contemporary art discourse of autonomy think it generally as an exercise in escape or creation of sanctuary. The popularity of ideas such as Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone has seeped into art’s understandings of autonomy. The Adornian dialectic (that I explore later in this chapter) is all but lost here – autonomy is not seen as inherently dialectically related to society, but a mode of disassociation from it. This understanding of autonomy is common, I would argue, in contemporary art discourse at multiple levels, where art is seen as constructive of “spaces” of distance from anything that the interlocutor doesn’t happen to like about society. What does it mean, for example, to create autonomy from ‘predatory exploitation of natural resources’, as the curator of *Exercises in Autonomy* suggests art can? Here, art isn’t even afforded a critical role, merely the capacity to assert its difference from extractive techno-ideologies. The suggestion that art’s role has been reduced to an escapism, or at best a site of imagination, is

deeply problematic. Articulated as such, art then becomes a refuge away from the problems of the world, not a site from which to challenge, critique, or rationally analyse that world. This is dangerous inasmuch as it conditions us to think of art conservatively as the ratification of capitalist realist relations. But furthermore, autonomy becomes a privileged site that promotes disinterested rather than the interested engagement of people whose lives are affected by the conditions they find themselves in. Thus, we see art being a refuge for a lack of diversity as privileged subjects are assumed to be more capable of speaking, precisely because of their autonomy from the conditions that they speak about. Autonomy in this form promotes a form of left-paternalism in art that is suspicious, not only because it privileges the voices of those who are already powerful over those who are without power, occluding those less privileged, but because it occludes the structural conditions that make this possible. Autonomy is given as the alibi for left-paternalistic accounts of struggle without affording those within that struggle the means to prevail over it, or claim ownership of the narrative.

Precisely, the claim of objectivity rests on the presupposition of freedom from conditions that would be seen to compromise that objectivity. Hence, why, for example, white mediators narrate the struggles of people of colour – their supposed disassociation affords them a superior position. In Renzo Martens' 2008 documentary/art film *Episode Three: Enjoy Poverty*, the Dutch artist works with Congolese photographers in an emancipation project that attempts to exploit the photographers' close relationship to their own and their neighbours' poverty. At the beginning of the film it is revealed that images of poverty are the Democratic Republic of Congo's most profitable export, Martens' intervention is to encourage these photographers, whose main line of work previously had been photographing weddings and parties, to setup a profitable business by photographing war and famine. However, when they sit down with a high-ranking official in Medicine Sans Frontier, their hopes are dashed. His response is straight out of the liberal playbook; these photographers are not allowed to exploit their own position, the only photographers allowed to sell their work are European/American. This distinction is drawn precisely because the (non-native) professional photographers are seen to have a disinterested, neutral and objective position in contrast to the interested, Congolese photographers. The assumption of neutrality, that links to whiteness, maleness, Europeaness is a direct consequence of the assumption of autonomy inherited from Adorno's reading of Kant.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that there is a significant body of research, often from a black radical and/or feminist perspective, that takes a critical position on this idea of neutrality – I will explore this later in this chapter and in the final chapter.

Furthermore, autonomy is figured as an escape or respite from the prevailing conditions, rather than a critical reformulation of those conditions. As Brian Holmes suggests, '(t)he crucial insight of what were formerly called the "avant-gardes" is that an image of emancipation provides only a contemplative respite from exploitation, hierarchy and conflict. The energies devoted to the creation of a privileged object could be better spent on reshaping the everyday environment' (Holmes in Sholette and Ressler, 2013: 166). Art, as only an image of freedom, is seen as allowing a privileged access to escape, access that is foreclosed to other less privileged subjects. Of course, we must also acknowledge that these privileged objects *have* shaped our environment, just in ways that assert the primacy of differential not universal freedoms through the production of spaces away from the prevailing conditions only afforded to certain subjects. Without a principle of universality, freedom will accrue differentially, and furthermore, will offer only a temporal escape not a tool with which to leverage systemic change.

The aim here is not to suggest that we need to find an art that does not operate in this way, or to try and mobilise, promote or engage only with practices that are anti-/non-/post-autonomous, in fact these practices already exist. Expanding our engagement with art and artists outside of the conditions of contemporary art, while worthwhile in its own right wrongly assumes two things; one, that it is possible to escape contemporary art's axiomatic conditions by fiat, and two, that by doing so we are able to produce critical change at the level of the system of art itself. Neither of these assumptions are accurate. In fact, as I will show in these chapters, the very process of attempting to produce change with these working assumptions counterintuitively returns the critical intention back on itself. First, however, the concept of autonomy needs fleshing out.

When we consider, for example, the work that appeared in the 2016 Berlin Biennale, where the infra-thin difference between art and commodity was nominally absent, it seems that art has entirely assimilated to the commodity form, to the point where not only does the work look like a commodity, but operates as one as well. Indeed, as Mohammad Salemy asserts, DIS, the lifestyle magazine/artworld outsider curators of the biennale, seek to 'blur, if not all together remove, the distinctions between art, theory, advertising, fashion and start-up commerce' (Salemy 2016). The difference between artwork and commodity has been removed; *The Present in Drag* is the latest example, or perhaps apogee, of this process of absorption that has been ongoing for the most part of the twentieth century. What is interesting to note here is the divergence of two tendencies in contemporary art. On the one hand (as exemplified by the

curatorial statements discussed above), there is the tendency to claim art as a mode of autonomy from the commodity form, and on the other, the tendency to eradicate that very autonomy. The totalisation of either of these positions is theoretically inadequate, and it is in this inadequacy that we find the central problem with claims to autonomy; there exists neither a totally autonomous art, nor a totally heteronomous art, it is not possible to either eradicate nor absolutise the gap between the artwork and the commodity form, society or prevailing political economy; artwork and its other are coterminous, but not entirely so. This is the central antinomy within art – the paradoxical centre. What I am keen to discuss here is the way contemporary iterations of autonomy (in either the autonomy as escape or DIS inspired eradication models) seem to misunderstand that very formulation.

In his letter to Walter Benjamin from 1936, Theodor Adorno attempts to defend autonomous art from the claim that it is, as Benjamin had asserted, “counter-revolutionary” (Adorno, 2007: 121). In his response to Benjamin and his later work, Adorno suggests that the autonomous side of the artwork is inherently dialectical, an assertion he repeats in *Aesthetic Theory* when he determines artworks to have an intrinsic processual quality, they, as he suggests, ‘go over into their other’ (Adorno, 1997: 232). The autonomy of art, for Adorno, works through the dialectical relation it has with society, not, as he notes, an existence purely separate or divorced from the commodity form or society. It is this dialectical, or processual, nature of the artwork that allows it to be at one and the same time apart *from* and a part *of* the society from which it arises. Furthermore, this capacity to stand apart from society (whilst also being a part of it), is, according to Adorno, what facilitates its negative or critical role in relation to that society. In the two examples above, the negative role is eclipsed by the totalising principles – either escape or absorption.

In a recent essay in the Marxist journal *Mediations*, Jackson Petsche lays out a defence of Adornian autonomy, suggesting that with the advent of post-modernity, the individual subject has lost the ability to differentiate the form of art from the commodity form, justification in Petsche’s mind to rehabilitate Adornian conceptions of autonomy (Petsche: 2013). Modernity’s capacity to produce the artwork as “other” to the commodity has disappeared, and aesthetic production today has been integrated into commodity production more generally – as per the example of DIS. Drawing on Jameson, Petsche argues that with the dominance of culture in everyday life, the specificity of the aesthetic has been lost altogether. Indeed, according to Jameson,

“[The] ‘self-autonomy’ of the cultural sphere [...] has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism [...] the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is [...] to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life - from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself - can be said to have become ‘cultural’”

(Jameson, 1991: 48)

Autonomy is understood as the opposite of the commodity form, but an opposition that appears almost identical to it precisely because the cultural has been integrated into the social. Indeed, Adorno suggests (following Kant), the functionlessness of art is its social function – thereby understanding functionlessness as precisely, the mode by which art distinguishes itself from a society that instrumentalises and calculates everything. Within Adorno’s work, this appears as an ongoing dialectical relation. Coterminous with the dialectic between economics, politics, society and other spheres, is that of the limits of what might have been previously considered “culture” proper and its outside. According to Adorno, art can never be truly autonomous, but it must adopt this status in order to criticise society; precisely because art is at one and the same time the thing *and* its opposite, and this demand is placed on it by the necessity to be critical, it is the critical tendency in art that has been the motor for this dialectic. Jameson’s amendment to this theory is to suggest that the autonomous realm, or the capacity for art to be dialectically opposite the commodity form, no longer exists. The dialectic has collapsed. In both an ontological and epistemological sense, the collapse of the difference between culture and commodity is the modality of Jameson’s postmodernity par excellence. Jameson’s idea of this dissolution axiologically constructs contemporary art, whereby there is no longer any distance between it and the commodity form – the DIS type exhibition emerges from this logic. Equally, the logic that produces exhibitions where autonomy is seen as un-dialectical escape also emerges from the same conditions. No longer capable of having a negative or critical dialectical relation to the commodity form, autonomy gets refigured as mere escape. How artworks operate critically today, then, must be understood as a reformulation of the concept of autonomy.

As the oppositional or alienating effects of the avant garde have become commodified and marketized, Petsche’s (Petsche: 2013) question then, is can art still oppose society by merely

existing? Is art still capable of being autonomous? Does, in fact, there still exist this antinomy between art and the commodity? Or has it been dissolved by the two opposing tendencies?

According to Petsche, where art, or the aesthetic experience, can no longer be differentiated from the commodity form, there is no space of contemplation within which to form a coherent critical distance from society. He draws on Marcuse to understand the power of art to create political or critical change, but, importantly, this occurs through a change in consciousness not social relations. Art's negation of established reality would establish an almost intangible shift in consciousness that would be inherently socially productive. Thus, political transformation is linked, through the sensuous aesthetic experience, to the internal world created in subjective experience, something that Marcuse sees as an antagonist force in capitalist society. Subjective, inner experience becomes not just a liberation for Marcuse, but the site from which the political must embark – the ability to step outside capitalist social relations, to differentiate the commodity form from the aesthetic form, and to escape the grip of capital. According to Marcuse, 'this escape from reality led to an experience which could (and did) become a powerful force invalidating the actual prevailing bourgeois values, namely by shifting the locus of the individual's realization from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience' (Marcuse cf. Petsche, 2013: 152). In this sense, autonomy becomes the production of an individualised space away from the prevailing conditions, a space to retreat into, rather than an operation dedicated to the dialectical practice of the negative. Freedom, as understood by this logic, appears not in the positive sense – freedom as capacity – but in the negative sense – freedom from coercion. When the critical force of art is subsumed by the commodity form, the conception of freedom appears only as escape and not as the capacity to produce change.

### *3.4 Thunderlike Freedom*

Contemporary conceptions of freedom seem to be rooted in at one and the same time free floating, deracinated, individualism, *and* colonial instantiations of differential power. This formulation is complicated by various, non-contemporary, non-Western histories of art, histories that find their genesis outside of the liberal tradition. However, it is important to account for the conditions of the genre of *contemporary* art as it appears in its European/Western formation precisely because of its internal drive for universality, and how it recursively co-constitutes the

normative dimensions of contemporary liberal society. I will link a review of the literature around contemporary art with an analysis of contemporary conceptions of freedom within neoliberal societies to understand how the nature of freedom instantiated by contemporary art is ideologically linked to freedom as understood within the liberal tradition as it transmutes into its neoliberal and more current variants.<sup>28</sup> A petropolitical analysis binds these forms of freedom to the ideological and socio-political formations emerging out of the Second Age of Oil. These concatenated inferential systems share tropological axiomatics,<sup>29</sup> (in this case around the ways freedom is articulated) that are correlated, but not causally linked, to the petropolitical. Which is to say, inferential systems share tropes, logics, and in some cases axioms in co-constitutive ways. Cultural phenomena both draw from and feed into these tropes, logics and axioms. It is, of course, the claim of this thesis that the cultural, political, economic and ecological co-constitute axiological founding statements, thus, the way a concept, such as freedom, appears in one sphere tracks across to the other spheres rather than remaining isolated.

The nature of freedom within art – how artworks, exhibitions and the condition of contemporary art as such articulate their relation, modelling and instantiation of freedom – has its historical genesis in the middle of the twentieth century. Within the tradition of art history this story generally mobilises a series of artworks, exhibitions and art events that float free of their surrounding social, political, economic and ecological contexts. The story usually begins with Duchamp and Warhol, reading, in the case of Thierry De Duve (1996), Kant through the conditions created by the readymade, or in the case of Arthur Danto (1997), the project of contemporary art through the Brillo Box. This thesis is neither a history of contemporary art nor a corrective to its limited narratives. Instead, what I attempt here is a speculative approach that holds together particular ideological components to produce a heuristic formulation. Contemporary art is not the art most suited to this particular historical political conjuncture because it responds to or extends its parameters, but because it reflexively feeds into the ideological formations that underwrite them – artistic tropes operate at the level of the

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<sup>28</sup> During the writing of this thesis a number of significant political shifts occurred, not least the EU referendum, or “Brexit” vote and the election of Donald Trump to the position of 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. These seismic events have made us aware of the growing discontent with liberalism from the perspective of a growing far right, ethnonationalist faction. The “current variant” of liberalism we are now experiencing must be seen in this context. While I will expand on some notions of this later in this chapter, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to articulate in full these conditions, however, we should keep in mind the fast changing nature of the political conjuncture.

<sup>29</sup> While the term “tropological” has its origins in biblical exegesis, I use it here to indicate the logics of tropes; how a trope might reappear in different inferential systems without there being a direct causal relation is an important mode by which we can understand the nature of the contemporary moment.

axiological. And this is nowhere clearer than in the concept of freedom. Cultural logics determine *how* this concept is articulated, not just that it has become a central concept in our lexicon.

Within the discourse, art is often seen as a mode of escape. The nature of autonomy for E. E. Sleinis, for example, is non-dialectical; in a text entirely untroubled by a reading of Adorno, Sleinis tells us that the ‘art enterprise inherently promotes freedom’ (Sleinis, 2003: 2), and that art ‘frees us from the commonplace and the merely instrumental [...] frees us from habitual and routine modes of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and acting that arise from activities needed to sustain life’ (ibid.: 5). He continues, ‘freeing entails overcoming resistance or inertia or loosening fixed patterns [...] [the] function of art is to overcome such resistance’. In his understanding art, then, is a project of negative freedom – “freedom from” – that foregrounds the experience of viewing art as one of transformation; we become freer when we view art – ‘the freeing creates a new self’ (ibid.: 13). But how precisely is this process to be understood if not dialectically? What of the “old self” is maintained, what is sublated? If we are to think this process without a synthetic conception of the person one becomes after viewing art, how can we properly understand it? Furthermore, without the dialectic at play in the art encounter, where we see “freeing” as an entirely linear, quantitative process – a process of calculation inherent in the economisation of society – whereby freedom is measured by how much of it accrues to a particular subject via their experience of an artwork, we can only understand freedom in its negative sense, we can only understand liberation as a project of escape from restrictions applied by others or nature. Thus, the “habitual” or “routine” stands in for laws and norms that imprison us, and the best way to overcome them is to escape them. Judged as such, freedom can only be a project of individual emancipation – one that seeks to free us one by one from the shackles without an attempt at systemic change. As discussed later in this chapter, this non-systemic thinking is coherent with a neoliberal logic that is comfortable with the production of differential freedoms – and has its roots in the Hayekian formulations discussed earlier. Further still, as I shall focus on more explicitly in the next chapter, this account of freedom is perfectly coherent with a market ontology that requires moral legitimation for the extraction of value, whereby freedom is deemed both legitimation and the conferment of value. Insofar as an artwork is seen to be a progenitor of freedom, it has symbolic value that adds to market value, and it covers over this operation with the nominal expression of personal freedom as a moral “good”.

The concept of freedom as an escape from norms is central to the project of contemporary art; as De Duve, quoting Robert Musil, tells us, art is ‘something which simply is, and which doesn’t need to conform to laws in order to exist’ (De Duve, 1996: 3). The very logic of art revolves around this central locus of non-conformation (to laws or norms), as De Duve shows us it acts as an invariant logic of contemporary art that has the status of ‘family resemblance’ (De Duve: 12):

[T]hat all attempts to define art must end in either a solipsism or a tautology; that the concept of art is undecidable; that the openness and indeterminacy of the concept are pertinent to any definition of the concept; or, finally, either by recourse to a theory of performative speech acts, or through the detour of institutional theory, that the circularity of empirical definition “art is everything that is called art” far from being a solipsism, constitutes the ontological specificity of works of art  
(De Duve, 1996: 12)

Here we have three positive claims; art is undecidable, open and indeterminate; art is everything that is called art; and these claims for art determine the ontological specificity of art as such. And I would add, these conditions work at the level of the particular and the generic – each particular work of art and the *genre* of art as such comply with these invariants. So, here we have a paradox; art is art only if it resists laws, yet it is itself conditioned by the invariant laws thus stated. A law of art is that art escapes law.

The Duchampian readymade, for De Duve, exemplifies this invariant; the naming of a urinal as a work of art articulates an indeterminacy of the concept of art, where previous paradigmatic limits of art no longer obtain, and the work of art is only art because of the proper name given to it. The performativity in naming an object art manifests, as he suggests, the ‘magic power of the word “art”’ (ibid.: 13), freeing the work from a history of style. Art’s autonomy exists precisely because of the capacity to nominate anything as a work of art. Autonomy is thus a condition of aesthetic nominalism – the capacity to confer the “value” of art on an object previously not thought of as such. This expansion of the axiom of art into otherwise non-art areas is emblematic of post-Duchampian modalities of art making, whereby the word art acts as a sign that at one and the same time designates an object as such *and* expands the notion of what art can be. This signifying practice exists only for an audience. Indeed, as Adorno asserts, the ‘experience of artworks is adequate only as living experience’ (Adorno, 1997: 232), the work of

art is animated by the gaze, contemplative immersion is required for the processual quality of the work to be 'set free' (ibid.). Or as Suhail Malik suggests, the fundamental constitutive logic of contemporary art is the *experience* of it (Malik in Hlavajova and Sheikh, 2016: 129). As such, when the term art acts as a signifier it does so precisely to constitute an audience rather than solely an object. Thus, the nomination of an art object is coterminous with the nomination of an audience. The Duchampian readymade has precisely this co-constitutive logic. One that has as its completed experience the refining, as Duchamp puts it, of sugar from molasses (Duchamp 1957), by the spectator, whereby an artwork's openness is temporally filled by the production of meaning in the process of experience. The nature of this production of meaning, however, is importantly non-conclusive as it will be repeated by every subsequent spectator. This 'contingently determined multiplicity' (Malik in Hlavajova and Sheikh, 2016: 129) is the central component of contemporary art's concept of freedom, whereby meaning is unfixed, free floating and determined only contingently through a co-constitutive relation with the audience (which repeats at every instance of being viewed).

This unfixity of meaning is guaranteed by an aesthetic nominalism that no longer grants the universal through genre. As Adorno determines, the aesthetic particularity of contemporary art frees it from the genres, determining contemporary art as the generic itself whereby the principle of individuation encourages particularisation (Adorno, 1997: 264). What Danto terms the "post-historical" period is characterised by an end to the master narratives of art, whereby work articulates a pluralistic approach. In this period, which Danto dates from roughly 1964, there are no 'stylistic or philosophical constraints' (Danto, 1997: 47), instead everything is possible. Here:

It is one of the many things which characterize the contemporary moment of art - or what I term the post-historical moment - that there is no longer a pale of history. Nothing is closed off, the way Clement Greenberg supposed that surrealist art was no part of modernism as he understood it. Ours is a moment of, at least (and perhaps only) in art, of deep pluralism and total tolerance. Nothing is ruled out.  
(Danto, 1997: xiii – xiv)

The rise of aesthetic nominalism explodes the generic limits that the modern artwork worked within and against, transcendence of limits is no longer a viable mode of art making, as every available style, form or philosophy, is tolerated. Instead, contemporary art emerges as a genre in

and of itself, devoid of dialectical relation between the particular and the universal that would have been granted through the working against the genre limit.

What Georg Lukács named “subjective idealism” emerges as a modality of experience, whereby subjectively differentiated “worlds” are conjured – aesthetic reflection is thus a matter of making meaning independently of a universal (Lukács in Cazeaux, 2000: 221). These independent worlds constitute multifarious viewpoints on the same aesthetic experience insofar as aesthetic reflection is nominalistically determined. Which is to say, the dialectical movement between the particular and the universal that would have been mediated by genre is foreclosed by the total tolerance given by aesthetic nominalism. Artworks no longer allow a dialectical transition into the universal and this is transferred to experience in as much as an experience of a work of art must understand that work of art to be just another iteration of an equally tolerated, free expression amongst many others. The condition of the contemporary is thus a condition of simultaneity whereby freedom is encountered as total tolerance within the same time and place – spatio-temporal simultaneity.

Peter Osborne has linked aesthetic nominalism to an increasing individualisation within society, whereby neoliberalism is seen as the most recent articulation of individuation (Osborne, 2013: 107). For Osborne, following Adorno, total individuation would result in a total destruction of meaning. Insofar as individuation is not total, artworks still require mediation via interpretative categories, however, as Osborne notes, the appropriation of aesthetic forms by the culture industry has led to ‘declining artistic significance of objective aesthetic norms’ (ibid.).<sup>30</sup> Channelling Lucy Lippard, Osborne understands the work of the latter part of the twentieth century to be uncategorisable. Eschewing objective norms, contemporary art as it emerged in this period, became the aesthetic experience most coherent with the emerging socio-political conjuncture. Insofar as the ideological components of neoliberalism rest on a particular conception of freedom, contemporary art’s resistance to genre, total formal and philosophical tolerance, increasing individuation, and the production of multiple, incoherent “worlds”, is

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<sup>30</sup> We might read this against the claims made for the 2016 Berlin Biennale in the last section; wherein contemporary art has destroyed the infrathin difference between art and non-art (the logical conclusion of the readymade gesture), aesthetic experience is no longer viable – the autonomy of art from the commodity form is what guarantees the reflection process, without it, works of art are merely things. Because I hold that autonomy articulated only as “freedom from” is purely quantitative, which is to say accords in varying quantities to various works of art, this understanding is incapable of managing the decline of artistic meaning. It is only when autonomy gets articulated as a process of self-legitimation that we can understand it in a dialectical relation to society as such. I will expand on this concept in the latter section of this chapter.

expressive of that conception. Which is to say, freedom thus understood as *lawlessness* legislates for the paradoxical production of generic norms in line with that idea of lawlessness. As I will discuss in the next section, this paradox is coherent with the emerging political variant of neoliberalism we are experiencing today. Thus, contemporary art imagines freedom in the last instance as a form of negative freedom – freedom from laws and norms. In this scene, the absent law represents genre limitations that would have determined the field as such, without these, art appears as fully pluralistic, or, as Cuathemoc Medina suggests:

the ‘arts’ have merged into a single multifarious and nomadic kind of practice that forbids any attempt at specification beyond the micro-narratives that each artist or cultural movement produces along the way. If ‘contemporary art’ refers to the confluence of a general field of activities, actions, tactics, and interventions falling under the umbrella of a single poetic matrix and within a single temporality, it is because they occupy the ruins of the ‘visual arts’

(Medina in Aranda, Wood and Vidolke, 2010: 19)

As Castoriadis (1991) makes explicit, thinking freedom as thunderlike and the subject as a free-floating entity, delinked from every tie (be that a law, norm, tradition, or history), is not adequate to understand the nuanced, dialectical nature of this concept. As Erich Fromm (2001) has argued, the project of increasing personal freedom – the continual process of individuation that he sees as historical as well as individual – is one that removes the security and orientation provided by community and tradition. As such, the history of negative freedom is haunted by the increased isolation of individuals – a phenomenon that Fromm traces through history to the escape from the bounds of nature. In the face of an overwhelming nature, the human is required to escape its bounds, this escape is then accompanied by a mastery of that nature with the use of tools and technology. As Fromm understands it, the negative freedom of escape is accompanied by the positive freedom of mastery through technology. Thus, the concept of positive freedom relies on technological innovation, which tends towards an increase in inequality due to differential access.

### *3.5 The Concept of Freedom as Norm Production*

In many narratives, the accrual of freedom is assumed to be a moral good, quite often without a nuanced understanding of the multiple ways that freedom is constructed. With the increased individualisation of freedom, the pursuit of differential freedoms, the understanding of freedom as escape from norms, the concept of freedom is understood quantitatively, as a matter of accounting. The project of freedom is thus seen as a zero sum game; there is only so much of it to be distributed.

It is clear that the demand for freedom – from regulation – to exploit the earth’s natural resources that comes from the oil industry rests on the exploitation, thus unfreedoms, of the rest of the population. What is less clear is how, when the concept of personal freedom so often comes to rest on the idea of non-coercion, we are bound to a normative construction of liberty as purely negative, as such, this norm of freedom as non-coercion comes to shape our very institutions and behaviours.

As a constructive conceptual articulation, when freedom is only understood through this specific frame, the social and institutional are reproduced in accordance; which is to say, social institutions, individual behaviours and normative practices are all constructed as though freedom means only freedom from coercion. It is the aim of this section to understand how the articulation of freedom within this narrow conceptualisation produces and reproduces particular norms, paradoxically when proponents of this formulation assume this idea of freedom to be free from norms as such. This argument correlates to the De Duvian argument above, whereby the law of art was one of lawlessness.

To understand this conception of freedom as proceeding from, and constitutive of, social norms will help us analyse it better and understand the modalities through which we can challenge or expand these notions of freedom. Precisely, my claim is that to understand conceptions of freedom as an escape from normativity, as proponents of negative freedom do, disavows the very action of norm production that occurs with this mode of articulation. When we understand all discursive articulation as participating in a regime of norm production and proliferation, we can see how even a conception of freedom as freedom from coercion (by norms) operates to reiterate and establish normative behaviours. Moreover, I think it is possible, through this analysis, to recover conceptions of freedom that link it to emancipation and democracy, in order

to wrest it from the hands of people who use it as means to undemocratic ends. We can do this precisely through the way we understand bundles of concepts to coalesce around constructions of norms and to produce causal significance. To begin with I want to understand how social structures have causal power (an idea that will reappear in Chapter Six), this will be followed with a critique of free speech advocacy and a discussion of how an adequate theory of normativity will allow us to reconceptualise freedom away from the restricted view of freedom as freedom from coercion.

To articulate how causal significance proceeds from the interaction between norms and social forces, rather than from either the transformative power of individuals or the monolith of society itself, Dave Elder-Vass (2010) understands the emergent powers of social forces through the concept of norm circles.<sup>31</sup> Specific groups of people have social powers, as they intersect and overlap, possessing causal power to influence individuals and institutions. The concept of the norm circle understands how structural and agential forces participate in the construction, ratification and proliferation of norms and how this produces change at a social level. For Elder-Vass, the power to produce change emerges from within a grouping of individuals (not society as such nor from isolated individuals) – precisely, these groupings, norm circles, have emergent properties, which is to say have powers greater than their individual members. A norm circle possesses potential for causal power exceeding that held by individuals alone. As we shall explore, this concept of emergence allows Elder-Vass to understand the norm circle as productive of social causality where individuals would be incapable.

Society is comprised of a hierarchical strata, or as Elder-Vass terms it, *lamination* of individuals, groups and social institutions (where behaviour sediments into norms and rules). We should understand the interrelation between each lamination as causal insofar as normativity intersects, and produces change within, each lamination. As Elder-Vass explains, ‘the social power that tends to encourage us to conform to any given social norm is in fact an emergent causal power of a specific social entity, a specific group of people: a normative circle’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 7). While not enough weight is given to the concept of power in this theory, where differential capacity for discursive control or domination within each norm circle is not fully articulated, it is

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<sup>31</sup> Cass Sunstein (1995) describes in some detail how social norms come to produce and police social action and behaviour.

still useful to understand how causality is produced as an emergent property of norm circles, not handed down from dominant figures.<sup>32</sup>

Action within a norm circle, interestingly for Elder-Vass, is not externally determined, but emerges from the commitment to ‘endorse and enforce’ practices within the circles themselves (ibid.: 123). As such, members of a circle act in ways they wouldn’t were they not members. There is a shared obligation to act and reproduce behaviour deemed acceptable or punish behaviour that falls outside the norm. Accordingly, concepts and actions get more readily concretised and ratified when reinforced by norm circles – in fact, within a circle there is a tendency to increase conformity to a norm. This tendency means that even seemingly small groups might have emergent powers beyond what could be imagined.

When understood in this way, the concept of freedom as non-coercion must be understood not as an escape from norms, but precisely as a central conceptual axiom around which norms are produced and reproduced.

The current tendency in popular political discourse to assume that freedom is constituted by the fact of being uncoerced – only when we are not being interfered with – assumes that life be free from coercion, limits, or regulation. It models freedom as a negative formulation whereby our freedom is normatively judged to be based on how unlimited we assume ourselves to be when making statements, performing actions or going about our business. If we feel coerced – by institutions, other people or social norms – we assume our freedom to have been compromised. As Wendy Brown (2017) has analysed, current strands of neo-fascist thought have been allowed to develop under the conditions of neoliberalism precisely because of the way freedom in neoliberalism has been formulated. The neoliberal variant of freedom has, according to Brown, been reduced to its restricted form of *freedom from coercion*, uncoerced action becomes freedom’s only meaning ‘[a]ll other meanings—freedom as emancipation from powers of domination, freedom as capacity, and freedom as participation in popular sovereignty—are simply nonsense from [a neoliberal’s] point of view’ (Brown 2017). As she suggests, this concept is ratified by, if not emergent from, the writing of Milton Friedman and Frederick Hayek. These two “architects of neoliberalism” understood economic freedom (freedom on and of the market, freedom to choose, freedom from regulation) to be not only the guarantor of personal and political

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<sup>32</sup> A further study of this could attenuate a reading of normativity through Foucauldian notions of power, or even through the work of Bichler and Nitzan who fully articulate the concept of differential power.

freedoms, but an end in and of itself. However, as Rob Larson (2018) has shown, the Hayekian/Friedmanite conception of freedom occludes the structural effects of power dispersal – differential wealth being the foundation of the production of differential power, thus differential freedoms. Neither Friedman nor Hayek have an adequate analysis of the structural problems of the concentration of wealth.

The predominance of these discourses in public life, to the extent that Larry Summers can proclaim to the Democratic party that “we are all Friedmanites now” (Summers in Larson, 2018: 111), has led to a rather restricted view. Thus, when we invoke freedom, we are normatively invested in concepts of freedom *as* freedom from coercion and nothing more. In other words, because of how public discourse has repeatedly linked the two while occluding other, more nuanced concepts of freedom, there is a normative dimension to the very language we use to engage in political discussion. As such, the demand by advocates of freedom to be uncoerced by norms results in the expansion of only negative forms of freedom and, paradoxically, as I shall explore now, in the reiteration of normativity within their own discourse. Non-coercion in this formulation comes to act as a norm that is enacted within the norm circles that adhere to this conception insofar as participants’ behaviour is endorsed or punished dependent on their adherence to the norm of no-coercion. We see this endorsement or punishing occurring most obviously in online behaviour where critical challenges to a person’s beliefs come to be understood as a restriction on their freedom of speech, no matter how abhorrent those beliefs may be. Freedom of speech in these environments trumps all other forms of freedom not by fiat, but by the fact we have a narrow understanding of freedom only as freedom from coercion.

This conception of freedom as “non-coercion” assumes, or desires, that social good, or society as such, neither exists nor makes heteronomous demands on us as individuals. That all that matters are individual choices, expressions and action – this is the view of methodological individualism. As Wendy Brown suggests, in this analysis ‘freedom is not just an unlimited right, but one exercised without any concern for social context or consequences, without restraint, civility, or care for society as a whole or individuals within it’ (Brown, 2017). Insofar as freedom is thought of as freedom from constraints on action and expression, it becomes the ground from which political battles are fought, and the basis for demands of personal rights as asserted with no care for the social impact of those actions. Personal expressions, no matter their consequence, are seen as sacrosanct precisely because the limitation of them is seen as a

limitation on freedoms and thus allied with whichever oppressive regimes you chose to name – thus, to oppose freedoms of speech is seen as consistent with logics of fascism and so on – the naming of one’s opponent as such can be seen as a form of discursive punishment for not adhering to a norm. The convoluted, illogical nature of this is troubling. We see claims to freedom of speech most often by self-styled libertarians who want to defend their ability to say “controversial” things in the public realm.

However, this formulation rests on the problematic assumption that freedom from constraint is a natural condition and engagement with institutions, people or norms problematically limits that natural state of freedom. As Zygmunt Bauman (1988) articulates, the long history of the study of the concept in sociology has focused on the conditions of “unfreedom”. It assumes, as he says, that freedom was ‘a fact of nature, [and unfreedom was] an artificial creation, a product of certain social arrangements’ (Bauman, 1988: 4). This history, that concentrated on restriction, limitation, social constraints – all concepts that assume an external (as constraints) or internal (as conscience) pressure – became a ‘self-evident, axiomatic assumption’ (ibid.: 5). However, as Bauman is keen to assert, the free human individual is far from a natural or universal figure, but an historical and social creation.

Individual freedom cannot and should not be taken for granted, as it appears (and perhaps disappears) together with a particular kind of society.  
(Bauman 1988: 7)

Individual freedom is thus a contingent social construct that emerges out of the conditions of a particular society – in his analysis this society is capitalist. And we should of course be conscious here that capitalism is the accumulative mode by which differential power is gained by differential accumulation. Because as Bauman suggests, freedom only exists as a social relation – relying on the differentiation between one party and another – one person’s freedom comes at the expense of another’s, freedom accrues in accordance with already existing lines of power. As he suggests, ‘freedom was born as a privilege [it] divides and separates. It sets apart the best from the rest. It draws its attraction from difference: its presence or absence reflects, marks and grounds the contrast between high and low, good and bad, coveted and repugnant’ (ibid.: 9). The form of freedom practiced by free speech advocates and neoliberals alike pretends that having resources in which to perform one’s capacity is unnecessary. Freedom as conceived of as lack of restrictions, for Bauman, is not an adequate expression of what it means to be able to do things

– we need resources, we need *capacity*. Importantly, not conceptualising having resources as a problem for freedom emerges from a position of never having to have worried about having resources or not. Only thinking of freedom as noncoercion is thus a sign of already occupying a privileged, or differentially powerful position in relation to other parties.

Freedom can only be differentially attainable. As Domenico Losurdo reminds us in his historical overview of liberalism, the contradictory dark heart of liberalism is the illiberalism of slavery (Losurdo 2014). The socio-economic conditions that provide some members of a global community with their much-prized freedom comes at the expense of the lack of freedom of others. How do we align an economic system geared towards, in the first instance, the differential accumulation of value with the expansion of freedom into realms that rely on a lack of freedom in order to draw value from them? How do we align freedom with slavery? This dilemma of liberalism is the key question for scholars of freedom to deal with. The differential conception of the attribution of freedom is what structures society – as Bauman suggests, ‘if it is true that “men make society”, it is also true that some men make the kind of society in which other men must live and act. Some people set norms, some other people follow them’ (Bauman, 1988: 23).

The capacity to create social norms freely is the ground for power, precisely because those norms determine the action of others; freedom appears, in Bauman’s analysis, as the capacity to rule. Under this logic, freedom becomes the precondition for oppression. Demand for freedom becomes demand for power over others.

Freedom is power, in so far as there are others who are bound  
(Bauman 1988: 23)

Articulated in this way, it is coherent to analyse the demand for personal freedom of expression as a demand for power. Predominantly these demands come from parties who see themselves as injured by restrictions on their freedoms of expression, but whom have been able to either forget or occlude the suppression of freedoms of others precisely because they do not understand freedom in terms other than noncoercion – to only understand freedom as non-coercion means

any occasion of coercion must be resisted and any reparative activity that seeks to rebalance power differentials are seen as forms of coercion.<sup>33</sup>

Advocates of freedom as non-coercion, then, argue that no one must care about each other when making statements, that, the ability to make statements trumps the harm done by those statements and in fact, because we are all individuals, the making of statements has little or no effect on those parties who might otherwise be harmed – harm is thus just rendered as “taking offense”. However, contra to this view, their actions and statements create, proliferate and reinforce norms. As such, their actions have a performative nature – they create the world they want to live in as a normative function. *Freedom as noncoercion* comes to act as a regulating, axiomatic principle whereby all critical statements must be allowed. Freedom of speech *must* be an inalienable right. But of course, this formulation of freedom as noncoercion as universal axiom, problematically rearticulates the fundamental liberal dilemma of freedom. Insofar as freedom accumulates differentially, some parties will always enjoy more of it than others. To unreflexively assume that this is not the case, or to act as though freedom accrues equally, is to occlude the structural dimension – that some parties will always be restricted or punished more than others, that freedom to speak or to act without coercion just is not realised universally. Some parties have freedom while others do not. As such, this demand for freedom is one that ratifies and increases already existing power, rather than increases universal freedom. If we are to care, as I think we should, about universal, not individual freedom, then we must attend to how these statements operate to restrict the freedoms of others and how they not just articulate but normatively reproduce the liberal dilemma of illiberalism. Equally, we must recover the concept of freedom from those that would seek to restrict it to only noncoercion, we must rearticulate its other, complex meanings – as self-determination, as freedom as capacity, as emancipation from oppression, as a positive project of autonomy that understands its relation to the community. As Judith Butler asks,

If I am struggling for autonomy, do I not need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well, and in ways that are not fully in my control or clearly predictable?

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<sup>33</sup> This type of thought is most prominent in recent debates around racial and gender justice, whereby historically oppressed communities attempt to seek reparative justice only to be criticised by those members of society who have historically enjoyed most social power for attempting to limit their own freedoms and thus to be acting like fascists.

(Butler, 2006: 27)

Are we then, to take seriously the case made for total freedom from coercion? Surely this is neither possible nor desirable. Not possible because the project itself has a normative claim that constructs society in a certain image – which it does so precisely because we are relational beings – and not desirable because dependency, community, respect, an understanding of relationality, of the way our voices and actions impact others and of the ways our freedoms are won at the expense of others is necessary for the construction of social norms, behaviours and institutions that produce maximum justice.

### *3.6 The Concept of Freedom as Occlusion*

If we do wish to live lives free from social and cultural norms, apart from societies that are seen to restrict us, away from the structures that bind us to tradition, community and other humans, then we have to account for how these desires inculcate and institute certain socio-political formations. Insofar as the concept of individual freedom articulates a declination of traditional ties, as Fromm (2001) asserts, it is conceived as a form of structurelessness. This attitude correlates across political and artistic discourses – the genre limits that modernity questioned, deconstructed and worked on that have now dissolved are seen as a structuring condition of art are seen by contemporary art as though they were normative constraints. Without those limits, contemporary artworks float free in a structureless world.

Equally, at the petropolitical level, individualist, liberal conceptions of freedom, as exemplified by Hayek, Friedman and others, find their apogee in the differential market capitalisation of the oil industrial complex. An industry that specifically relies on the privatisation and individualisation of forms of knowledge, access and profit seeking while conterminously producing downstream externalities that are increasingly responsible for the destruction of planetary existence. Within this industry, environmental regulations are downward pressures on market capitalisation – the socio-cultural norms emerging from the environmental movement, that question the legitimacy of these industries and tend towards greater regulation, are limits on the freedom of the market that characterises the ideology of neoliberalism. The general tendency towards less regulation in all spheres is noticeable.

Yet, as is evident in relation to norms, this tendency, while it holds the value of freedom from structure as a central tenet, paradoxically reproduces structure in other ways. This paradox is well articulated by Jo Freeman in her essay “The Tyranny of Structurelessness”. Writing in the context of feminist organising, she asserts, structure is unavoidable, no group that coalesces can do so without the creation of structure. Structure returns to groups that presuppose their own lack of structure.

A “laissez-faire” group is about as realistic as a “laissez-faire” society; the idea becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of ‘structurelessness’ does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones (Freeman, 1996: 1)

By many proponents of forms of liberal and neoliberal governance, explicit, formal structures are seen as a restriction on our freedoms, however, as Freeman understands, the presupposition of structurelessness in fact ‘becomes a way of masking power [...] most strongly advocated for by those who are the most powerful’ (ibid.). Power can be exerted even when the subject is unaware of its existence, for example, in Freeman’s case study, access to childcare can allow some women more capacity to participate in organisations. Not having the same level of access, time, energy, thus prevents an equal distribution of power within groups. In contradistinction from the liberal assumption about structure, formalised structures seek to make evident those inequalities, whereas the declaration of structurelessness merely returns informal structures while concomitantly denying their existence. This occlusion of structure – that comes to enforce already existing power differentials and thus proliferate unfreedoms – is done in the name of freedom. Yet again, the assertion freedom is allied with the restrictions of freedom of others. Is it impossible, then, to think of freedom as a universal concept? Will the expression of freedom in one place necessitate the reduction of freedoms in others?

Nancy Hirschmann (2003) has analysed the differential distribution of freedom, specifically in the way it effects women in society (while her analysis has a feminist focus, this description could equally be applied to other areas – race, class, disability etc). Here she understands how the subject of discourses of freedom and liberty has traditionally been a “neutral”, white, man – the unthought structure that returns to reduce freedoms is here nature itself; “natural” gender distinctions are seen to determine the access women have to, for example, education. As

Hirschmann tells us, the Western liberal tradition is constituted by a principle of patriarchy even when proclaiming itself to be attached to freedom. By focusing on women's experiences, she reconsiders the dominant understanding of freedom, that is seen as severely lacking in complexity, to incorporate particularity into what is (mistakenly) seen as a universal category. If, as she suggests, freedom theory has focused too exclusively on the semantic debates over the meaning of the word, instead of taking into consideration *who* the subject of that freedom *is*, then the theory lacks a substantial concept of power. Hirschmann's critique reinscribes theories of freedom with politics, including the particular experiences of women to articulate a concept of freedom that resists falsely universalising a masculine subject. Hirschmann:

If context sets the terms for understanding claims of freedom, and if women's choices, opportunities, desires, and options exist within a context of patriarchy or sexism, there is good reason to believe that sexism itself can be a barrier to freedom. That is, not just individual sexist acts perpetrated by particular individuals, but the entire cultural construct that assigns greater value to men than to women, that provides more options to men and supports men's pursuit of choice more than women's – in short what many feminists alternately call male privilege or patriarchy – can restrict women's freedom (Hirschmann, 2003: 23)

The context of masculinity thus defines precisely how the expression of the concept of freedom is applied. A partial account of freedom, as Losurdo has also reminded us, leads to a situation whereby one portion of the population is afforded freedoms that are denied to others, to counteract that, we must work with understandings like Hirschmann's that inscribe particularities back into the universal concepts we want to use. Far from accepting what appears as natural or necessary, Hirschmann, along with many other theorists of social emancipation, seek to delegitimise claims to necessity and reveal how, in fact, the social order is plastic, malleable and constructed.<sup>34</sup>

Hirschmann utilises this mode of analysis, social constructivism, to understand how gender differentials come to structure the concept of freedom, identifying the unaccounted unfreedoms at the heart of the pursuit of freedom. In agreement with Bauman's analysis, as described above,

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<sup>34</sup> As Erik Olin Wright suggests, 'a central proposition of all theories of social emancipation is that the structures and institutions that generate the forms of oppression and social harms identified in the diagnosis and critique of society do not continue to exist simply out of some law of social inertia; they require active mechanisms of social reproduction' (Olin Wright, 2010: 26).

‘sociohistorical configuration’ is seen as productive of our social worlds, structures, institutions and relationships (ibid.: 75). Liberalism here is conceived as only one possible response to the contemporary historical and political conditions, rather than the only response, she sees it as ‘no longer inevitable or natural, but contingent and historically specific’ (ibid.). Thus, when we discuss concepts such as freedom, we must understand them both in their timeless, universality *and* in their specific instantiations within the conditions provided by the contingent socio-political contexts. This weaving of local occasions and universal concepts is a key methodological tool that I will return to in Chapter Six.

### *3.7 The Concept of Freedom as Commitment*

In Martin Hägglund’s (2019) work, the concept of freedom appears as a matter of what he calls secular faith. In this understanding, faith is described as the commitment to a set of procedures that reiterate and reproduce responsibility- it is only through the commitment to the object of our commitment that we recognise as finite that secular faith has any meaning. The recognition of our finitude – both that we will die and that we are necessarily reliant on others to support our existence – invokes in us a sense of responsibility to others as ends in themselves, not as means to an end. As opposed to religious faith, that Hägglund argues is tied to ideas of the infinite in the notion of life after death and thus cannot adequately value life because it does not view it as either precarious or precious (because of that precarity). It is this ethical commitment that I want to borrow from Hägglund to understand how freedom is explicable by the ideas of responsibility rather than through the notion of escape. Let us look more closely at Hägglund’s work to understand this.

In response to the appropriation of the concept of freedom by the political right, where freedom ‘serves to defend “the free market” and is largely reduced to a formal conception of individual liberty’ (Hägglund 2019: 31), Hägglund argues that many thinkers on the left have retreated from or rejected the idea of freedom. This, he suggests is a mistake, declaring the necessity to include concepts of freedom in emancipatory politics. In his understanding of a renewed conception of freedom for the left, this important political concept emerges not through ideas of individual or personal liberty, but as a social project whereby we must acknowledge the necessity to rely on others for our own survival. The acceptance of our own finitude becomes here the basis of the expression of our freedom, insofar as freedom becomes a commitment rather than a release

from responsibilities – precisely, it is the acceptance of and commitment to responsibilities that mark us as social beings. For Hägglund secular faith;

recognizes that the defining purposes of our lives depend on our commitments. The authority of our norms cannot be established by divine revelation or natural properties but must be instituted, upheld and justified by our practices.

(Hägglund 2019: 16)

It is only through an ongoing process of engagement with practical attention to the difficult tasks we have in our lives that we can be free – a dedication to our projects – rather than the liberal understanding of freedom as non-coercion, Hägglund, paraphrasing Marx, suggests that freedom ‘does *not* consist in a liberation from labor and necessity’ (ibid.: 323). The idea of freedom as limitless supply of free time away from anything that is put at stake, that matters, that has value, that we need to struggle for, is anathema to Hägglund. It is precisely in the *struggle* that the value of what we commit to emerges.

The role of instituting is important to Hägglund; he identifies the necessity of the institution of social norms as opposed to the expectation that these norms will obtain naturally or through an act of divine revelation. Without adequate social institutions, the capacity to sustain our commitments is reduced. As I shall explore later in this thesis, this understanding of the importance of institutions is key to my theorisation of a socialism by which we can expand our epistemological understandings of and commitments to justice. Hägglund’s work is coherent with this theorisation insofar as he identifies the role commitment plays in the struggle for freedom. He identifies commitment to a project as ‘any form of purposive activity with which you identify and to which you are freely committed’ (ibid.: 214), expanding that these projects could be anything that you ‘treat as an end in itself’ (ibid.). This is not merely the avowal of a belief, but the active commitment to something that makes a demand on me – caring for a loved one, building a house, indeed, writing a thesis – thus, freedom can only be expressed through the acknowledgement that the value of something only emerges when that thing is at finite. It is the finitude of the object of our commitments that makes us value it; Hägglund suggests that ‘by virtue of my commitment, I cannot be indifferent but must be responsive to the fate of what I value’ (ibid.: 220). Thus, the commitment to pursuing our projects is only possible because of the value inferred on those projects by the knowledge of them as finite – the fragility of the environment, for example, provides us with motivation to commit to its protection (or one

hopes). It is precisely in this way, we could say, that artistic *practice* constitutes a commitment to freedom – the pursuit of a project as an end in itself – yet this cannot, however, be said of the reception of the artwork itself (which is my main concern here). The moment of apprehension of the artwork, in contradistinction to the sustained commitment that a practice entails, appears as a revelatory moment isolated from the practice itself. In this sense, the apprehension of a work of art cannot clearly be said to encompass the same conception of freedom as artistic practice.

In the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, the idea of autonomy links directly to the Greek origins of the word – *auto nomos*, meaning self-law. Autonomy then, specifically means the creation or institution of one's own laws; to be free, we have to make our own *nomos*, autonomy is a movement of self-legitimation (Castoriadis, 1991: 162). However, autonomous societies – ones entirely governed by their own laws and norms – rarely exist; according to Castoriadis 'almost always, almost everywhere societies have lived in a state of *instituted heteronomy*. An essential constituent of this state is the instituted representation of the extrasocial source of the *nomos*' (ibid.) Which is to say, society is almost always constituted by laws and norms that are adjudicated from sites relatively external to it. While he doesn't discuss autonomy in art, there are formations that can be mapped across to art here. As Andy Hamilton asserts, following Adorno, 'autonomy is normally taken to mean that art is governed by its own rules and laws, and that artistic value makes no reference to social or political value' (Hamilton: 251). This concept of autonomy as self-legislation, rather than escape, is coherent with Castoriadis' work. For him, autonomy is not the absence of laws or norms – not the escape from them into a lawless realm – but the creative act of institution that 'ushers in a new type of society and a new type of individuals' (Castoriadis, 1991: 163).

Autonomy does not consist in acting according to a law discovered in an immutable Reason and given once and for all. It is the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations as well as the capacity, in light of this interrogation, to *make, to do* and to *institute* (therefore also, *to say*). Autonomy is the reflective activity of a reason creating itself in an endless movement, both as individual and social reason  
(Castoriadis, 1991: 164)

This continual movement of self-creation at a social and individual level articulates just what is at stake here. Instead of understanding autonomy as the retreat into a privileged zone, safe guarded

from the laws and norms of society, or free from the struggles of that society, we can re-imagine it as a dialectically creative passage between registers and scales that works to institute laws and norms. This also points up the failure of contemporary understandings of art's autonomy – if art thinks the passage into autonomy purely as an exercise in escape then it disavows the dialectical potential to co-constitute society in another image.

Despite Petsche's insistence that Adorno held radical negativity as the safeguard against art's potential escapist tendencies, art today has reneged on that Adornian promise. Not only because, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) suggest, negativity and critique have been reincorporated, but because the characterisation of autonomy as escape has precluded the capacity art might have had to act as an engine for socio-political change. However, when autonomy is considered as a process of self-legislative construction, as Castoriadis asserts, then 'politics is a project of autonomy [...] politics is the reflective and lucid collective activity that aims at the overall institution of society' (Castoriadis, 1991: 169). Autonomy, thus understood, is a deliberate, political activity that works towards common ends through common means, not through the privileging of one particular subject, instead it is a collective instituting of laws and norms. Art, then, can partake in this continual movement of collective instituting once it re-understands the political project of autonomy in this Castoriadian frame.

This formulation, as Castoriadis suggests, seems unusual 'only to those who believe in thunderlike freedom and in the free-floating, being-for-itself disconnected from everything, including its own history' (ibid.: 173). Castoriadis ridicules those who would believe that freedom is a release from all boundaries, regulation or limits and that a desirable state is one of structureless flux. The way this form of freedom infects the project of autonomy is important, as societies reflexively self-create their own boundaries, the desire to break with those boundaries continually emerges. This dialectical procedure of forming and then breaking with the law is fundamental to any functioning democratic society – however, what Castoriadis' work warns us against is the idea that there could be any final resting place for this society – thunderlike freedom as a telos is not desirable nor achievable – instead, autonomy is not a transcendence of the law, but a continual reformulation of it.

This challenge to the conception of freedom that asserts a delinked methodological individualism (a thunderlike freedom from all rules and laws), also proposes a strong counter to the contemporary insistence on individualised, subjectivised aesthetic experience. Where art

thinks autonomy as a paratactical, atelic escapism – which is to say the creation of spatially and temporally delimited zones somehow outside, or alongside, the prevalent conditions, that adhere to the non-strategic production of local horizons – it fails in the task of instituting radical counter hegemonic socio-political realities. We must rethink autonomy as the creation of reflexive, synthetic complex counter hegemonies that are capable of instituting common, or collective freedoms rather than the dive into the myopia of, on the one hand, particularism or, on the other, false universality.

What is apparent, then, is the necessity to rethink concepts of freedom within art in line with a renewed engagement with Adorno's work through the lens of more recent understandings of the way power intersects with appeals to freedom. Instead of allowing neoliberal articulations to dominate, articulations that can only attribute freedom the value of being free from norms, laws and heteronomous control, we can hope to think of art as a form of constructive autonomy. Whereby it returns to the institutional role of interceding in the production of axioms. This, however, is not an easy task. As Chapter Five will discuss, we cannot hope to jump over the void separating individual works of art and the capacity they might have to autonomously institute socially transformative norms and laws. We do need to begin, however, by thinking of the capacity of art to constitute laws as a useful starting point for this project. If we *only* imagine autonomy in terms of negative freedom, we cannot imagine how autonomous art can produce political change. But equally, we must reject the differential freedoms that exemplify the conditions of the Second Age of Oil – the insistence on freedom as escape from norms, laws and regulation reinscribes the power differentials that characterise the massive inequalities inherent in this time period. The mythic nature of freedom in this era, that it only accrues to people who already have power yet is assumed to be a natural feature of the market/life, occludes the huge differentials at play. If art can only see freedom in an individualistic sense, it will never be able to take up the necessity for a counter-hegemonic challenge.

## Chapter Four: Exemplification

Cultural capitalism [treats] official culture as an economic activity driving innovation, thereby justifying its support on economic grounds. As in other areas of government investment, such as defence, commercial culture looks to official culture to fund the training, research and risks that commerce can exploit  
(Hewison 2014: 220)

### 4.1 Rebrand

In the summer of 2000, after a series of acquisitions, British Petroleum spent a reported total of \$211 million to rebrand as Beyond Petroleum, employing advertising giants Landor to redesign their logo as a green and yellow flower/sun to indicate their new commitment to green energy and a reduction in emissions (*Most expensive logo*). The rebrand drew the ridicule of a number of commentators, not least Greenpeace who mocked the oil company for attempting to paper over their extractive practices with canny marketing. In the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill on the BP operated Macando Prospect oil rig, Greenpeace launched an attack campaign that asked the public to redesign the infamous “Helios” logo in line with the company’s record. The ad Greenpeace took out read:

It is clear that BP's bright green logo has never matched the reality of the company. Since taking over in 2007, Tony Hayward has taken BP back to petroleum, chasing the last drops of oil from unconventional sources like the Canadian tar sands and deep-water drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.  
(Brownswell 2010)

Drawing attention to the hugely disproportionate amount spent on acquiring ARCO to expand its oil drilling portfolio over the amount spent on the much smaller solar energy company

Solarex (\$26.5 billion against \$45 million), Greenpeace accused BP of greenwashing. Foregrounding their environmental credentials whilst continuing their extractive and polluting practices, including investing in the controversial Alberta tar sands extraction, was a marketing trick that sought to resist the downward pressure of the falling rate of profit. BP had read the public mood – environmentalism was becoming popular – and had responded with a campaign aimed at repositioning themselves as an environmentally responsible oil company. However, with an increased investment in controversial extraction projects, the expansion of their oil drilling portfolio and a swath of environmental disasters to their name, nothing could be further from the truth.

Colloquially this marketing practice is known as greenwashing, it is common enough, but for the purposes of this thesis, I want to understand it through the frame provided by Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg (2015). Responding to the necessity to protect their reputational capital, firms would often, as analysed by Wright and Nyberg, employ tactics of corporate environmentalism. These tactics they name as “exemplification”. Drawing on the work of Boltanski, Chiapello and Thevenot, this analysis understands corporate environmentalism as a process of *incorporating critique*. My claim is that this practice is not just limited to the corporate world. Contemporary art is not only uniquely positioned as a tool in the practice of exemplification (BP’s sponsorship of the Tate points to this) but is also governed by a similar logic. Within the context of the reputational economy, contemporary art works to increase reputational capital through the expression of moral goodness (a quality that has been employed in the now common practice known as “artwashing”), while conterminously blindly reproducing, or not adequately addressing, differential power and systemic oppression. The axiomatics of contemporary art revolve around an image of goodness/virtue whereby it appears to be committed to an ethico-political project of either guilt assuagement, amelioration or social restoration where, in fact, its continuation of systemic inequality is tied to its role in the valorisation of capital, the entrenchment of class power, and the reinscription of notions of freedom as deregulation. Art problematically structures its performative assuagement of inequity around the liberal notion of access rather than the radical project of redistribution, thus furthering the logic of neoliberalisation. This chapter is focused on an analysis of this phenomena, understanding the desire for an increase in perceived moral goodness to stem from the necessity to increase one’s own human capital, tying this reading to the forms of exemplification theorised by Wright and Nyberg. Nancy Fraser (2019) describes this condition, and one she analyses as at play within society at large, as a form of “progressive neoliberalism”.

For Fraser, progressive neoliberalism is an alliance of two tendencies; ‘on the one hand, mainstream liberal currents of the new social movements (feminism, antiracism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ+ rights); on the other hand, the most dynamic, high-end, “symbolic”, and financial sectors of the US economy (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood)’ (Fraser, 2019: 11). This hegemonic bloc, as she describes it, foregrounds its “progressive” credentials, whilst continuing the economic trajectory of much of the latter part of the twentieth century. As Fraser suggests, ‘[t]he progressive-neoliberal bloc combined an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition’ (ibid.: 11-12). The concept of exemplification emerges directly from this hegemonic alliance, it acts as the fundamental motor of this politics. As discussed below, the politics of recognition that emerged from the 1960s counter cultural movements provided the legitimacy for capitalist accumulation and the “lean-in” varieties of feminism emerging in the context of neoliberalism.

#### 4.2 *Greenwashing*

The systemic fear analysed by Bichler and Nitzan (2011) discussed earlier (Chapter Two), provides an internal driver for capitalists. In response to increased critique, declining market share and profitability, capitalists are concerned with losing control. The presumed impending crisis is systemic, general rather than localised, and is generally assumed to have three specific features that Bichler and Nitzan outline as; crises of the relation between politics and economy, as a mismatch between “real” and “nominal” aspects of the economy and as rooted in our past sins. However, the authors want to suggest these foundational assumptions are wrong. They claim that if we were to think of capital as a form of *power*, then these assumptions would become unsound, instead;

The bifurcation of “economics” and “politics” would become untenable, thereby rendering the notion of economic crisis meaningless. The separation of the “real” and the “nominal” would become unworkable, thereby leaving finance with nothing to match or mismatch. And the backward-looking orientation of the analysis would have to give way to a forward-looking stance, rooting the crisis not in the sins of the past but in the misgivings of the future.

(Bichler and Nitzan, 2011: 3)

Thought of as a form of power, capital then becomes entangled in the struggle for domination, whereby future accumulation is tied into present power. A normal crisis of capital might indicate a decrease in power, but one that will be resolved eventually, whereas a systemic crisis indicates a precipitous drop in power. As Bichler and Nitzan claim, this systemic risk increases, as does the potential for the precipitous decline in power, precisely when this power reaches its asymptote – a ceiling that is never quite reached. An asymptotic ceiling not only indicates the limit of capital, but the need for greater and greater force to keep capital accumulation on track;

Capitalist power rarely if ever reaches its upper limit. The reason can be explained in reference to the following dialectical interplay: the closer power gets to this limit, the greater the resistance it elicits; the greater the resistance, the more difficult it is for those who hold power to increase it further; the more difficult it is to increase power, the greater the need for force and sabotage; and the more force and sabotage, the higher the likelihood of a serious backlash, followed by a decline or even disintegration of power (Bichler and Nitzan, 2011: 4)

As is evident in the last forty years, petropower has been approaching, if not has reached, its asymptote. The declining viability of traditional extraction methods, the loss of legitimacy due to environmental critique and the clear indicators of the limits to CO2 emissions all point to a serious systemic crisis. These “backlashes” must be met with a response by petrocultural if it wishes to maintain its market dominance and thus power. In Chapter Two I analysed the violent response through the means of financial capital – to place on to the future by means of the derivative, the responsibility to not only return value, but expunge the deleterious effects of pollution. The current chapter is focused on the second means that capital seeks to increase its distributional accumulation – marketing. In the context of the oil industries this marketing takes the form of greenwashing.

The organisational and individual drivers behind greenwashing emerge in the context of increasing regulation, delegitimising loss of public support for the oil industry and the downward pressure of loss of profit due to the increased difficulty of extraction as petropower reaches its asymptote. The oil industry is exemplary in the position it holds – at one and the same time committed to its internal logic of capital accumulation in the face of internal downward pressure and, as a form of marketing, committed to the appearance of environmentalism. Despite overwhelming evidence to suggest the existential threat posed by the industry, oil extraction has

not abated, instead moving towards unconventional, and often much dirtier, methods. These firms then seek to legitimise their behaviour through the offsetting of their moral conscience in the form of virtue marketing.

So widespread is this practice (not only within the energy sector), that the consumer markets for green products has grown exponentially in the last two decades. As Magali A. Delmas and Vanessa Cuerel Burbano have analysed:

The consumer market for green products and services was estimated at \$230 billion in 2009 and predicted to grow to \$845 billion by 2015. At the start of 2010, professionally managed assets utilizing socially responsible investing strategies, of which environmental performance is a major component, were valued at \$3.07 trillion in the U.S., an increase of more than 380 percent from \$639 billion in 1995. More companies are now communicating about the greenness of their products and practices in order to reap the benefits of these expanding green markets.

(Delmas and Burbano 2011: 64)

As consumer knowledge about environmental risk has grown, to be seen to be “green” is profitable. While some firms have sought to reduce waste, limit their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or “go green”, many have also opted for the practice of greenwashing, or ‘misleading consumers about firm environmental performance or the environmental benefits of a product or service’ (ibid.). While it is indeed virtuous to incorporate green policies, the detrimental effect of greenwashing is significant. As Delmas and Burbano suggest, the rise in greenwashing has a profound negative effect on consumer confidence, eroding trust in green products and services. The backlash against firms that seek to reimagine themselves as green is not limited to the BP example above. Just witness the media storm surrounding the recent revelation that Volkswagen were fixing their emissions figures.<sup>35</sup>

Delmas and Burbano define greenwashing as the ‘intersection of two firm behaviours: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance’ (ibid.: 65). The disparity between performance and the communication of that performance is accounted for by the regulatory context – punitive measures against greenwashing, especially in the US, where this study is carried out, are limited. Firms face little incentive to avoid

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<sup>35</sup> Brignall (2015), for example

greenwashing but high rewards. The analysis emphasises the importance of ‘regulatory, normative and cognitive factors’ (ibid.: 68) in determining firms’ tendencies towards greenwashing. There are seen to be a number of driving factors, some internal and some external – these can be further broken down into market external demands (consumer/investor demand and competitive pressure), non-market external drivers (lax regulation, activist/NGO/media monitoring), individual psychological drivers (optimistic bias, narrow decision framing, hyperbolic intemporal discounting) and internal organisational drivers (firm characteristics, incentive structure and culture, effectiveness of intrafirm communication, organisational inertia). These factors all determine the tendency of a firm to greenwash. They all point to an environment in which firms have the freedom to utilise whatever means necessary to increase shareholder value, where legitimacy is being eroded due to normative behaviour, and where short termism is prominent.

Toby Miller (2018) has analysed how culture is implicated in the project of greenwashing. This complicity, he argues, operates in two ways; through the externalities it produces in the form of energy consumption and the failure to deal with that consumption. This complicity is then, as in the case of corporate greenwashing explored above, covered over by the self-promotion as good environmental citizens. There are multiple examples. The irony of the international biennale that insists thousands of visitors a year fly many thousands of miles to look at works of art – often that express distress at social ills like environmental degradation. Institutions that accept sponsorship from oil and gas companies, whilst showcasing artworks that challenge the legitimacy of those very same industries. The independent curator that reproduces bad employment practices by not adequately paying their artists while making an exhibition about the conditions of labour. Miller asserts culture as a way for polluters to seek social license to continue their activity, understanding culture through multiple lenses – among others, as a means of spiritual uplift, as a project of critique, through the Marxist understanding of culture industry as the creation of false consciousness or in Gramscian terms as a legitimation for the hegemonic political economy. As Miller suggests, culture ‘offers important resources to markets and nations’ (Miller, 2018: 33). Because culture reflects and manifests each epoch’s consciousness of itself, suggests Miller drawing on Althusser (ibid.: 34), it is seen as a resource in and of itself.

This understanding of greenwashing sees culture as a way to provide “symbolic cover” for the institutions’ own polluting tendencies. Contemporary art is a tool in the task of greenwashing. But, as I will claim later in this chapter, contemporary art is not only an adequate tool in this

project, but adheres to the same set of axiological conditions – insofar as art operates to occlude its own structural effects through a foregrounding of virtue, it is bound to a project of marketing that get realised in what I called in Chapter Three, “neoliberal virtue”.

### *4.3 The Expediency of Contemporary Art*

In a 2013 speech addressed to arts executives in the British Museum, then Conservative Secretary for Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Maria Miller spoke about the necessity of art’s economic contribution. Her intervention into the debate around art’s function was to assert the dominance of economics. Maintaining and furthering “British values” at home and abroad is the express aim of her position, utilising the soft power of culture to assert British dominance, to, some critics might suggest, continue colonialism by other means. One way of doing this is through the spread of cultural values, a role that successive British Culture Ministers have been fully aware of, the other is through economic growth; art must be seen in this context to have this double function. At one and the same time an ideological function, linked to the nebulous concept of Britishness and the historically problematic concept of civilisation, *and* an economic function whereby culture is understood as a tool in the toolbox of political economy.

Her assertion of culture’s economic value came in the context of vast swaths of austerity measures by the Conservative/Lib Dem coalition, many of them hitting the arts hard. As a declaration of intent, the speech was clearly designed to foreground firstly, the necessity of belt and braces austerity and secondly, the importance of culture in that project. As she suggests:

[S]ome simply want money and silence from Government, but in an age of austerity, when times are tough and money is tight, our focus must be on culture’s economic impact.

(Miller 2013)

Subsuming culture to George Osborne’s economic wishes, Miller asserted the necessity of it as an instrument of growth over and above its other, intrinsic qualities. While many saw this as a deep betrayal (National Theatre director Nicholas Hytner for one was critical<sup>36</sup>), I am convinced that Miller’s statement, while not declaring a desirable normative position, was ontologically

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<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22267625>

coherent. British culture, and especially contemporary art, does, despite its performative resistance to the idea, have a significant economic function in line with the Conservative Chancellor's designs.

As George Yúdice suggests, the concept of culture as an expedient of governance or economic development has 'displaced or absorbed some of the other understandings' (Yúdice, 2003: 1). Yúdice sees culture as a resource much like nature, something to be fostered and cared for, for the sake of future generations. This, he suggests entails understanding these resources as part of the process of accumulation. He continues,

*Culture-as-resource* is much more than a commodity; it is the lynchpin of a new epistemic framework in which ideology and much of what Foucault called disciplinary society (i.e., the inculcation of norms in such institutions as education, medicine, and psychiatry) are absorbed into an economic or ecological rationality, such that management, conservation, access, distribution, and investment – in “culture” and the outcomes thereof – take priority.  
(Yúdice, 2003: 1).

Insofar as artworks seek to provide resources for critical engagement, foster social bonds or develop communities, Yúdice suggests that it is impossible to think these practices outside of the frame of the resource. Whereas they assume to be providing the grounds for progressive political struggle against capital or power, artists become managers of expropriative schemes in the name of social good – ‘community-based art projects [...] ultimately enhance the value of real estate, foster investment and so on’ (Yúdice, 2003: 35). Cultural capital provides the legitimacy and value that attracts investment, provides ethical cover and reinscribes civilisation into “uncivilised” areas. Regularly, art institutions, biennales, public art works and so on are introduced to economically “deprived” areas to drive urban regeneration and revive economies. As Robert Hewison (2014), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, has analysed, this form of cultural capital draws value from artistic endeavours but returns it in economic form to the state or, more often, private investors. Hewison:

Cultural capitalism seeks to privatize this shared wealth, absorbing it into the circulation of commodities, and putting it to instrumental use.  
(Hewison, 2014: 7)

In spite of, or even because of, the assertion of the art's autonomy, social ills would be magically transformed with the correct dose of culture.<sup>37</sup> In fact, artwork would not even necessarily have to directly perform social good (in the case of socially engaged art) or have political or social good as its content; the mere existence of art as such, even, or especially, art critical of its own condition as bankable commodity, is enough to draw value to the site of investment in both Hewison and Yúdice's analyses. It is art's power to confer ideological value on a site, to hold economic value as a resource and to provide legitimation that I am analysing here – art with a critical valence performs this process just as well as art without. As Hito Steyerl has suggested, contemporary art suits the environment of the hyper-capitalist oligarch precisely because of the cultural value it infers on him (it is always a “him”), and the critical capacity of a work of art is so intrinsic to that value – autonomy is used against itself as a form of valorisation. She asks;

Why and for whom is contemporary art so attractive? One guess: the production of art presents a mirror image of post-democratic forms of hypercapitalism that look set to become the dominant political post-Cold War paradigm. It seems unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial, moody, guided by inspiration and genius. Just as any oligarch aspiring to dictatorship might want to see himself. The traditional conception of the artist's role corresponds all too well with the self-image of wannabe autocrats, who see government potentially—and dangerously—as an art form. Post-democratic government is very much related to this erratic type of male-genius-artist behavior. It is opaque, corrupt, and completely unaccountable. Both models operate within male bonding structures that are as democratic as your local mafia chapter. Rule of law? Why don't we just leave it to taste? Checks and balances? Cheques and balances! Good governance? Bad curating! You see why the contemporary oligarch loves contemporary art: it's just what works for him!

(Steyerl 2010)

In this essay Steyerl insists that we consider not what the work of art is about, but what it *does*. It is this imperative that drives my analysis here. If anything, my work is to understand how we can apply this form of pragmatic critique to contemporary art. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's famous maxim of pragmatism, that understands the necessity of looking to the practical effects

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<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of art's social impact see Belfiore and Bennett (2010)

of an object, I read contemporary art against itself, understanding the function of it as an object in the world to be as important as what it is ostensibly *about*. Here is the maxim in full:

It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.

(Peirce, cf. Thayer ed. 1982: 88)

I will return to this pragmatic approach later in the thesis. For now, it is enough to note that Steyerl's immanent critique shares a lineage with this tradition, and, further, that any consideration of a theory of contemporary art must understand its function outside its ideological commitments or content. It is this mode of analysis that Dean Kenning and Margareta Kern (2013) take up, where they understand the function of art to be related to increased economisation. Linking artworks to their role on the financial markets, they suggest that art provides 'opportunities to store, accumulate and exhibit extreme personal wealth and to promote corporate and class power via sponsorship deals and philanthropic relations' (Kenning and Kern 2013). They continue;

The cultural prestige attached to contemporary art can also be used to reproduce hierarchies and exclusive networks, instil a neoliberal culture of competitive individual advantage, exploit unpaid or poorly paid labour, and contribute to landholder profits through culture-led gentrification.

(Kenning and Kern 2013)

Insofar as art valorises contemporary capitalist exploitation at the level of its function (which is to say, not at the level of its form or content), it provides a foil for increased accumulation. Acting as part of the asset class (as analysed by Erica Coslor and Olav Velthuis (2013)), artworks provide the perfect vehicle for transporting and storing huge quantities of wealth, often tax free. In the context of financialisation, global hegemonic power thus utilises art as part of the process of valorisation, accumulation and transfer of wealth amongst the richest percentage of the population. Somewhat like oil commodities, art's economic value is sometimes projected into the future through its role on the derivatives market. Thus, individual artworks are temporally coded for economic growth apart from their value at the auction house – they exist as part of an asset

class for investment incommensurate with their value in the art world as such. But let's examine this a little more closely. Despite the reticence of some dealers (Coslor and Velthuis, 2013), the financialisation of art has increased in the last thirty years (in line with generalised financialisation of the economy), however, as Coslor and Velthuis insist, the art market has not been entirely financialised precisely due to artworks' illiquid nature. As they suggest, '[t]he lack of liquidity and costliness of information means that works of art cannot be bought and sold easily; it is difficult to locate and match supply and demand, which in turn results in high transaction costs' (Coslor and Velthuis, 2013: 482). Artworks' value fluctuations at the whim of taste make the projected value uncertain – 'the potential rewards are high, but so is the risk' (ibid.: 481). The unregulated nature of the artworld makes it less attractive for professional financial investment. There *have* been occurrences of artworks bought and sold in securitised form, it is just not the success story that some might have thought, or hoped for. Liquidity needs to be constructed; the unregulated nature of the artworld is more akin, then, to the *laisse faire* nature of liberal markets, rather than the highly interventionist strategies employed in the neoliberal era. Thus, the art market somewhat resists total financialisation because it is unregulated, which is to say, unmeasured, not scientific, lacking in calculation. It is, as Steyerl suggests above, mercurial, dynamic, unpredictable – much like the figure of the modern artist that so attracts hyper capitalist investment. Precisely because of this nature, the art market, instead of a site for professional investment, can be exploited as a site for corruption – forgery, arbitrage, and insider trading – making it a risky environment for financial investment that relies on clarity of data and an ability to predict future trends. The art market, and whatever is meant by the term "the art world", thus models itself on the very nature of contemporary art, free floating, limitless, without regulation.

Despite the resistance the art market has to total financialisation, art itself must be analysed as complicit in aspects of global capital power. The power relations, logics and human values reproduced by neoliberal financialised capitalism are not distinct from current cultural formations, practices and institutions, as Kenning and Kern assert, 'capitalism is not something at a categorical distance from art to be either opposed from an autonomous critical sphere or else submitted to in an act of betrayal to that critical autonomy' (Kenning and Kern 2013) The concept of complicity itself needs to be analysed here; to assume that artworks are *complicit* in power presupposes an a priori "pure art" that is distinct from, but then becomes corrupted by the machinations of power. What I hope to achieve here is an understanding of art that sees its relation to power as intrinsic but not necessary. Which is to say there is not a prelapsarian form of contemporary art that exists in its pure form prior to recuperation into the current political

conjuncture. Contemporary art emerged as part of the conditions of the political economy of the twentieth century, and recursively feeds into them – art here does not exist as an expression of political economy, but a sphere within which political and economic logics manifest, emerge and have traction. But, importantly, it could otherwise be so.<sup>38</sup> In other words, art is coterminous with the constructions and maintenance of global power, not divorced from it, nor an empty container within which power finds its representation or cheerleader – yet, and this is an important distinction, art is not seen here as a project that is *necessarily* tied to the particular direction of travel of these political logics, it is only bound to neoliberalism insofar as it is considered part of the genre of *contemporary* art. This is not to say that non-contemporary art, or art prior to the contemporary period, existed in some autonomous realm away from political and social conditions, but that, precisely, contemporary art conditions and is conditioned by, the neoliberal variant of political economy. Even, especially, insofar as artworks appear to be critical or to escape from those conditions.

Whereas artworks and practices might seek to disrupt, resist or challenge the neoliberal hegemony, even perhaps the petropolitical conditions of that hegemony in the case of many recent works of art and exhibitions, these artworks and practices do not escape their paradoxical relation to those conditions. On the one hand, as Kenning and Kern suggest, ‘capitalism and elite power are immanent to art’ continuing, ‘art is one of the forms of its manifestation and operation, a mechanism elites use to consolidate and extend that power’ (Kenning and Kern, 2013). Yet on the other, artworks continually resist, at the level of content, this complicity. Or some, further still, admit this complicity as a form of immanent critique. What is coherent to suggest here, is that contemporary art, as it exists under the current socio-political conditions, performs at a functional or structural level services that it opposes at a conceptual or ideological level. Kenning and Kern suggest that;

In recent years art has appeared to manifest forms that challenge neoliberal dominance, with exhibitions, artworks, projects and talks in galleries concerned to question, criticise and oppose the systems of global financial capital, and to propose alternatives to it. However, so long as these events and discourses do not address directly the specific material and symbolic conditions that frame them, criticality can be dissipated, rendered

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<sup>38</sup> As I will analyse in the next chapter, we cannot hope to remove contemporary art from this context by fiat, instead, what is needed is a thoroughgoing, continual remaking of art and culture and of political economy. As I will suggest, art is to be seen as part of this process of remaking.

ineffective or, worse, act as a radical smokescreen for both individual works and institutional set-ups keen to maintain avant-gardist credentials while embodying neoliberal values

(Kenning and Kern, 2013)

My claim is that this radical smokescreen concept goes right to the heart of the logic of contemporary art. Art is not just a tool in the concealing of the truth of a political conjuncture, but has that concealing aspect as an axiom. Even when art seeks to reveal the truth of the conditions of its making, it does so, as I will show, as part of an expression of virtue that confers value on the person, institution or neighbourhood it is being associated with, it uses virtue to occlude the processes by which it reinforces inequity and reinscribes hierarchy, and virtue comes to be seen as the predominant criteria for quality despite its complicity in oppressive techniques. Indeed, as Andrea Philips suggests, Contemporary Art participates in a project of colonising value through the expression of righteousness:

Since its postwar governmentalization in Europe, culture has only had one real value to economize socially, and that is its general value. The demand to economize value is met with outrage in most quarters of the art world. Yet value is at the core of art's self-belief – it is why the MACBA feels entitled to incorporate anti-capitalist activists into its program. In this sense the arts colonize value: this colonization is performed through the perpetuation of righteous belief systems at local and international scales. The value of art is its export. Its general European liberal value regime is exported across the world, masking human rights atrocities to local labor debates. What is this general value? Care, community, neighbourliness, sustainability, etc. These values are shared by the directors of major museums and their boards as well as by activists; they are shared by small-scale, large-scale, micro-political, and macro-institutional players.

(Philips in Amundson and Mørland 2015: 39)

It is coherent, then to suggest that art utilises its vainglorious belief in its virtuous nature as a mode of colonialism – whereby the spread of the concept of contemporary art is useful to powerful interests despite, or indeed because of its progressive value. A significant mode by which art operates to ratify already existing power relations is through the mode of inclusion and disinclusion – whereby the cost of access is extremely high, but also, true to type, indeterminate;

it is expressly not articulated what requirements someone must meet to be included or excluded. It is this contradiction that forms a central axiom of contemporary art.

#### *4.4 The Paradoxical Doing of Contemporary Art*

In the well-known essay *The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights* (2008), Boris Groys is keen to reassert the autonomy of art as a mode of resistance against external pressure. If art is to have any power, he suggests, it cannot be purely a means of aestheticising or decorating politics. However, Groys suggests, the art system itself, cannot be purely autonomous, but must reflect certain ‘dominant social conventions and power structures’ (Groys, 2008: 12). The art system, in his rendering of it, is defined by a multitude of external value judgements, criteria and rules, which leads, he suggests, to an abandonment by many artists and critics (he never names which ones he means) of the concept of autonomy; ‘the autonomy of art was – and still is – thought of as dependent on the autonomy of the aesthetic value judgement’ (ibid.). In other words, if the *decision* about what enters the art system – what becomes art – is not autonomous, art-immanent, then the artwork itself is seen as non-autonomous, and thus rendered merely decoration. However, against this tendency, Groys asserts that it is precisely this condition of absence of immanent value judgement that guarantees the autonomy of art. He suggests ‘[t]he territory of art is organized around the lack or, rather, the rejection of any aesthetic judgement’ (ibid.). I made a similar argument around the dissolution of genre in the previous chapter, but here, Groys brings in the concept of judgement to understand how artworks enter into the regime of art. And this entry is precisely conditioned by an absence of judgement, which is to say, the condition of entry is not guaranteed by a hierarchy of taste, but by the assertion of equal aesthetic rights. As Groys suggests;

[T]he autonomy of art implies not an autonomous hierarchy of taste – but abolishing every such hierarchy and establishing the regime of equal aesthetic rights for all artworks. The art world should be seen as the socially codified manifestation of the fundamental equality between all visual forms, objects and media.  
(Groys, 2008: 13)

In this passage Groys understands art world limits to be modified by the condition of equality, the artworld is thus an expression of that equality, distributed not around a hierarchy of value

judgements, but a flat plane of equal rights. It is only under these conditions, he suggests, that every judgement can be seen as a 'heteronomous intrusion into the autonomous sphere of art' (ibid.). As such, art works resist intrusion (and confirm their autonomy) by an assertion of their equality. This assertion, Groys suggests, links art to politics through a claim to the recognition of equal rights. The avant garde is thus rendered a political project of equality that demands every artwork, and thus person, be thought of as fundamentally equal. In the name of fundamental equality, the field of art is extended to all objects and images, forms that previously existed outside of its remit. The name of art is given over to 'all possible pictorial forms' (ibid.), to allow their entry into the regime of art under the condition of equality. Art has become a site open to all, the 'kind of recognition that once used to be granted only to the historically privileged artistic masterpieces' (ibid.). Recall Osborne's (2013) concept of transcategoriality, or Medina's (2010) conceptualisation of contemporary art as a multifarious and nomadic field, or further still the understanding of aesthetic nominalism in the writing of De Duve (1996). Groys' claims exist in the same universe as these theorists'. Art has opened out, become radically tolerant of difference, and as such has become a model of liberalism, recognising as legitimate 'forms and artistic procedures that were not previously considered legitimate' (ibid.).

For Groys, this becomes a politics of inclusion directed against the politics of exclusion of minorities. Contemporary art's total tolerance becomes adequate to a tolerant political regime, that resists the imposition from the outside of inequalities. As such, contemporary art's power comes from its ability to declare the equality of all images and signs in its system, an inferential system that *acts as though everything is equal*. The normative condition of contemporary art is one of total inclusion insofar as works of art index their own acquiescence to this equalisation – "good" art is art that speaks of equality. Some artists transplant images from regional context into a mass media and some do the reverse and insert mass media images into a regional context. The ability of art to not just transcend regional boundaries, but to act as though they don't exist is central to this logic. Contemporary art, I would argue, thus becomes rather than an index of political equality, indexical of the global citizen, capable of crossing borders at will, with minimal resistance. This conception of citizenship is problematic in the sense that it denies the actually existing inequalities that do exist, holding equality and tolerance as an epitome of what it means to be civilised, thus centring a narrative of politics around a falsely universalised subject – the privileged passport holder. Divorcing the universal from the particular in ways that deny the particular circumstances of subjects without privileged access to the freedom to transcend boundaries, Groys' celebration of equality uses the concept of equality as a smokescreen to

occlude actually existing inequalities in much the same way as theorists of freedom, as analysed by Hirschman (2003), wrongly presuppose their subject to be universal. What Groys' conception of art does, is derive its universal principle from the particular conditions of western manifestations of art without recourse to the privileged conditions that made those particularities possible. Any assertion of equal aesthetic rights thus occludes the structural conditions that allowed those artworks or subjects their free movement whilst denying others the same privilege.

Groys' understanding lacks a theory of power. Nowhere is the concept of equality attenuated through a lens of differential access to the means to gain that equal position – artworks merely sever their relationships to any particularity. This critique, of course, finds its genealogy in the post-structuralist and feminist critiques of universalism that, as Judith Butler asserts, 'have noted the use of the doctrine of universality in the service of colonialism and imperialism' (Butler in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 15). The association between universal claims and colonialism could be made here in regard to Groys' work, but it is perhaps more interesting to re-evaluate the role of universality within artistic and political discourses. Raising to the level of abstraction the concept of equality allows Groys to sidestep theorisations of power differentials and the way that power manifests and is made through and in social life. As Butler suggests, '[p]ower is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life; it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense, and is ensconced as the prevailing epistemes of a culture' (ibid: 14). To read Groys in Butlerian terms, equality thus becomes a formal claim, one that seeks to assert itself as an abstract law or universal, that sediments in the current episteme the concept of equality as silo'd off from the power relations that provide certain subjects the access to it. Equality as an assertion, not as a struggle, comes to form our common sense. This is a claim that relies on an abstraction away from the particular in order to produce universal claims – formalism is, as Butler suggests, the 'product of abstraction' (ibid: 19). She continues, 'this abstraction requires its separation from the concrete, one that leaves the trace or remainder of this very separation in the very working of the abstraction. In other words, abstraction cannot remain rigorously abstract without exhibiting something of what it must exclude in order to constitute itself as abstraction' (ibid.). Formalising claims for equality thus exclude the work that goes against that equality of images, work that adheres to hierarchical systems, work that binds to the parochial. As such, this work is seen as outside the conditions of contemporaneity; a contemporaneity that assumes total equality. As such, there is a paradox at the heart of the claim Groys makes when he suggests that

[T]his struggle for inclusion is possible only if the forms in which the desires of the excluded minorities manifest themselves are not rejected and suppressed from the beginning by any kind of aesthetic censorship operating in the name of higher aesthetic values

(Groys, 2008: 15)

These aesthetic values are thus replaced by ethical values that assert the claim that only work that adheres to the ethical demand for equal aesthetic rights be tolerated in the system of art – as such becoming identical to liberal civilising notions of community and citizenship. The violence this performs is, as we have seen, occluded by the assertion of ethical “good” inherent in the notion of equality. Groys’ idea of art as focused on the concept of goodness as derived from the declaration of equality and total tolerance is identical in form to a type of neoliberal virtue analysed by Sara Farris (2017). Tolerance as a form of ethical goodness as opposed to the perceived intolerance of the Islamic faith is a narrative that plays out across Europe today. As shown by Farris, in her use of the term femonationalism, multiple actors in the contemporary political context invoke women’s rights to forward their own Islamophobic agendas. As she suggests;

Short for “feminist and femocratic nationalism”, femonationalism refers both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality.

(Farris, 2017: 4)

In her analysis, concepts of gender equality are invoked in order to produce anti-Islam narratives about oppressive male violence within the faith, which in turn stirs up feminist critiques of Islam. Central to contemporary Western democracies are doctrines of gender equality, even if their realisations are inadequate, that can be utilised to counter perceived oppression or lack of tolerance within what are seen as “less civilised” populations and nations. The use of equality here mirrors that foregrounded by Groys. While in Farris’ work femonationalism indexes the advance of ‘xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality’ (ibid.), pursuing these politics in the name of equality and tolerance, which inscribes into Islam the “common sense” notion of intolerance and the idea that Muslim women need to be “saved”. In Groys’ work, the concept of equal aesthetic rights rides roughshod over aesthetic forms that

appear to be outside the conditions he ascribes, assuming them to be “bad” art. Thus, the concept of equality reinscribes an inside and outside, a disavowed hierarchy that markets itself as a horizontality. Within this frame, exclusions occur that delimit work that does not perform in the way Groys suggests it should, which is to say work that is perceived to be “intolerant” of all other images. Without wanting to find a place for intolerance within the conditions of contemporary art – my claim is not that Groys’ work is wrong to exclude intolerance, it is that his assumptions about inclusion paradoxically reinscribe a form of exclusion that he cannot vouch for – I would want to understand how limits to contemporary art are avowed rather than problematically disavowed in a move that prescribes a universality which occludes the conditions that created it. As we discovered in Chapter One, Chantal Mouffe (2005) identifies this occlusion of politics in her analysis of third-wayism. As she suggests, this political conjuncture foregrounds consensus politics, occluding the very real agonistic elements of discourse. As becomes evident, the critique of Groys above identifies the axiological relation between contemporary art and Mouffe’s analysis of neoliberalism. Thus, it is coherent to suggest that Groys’ concept of universality does not account for the socio-political constructionist nature of the limits of contemporary art.

As Hirschman (2003) suggests, a theory of social construction is important to help us understand the way claims to universality miss out on their true properties – that the universal is, at least in part, socially constructed. This social construction necessarily concretises around concepts that form the guiding principles of a movement, period or nation. In the case of contemporary art, the concept of equality of aesthetic forms has come to stand in for that concrete centre just as much as freedom from coercion has. But this central claim around which the genre of contemporary art concretises misses what it excludes. What eludes the claims precisely is what, according to Butler, ‘return[s] to haunt the polities predicated upon their absence’ (Butler in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 11). Groys’ assertion of equality acts as a false universalism that occludes the structural inequalities that proceed from the act of declaring something as art and that this disavowed structuring procedure is what returns to undermine his claims. This exclamation of goodness vis-à-vis disavowal is one way contemporary art “greenwashes” its structural conditions.

#### 4.5 In the Background

In her address to a Former West panel (2014) Andrea Phillips discusses the way public institutions, especially arts institutions, mobilise critical content. Her claims revolve around an analysis of what she calls, following management studies language, the back end and front end of neoliberalised institutions. Asking how the front end and the back end of the institution operate together, how claims made in the public facing part of the institution manage the internal workings, Phillips makes the claim that, in the Anglo-Saxon model, these two sides do not meet at all. At the front end, what is displayed to the public, is an ethos of, or call to, a progressive, left political demand or critique. At the level of content, the institution, as Phillips suggests, is often bound to a project of political radicality, whereas at the back end, the way the institution is organised, managed and run reproduces inequities that are coherent with those in the neoliberal order that the content is critiquing – exploitative employment practices, outsourcing of labour, unpaid internships, entrenched hierarchical structures etc. Writing elsewhere, in the context of private ownership of ostensibly public institutions, Phillips suggests the following:

So often arts institutions commission artworks that call for radical forms of collaboration and communing, but fund these through private patronage and promote them through and as an individuated core. This raises acute political issues concerning the ontological foundation of the artwork as privatised property in its contradictory modality of presumptive sharing. Here the content of the work – that might propose alternative and decapitalised forms working together – sits in parenthetical relation to its property state, a state which consistently coalesces around the artwork despite the artist or curator making a non-privatising demand (this is of course related to much broader infrastructural concerns regarding the art world, including those of education and esteem, value and production).

(Phillips, *Invest in What*: 7)

Phillips suggest this contradiction appears within the context of increased entrepreneurialism in the arts sector, whereby ‘cultural workers are left with little option but to perform this contradiction on a daily basis’ (Phillips, in Amundson and Mørland, 2015: 34). The competition between cultural workers, institutions and so on necessitates this type of contradictory behaviour – precisely the requirement to act as economic actors, according to the principles of *homo economicus*. For Phillips this emerges from a crisis of legitimacy, whereby, the difference between

the front end of the institution and the back end conceals the way these institutions have incorporated the methodologies of the culture industries. It is the use of “virtuous” or “progressive” artistic practice as marketing that has allowed these institutions to maintain their foothold on the competitive market.

This contradiction between the front end of the institution, I would suggest, is not limited to art – in fact the examples given at the beginning of this chapter point to an identical logic within the energy industries – but is endemic to the condition of neoliberalism itself. What is peculiar to art, however, is the way art’s double status as both a commodity and not, the dialectical nature of its autonomy, is productive of this contradiction. The condition of the autonomy of the artwork organises the way art institutions operate – which is to say, extending Phillips’ argument, art itself is not an innocent, or pure object that sits *within* the “front end back end” model of the institution, but itself is exemplary and productive of that very model. Contemporary art’s logic here is identified as a problem for the reconciliation of the contradiction, rather than a curative measure. In fact, as we see in many examples, art is so comfortable with this contradiction, that it is the perfect tool for the papering over of the “badness” of business operations with the “goodness” of artistic content. In Phillips’ work she is committed to finding ways to transform institutions into centres for the experimentation and practice of equality, not only at the level of content, but the way the institutions themselves operate. This commitment is instructive insofar as it points to the necessity to account for activity that art criticism rarely considers – what art *does* outside of its content and form. I consider this to be a pragmatic approach to art theory; understanding the full operations that an artwork performs as part of its analysis. This pragmatic approach should be attenuated through a structural understanding of how goodness operates to occlude an analysis of the secret truth of the artwork.

In Brian Holmes (2008), we find a similar immanent critique. Discussing the representation of politics in the art gallery Holmes portrays a situation where the institutional frame requires politics, often radical politics, as a legitimating argument for its existence. The representation of anti-global politics, for example, has become a ‘hot topic [...] popular in a museum (Homes, 2008: 82). For multinational corporations, who often sponsor art events, (Holmes lists a number of significant sponsorship deals from the early 2000s, and we could equally think of Deutsche Bank’s ongoing support of Frieze Art Fair, BP’s involvement until recently with the Tate, or any number of lesser known sponsorship deals that prop up the international art market and its attendant biennales, talks, events or exhibitions), the image of ‘excluded people’s politics is worth

a lot to the included' (Holmes, 2008: 83). To those parts of society who "count", the representation of those who are excluded, often by the former's economic activities, are seen not only as a form of entertainment, but a way to *legitimate* their activities. Thus, we see the double violence of representational politics in the art world. The violence of exclusion accompanied by the violence of exploitation. Art is the perfect vehicle of this double violence precisely because it performs this move itself. Which is to say, as analysed above, art has a set of socio-economic functions that increase inequality, reduce the reach of democratic politics and presuppose equality where it doesn't exist whilst simultaneously presenting the politics of the excluded as content to be celebrated as entertainment and act as a form of "washing" of the consciences of the global elite who make up the artworld.

#### *4.6 Exemplification and Justification*

Wright and Nyberg (2015) identify the way corporations engage with civil society as a form of marketing aimed at increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of their consumers. They name this marketing process "exemplifying". Businesses exemplify in order to claim legitimacy by being seen to act in the best interest of society or the environment. They 'present themselves as role models that embody many of the ideal practices and innovative capabilities required to ensure the well-being of present and future generations' (Wright and Nyberg, 2015: 85). This process is often, as shown by their analysis, accompanied by veiled action counter to the marketing agenda. Despite presenting themselves as green, or worthy, behind the scenes corporations continue to lobby for more lenient regulatory environments and invest in polluting technologies. Coherent with the concept of greenwashing, Wright and Nyberg's concept of exemplification extends this analysis to include a Gramscian notion of hegemony and the concept of justification as explored by Boltanski and Chiapello and Boltanski and Thevenot. I will pursue this route to offer an extended reading of notions of exemplification and justification, linking them to an analysis of artistic critique in Boltanski and Chiapello (2007).

Participation in corporate citizenship schemes is now widespread; many major companies engage in activities that intervene within public sector and state lead areas of governance. However, as Wright and Nyberg suggest, this extension of corporate influence 'is driven by narrow business interests' (Wright and Nyberg, 2015: 75), and has the potential to undermine democracy. By aligning their interests with public interests, such as the reduction of CO2 emissions,

corporations are seen to act as authorities in the fight against the climate emergency despite their lack of expertise and their often paradoxical desires to reduce their own accountability to environmental regulation. This tendency is most prevalent amongst green modernists and corporate environmentalists who are committed to the belief that environmental stewardship can go hand in hand with economic growth and that market mechanisms are the most reliable solution to environmental problems – such as Nicholas Stern.<sup>39</sup>

The final acquiescence to the demands of climate science, albeit within the parameters of the free market model (that, as we have seen, is anything but free), recalls the assumption that the market works in the best interests of society. Despite the thoroughgoing critique of this position from multiple angles, some of which I have introduced above, many groups with seemingly green credentials act against the interests of society by acceding to the corporate world's mechanisms. The act of exemplification, in the final analysis, seeks to blind critique of these mechanisms with the veneer of social good. Within the sphere of arts and culture – a sphere within which the act of exemplification has found a fruitful home – institutions, businesses and corporations often utilise the sheen provided by art as this veneer.

As an example, the Design Museum's 2018 exhibition *Hope to Nope* is not unusual, except, perhaps in the response by some of its exhibiting artists to what they saw as a practice of exemplification too far. In the summer of this year, when it was revealed that the Design Museum had hosted a luxury reception for arms dealers at the same time as displaying an exhibition of art and design born from, or dedicated to, social movements for peace and justice, many of the exhibiting artists removed their work in protest. Much of the work in the exhibition was within the scope of progressive or left political art-activism that protested against injustices meted out by corporate interests, be that in the military or oil industrial context. Fighting against racism, sexism and gentrification and for fair pay and working conditions, these artists couldn't countenance an engagement with an institution that would receive corporate sponsorship from the villains of their battles. While it is not within the remit of this thesis to discuss the ethical dimensions of corporate sponsorship, this action of protest does draw our attention to the ways

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<sup>39</sup> Sterns' (2015) analysis that climate change is merely a market failure sees the potential market successes that could emerge in the wake of this climate catastrophe. This idea that capitalists could either solve or benefit from the emerging markets underwrites not only corporate environmentalist's greenwashing, but the attempts by capital to create markets for "responsible" citizens.

institutions, even ones seemingly dedicated to a political project such as the Design Museum, are content to take money from highly unethical industries.<sup>40</sup>

Subsequently, the protesting artists set up an offsite exhibition in Brixton Recreation Centre in September 2018. This exhibition, *From Nope to Hope*, organised by the group themselves to draw attention to the practices of the Design Museum and the ways institutions often use art to cover over the business practices of their donors, the exhibition was a somewhat ad hoc affair, set in the context of a space the antithesis of a white walled gallery; the large green floored, redbrick and concrete space is part of a gym and recreation centre. The usual recreation centre sounds echoed out over the work, most of it clipped to Harris fencing.

Work by Shephard Fairy and Jeremy Deller appeared amongst work by lesser known artists and activists, much of it with an anti-war, anti-oil agenda. Some work made explicit a critique of the contradictory practice of exemplification; one piece in particular, *Bus Stop Posters (2015-16)*, by Brandalism/Barnbrook Design consisting of three posters that take aim at BP, Total and Volkswagen, pointed out the contradictions inherent in the industries. The anti-Volkswagen poster, for example, reads 'Drive cleaner. Or just pretend to.' (Brandalism/Barnbrook Design, 2015-16).

However, one piece seemed to turn its critical attention on itself and the work around it. A large text work by Oddly Head (2017) read (in a nice typeface) 'Slogans in nice typefaces won't save the human races'. This self-critical approach seemingly makes the claim that even the surrounding artworks dedicated to both good design and social causes won't do anything to counter the inequities they fight against, neither will this work itself. As one of the first works seen as you enter the exhibition, it greeted the audience with a seemingly cynical acquiescence to the status quo – there is no alternative, and certainly posters that want to demand one have no hope of achieving it. However, I would argue that this work was not the most cynical in the

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<sup>40</sup> In this context it would be wrong not to point out one of London's key examples of this practice; the Zabłudowicz Collection. As many will be aware, Anita Zabłudowicz, wife of Poju Zabłudowicz, runs a highly successful commercial art gallery and collection that presents itself as something of a confluence of entrepreneurial project space, a Kunsthalle following the German model and a public institution. In reality, 176, the space dedicated to the Zabłudowicz Collection, has acted like all of these things, but the central aspect of their practice that is relevant here is that Poju's business interests include arms dealing. Critique of Anita's arts endeavours often centre around the fact they act as a way to wash the image of her husband's businesses – a call to boycott Zabłudowicz projects and events, much in the same vein as BDS, has been written and distributed, giving special attention to the close relationship Goldsmiths has to Zabłudowicz through its curating MFA. See here - <https://boycottzabludowicz.wordpress.com/>

exhibition but the most intelligent. Instead of pointing to failure it points to the need for a revised methodology. Sat amongst posters that proclaim the power of art to ‘make us better’, or seeks to provide hope in dark times, Head’s work speaks to the necessity to do more than just plaster posters or hold placards. It is a work that critiques the work around it, suggesting, as I do, that work of this sort is limited in its political potential precisely because it is, as we shall see in the following section, involved in a project of exemplification itself.

Within the context of Brixton, a part of London that has seen significant gentrification in recent years, *From Nope to Hope* asserted a resistance to the prevailing conditions, but did so in the language of the street. Either in the tropes of activism of the OWS variety or the sleek design popularised by Adbusters these works are all seen as somewhat temporary, fast in their response and not entirely without their amateur nature. As part of a wider project to reject corporate sponsorship, to collectivise artistic resistance to inequities in the art world and the making public the “back end” of art institutions this exhibition is successful. Many of the artists here are involved in wider struggles, or act in solidarity with those struggles in ways that genuinely support them. They provide nodal points in the shifting of public opinion and sediment political activity into useful phrases and images with which to mobilise opposition. The work doesn’t appear to be contemporary art in many ways – it doesn’t conform, for example, to the Groysian demand for equal aesthetic rights. This work very much asserts a demand to be read in only one way, it resists the freedom of interpretation presumed by contemporary art. However, I have no misconceptions that this work can escape the conditions of the contemporary by fiat. As I will show in the next section, the valence held by critical work participates, whether it likes it or not, in the conditions of exemplification. And this is the crux of this argument. Critical work still adds value in the form of cultural capital to the institutions it represents. In the Design Museum example, the artists’ work was used, inadvertently, to valorise the business of arms dealing. But what, we must ask, is being valorised in the Brixton Recreation Centre context? What does the work here add cultural capital to? I would argue that cultural capital is accrued not necessarily only to the contexts in which the work is shown, but to the notion of art *as such*. As I shall explore in chapter six, the system of art exists not as a series of isolated instances of art, but as what I will call a metabolic system. Valorisation spreads across the whole system where critique offers legitimacy to the whole system. It is not true that there is an inside and outside to the institution, that work appearing within the museum context is compromised and work appearing in other institutional contexts is politically or ethically pure. Work appearing in any context

legitimizes that context, but also, this legitimacy is granted across what might be seen as borders to that context and into others.

#### *4.7 Legitimation and Virtue*

In the context of civil society, how does an organisation, corporation, individual or institution gain legitimacy? What provides justification? For many theorists already encountered in this chapter, art acts as a tool for justification. It legitimizes action precisely because it is deemed to be good, worthy or of value. Art's intrinsic value outside of monetary value is seen as a benefit to the institution, corporation etc displaying it. This analysis juxtaposes the market value of a work to another order of value that it holds, but does not see them as entirely separate. Art's non-monetary value often operates to provide a return on investment to shareholders, private individuals or corporations through processes such as gentrification, cultural capital exploitation, or financial transactions. Helping us understand the way art participates in the accrual of cultural capital through the notion of virtue, Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) work is instructive.

In Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), the question of worth emerges through a reading of works of political philosophy. For them, judgements based on the order of worth are bound by their relation to trust in reputation. How can we decide to trust someone's reputation or challenge it without recourse to a higher order, or charismatic authority? How does a society seek justification when free from the bonds of dependence on social orders and hierarchies? When not governed by market principles how do we assess value? Boltanski and Thévenot theorise that within the context of liberalism – the freedom of men from bondage (to paraphrase their reading of Rousseau) – 'detached from hierarchical relations, men can still fall under the sway of public opinion' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 109). Thus, opinion and public esteem come to stand in for legitimation.

Liberated in this way from relations of personal dependence, men are nevertheless still not free, for they remain slaves to opinion, which is based not on reality but on power relations among factions and coteries, and conflicts of interest that pit men against one another in temporary groupings formed for selfish ends.

(Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 109)

Reading Rousseau, Boltanski and Thévenot theorise that legitimate political relations rely upon a third, mediating party, suggesting that any attempts to negotiate at the level of concrete interactions between equal people will result in relations of force – ‘[i]f just relations are to be established among persons, human interactions have to be mediated by a relationship to a totality situated at a second level’ (ibid.). This is where *The Social Contract* leads, to the construction of a mediating second level order that appears from the natural antagonistic relations between people.

If relations of force emerge from non-mediated negotiations, Boltanski and Thévenot suggest that virtue operates as a balancing principle of the body politic. Worthiness is not gained through talent, but through virtue. As they suggest:

Unlike distinctions of rank, which are marked by titles, or the benefits of distinction that are accrued through fame, that is through recognition by others, distinctions that are acquired through civic merit are associated with persons to the extent that these persons serve causes that transcend them. Interpersonal relations are meritorious when they occur in settings arranged in such a way as to desingularize them.  
(Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 111)

In this context, this means that the construction of the general will, through the conditions of an arithmetical sum of individuals in the form of voting, must be accomplished through the freedom of all participants. An absence of coercion is thus a central component of the construction of a second order mediator, however, as we have noted, this freedom is not untroubled by relations of power. Belief in someone’s reputation is reliant on opinion; to assert the absence of influence through the mechanism of opinion within the context of a nominally free and open society is meaningless. Insofar as the status accorded to virtue is significant, personal reputation is based on the assumed validity of virtuous actions, thus action seen to be without virtue counteracts the construction of reputation.

Michel Feher (2009) has argued that a defining feature of neoliberalism has been the growth of human capital as a dominant subjective form. Rather than the “commodification” of the liberal subject, the idea of human capital has emerged as a prominent concept in the current era. In

order to understand how cultural capital is accrued by art I will link it to Feher's notion of human capital. According to Feher,

[M]y human capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect. Accordingly, the return on human capital no longer manifests itself solely in calculations about whether to work or to receive more training. It now refers to all that is produced by the skill set that defines me. Such that everything I earn – be it salary, returns on investments, booty, or favors I may have incurred – can be understood as the return on the human capital that constitutes me.

(Feher, 2009: 26)

Not all return on investment in human capital appears as earnings, it could equally be accrued as forms of well-being not associated with financial income – health, happiness, relationships, pleasure and so on. This appreciation of human capital, according to Foucault (2008: 226), and of course, Feher, whose work extends Foucault's, appears as the subject's "satisfaction". Drawing comparisons to the neoliberal model of corporate governance, Feher highlights the preoccupation with 'capital growth or appreciation rather than income, stock value rather than commercial profit' (Feher, 2009: 27). As such, an investor in their own human capital, it appears, is concerned less with a ROI but with the appreciation of the "stock value" of that capital. Thus, in the context of the reputation economy, the investor in human capital is concerned with utilising the expression of virtue as a mode of appreciation. We see this in the example of greenwashing outlined at the beginning of this chapter, and, of course in the ways corporations use virtuous art as a practice of exemplification. This practice not only draws ethically minded customers to use their products, increasing profit, but increases their capital value. An association with virtue thus appreciates the value, and valorising potential of a corporation, individual, or as I suggest, an artwork. And this is key, as an enterprise unit (to use Foucault's terminology) increases their value, so too does their ability to bestow value on other units increase. Reputation within the system allows enterprise units to act in accordance with other units to confer the appreciation of capital value. Thus, artworks can accumulate cultural capital through association with other artworks, institutions, and so on, just as institutions accrue value through their association with virtuous artworks. What is considered virtuous is, of course, different depending on the context and the conditions of the time.

As Feher's analysis shows, neoliberal subjects are predominantly concerned with the appreciation of their capital value through the 'impact of their conducts' (Feher, 2009: 27). They seek "bankability", "employability" or "marketability" as a measurement of their human capital. In the context of the art exhibition that valorises and legitimates corporate businesses, the impact appears as an association of virtue – not here delineated by the content of the work as such, but through the association with the system of art precisely because *art is seen to be virtuous in and of itself*, and the bankability, employability or marketability of a work of art is how cultural capital is measured. As such, critical appreciation of a work of art is not an end in itself, but part of a process whereby value is accorded to that work through the attention drawn to it through the process of critique.

As I shall explore in the next section, virtue is accorded to art precisely *because* it has a history of critique and fighting against oppression. To accord value to a work of art each occasion of art does not in itself need to be virtuous. Instead, the value of art is given in accordance with the system of art, whereby capital is spread across that system (in an uneven fashion).

#### 4.8 Critique as Justification

Art washing only works if we trust that art is intrinsically *good*. With the recent rise in critical approaches to art, a re-emergence of institutional critique (Phillips, Malik, Yudice, Hewison, Holmes, Steyerl, Kenning and Kern as just some of the most prominent examples) this trust must surely be eroding. Just as trust in corporations erodes when it is revealed they are partaking in greenwashing. The growth in counter-cultural, anti-corporate movements within the arts such as Platform or Art Not Oil points to an increase in consciousness surrounding the issue of art sponsorship and its relation to the oil industry. As analysed by Polanyi (2001), this tendency in radical political resistance is known as the counter-movement, and it exists alongside the movement of history as a form of corrective or challenge to power. It is this critical tendency, exemplified by the proponents of "anti-" type movements in art or business, and for the sake of this thesis, the oil industry, that make up the counter-movement. My argument here is that it is precisely the immanent critique of art, the counter-movement, that returns to provide legitimacy of it. Without its internal corrective procedure in operation, art would merely be decoration for power or a form of propaganda, but the critical project that art – autonomous art – participates

in is exactly what legitimates it as “serious” and “good”, thus providing the much needed cultural capital required for the act of exemplification.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) describe a situation in the 1980s and 90s whereby contemporary variants of capitalism recuperated the demands for liberation by the previous decade’s anti-capitalist movements, what they call the artistic critique, in order to increase accumulation. They specifically focus on how the demand for liberation of desire came to structure the neoliberal model of accumulation, creating the conditions for the increase in flexibility, precarity and casualisation. In this sense, the critiques of capital from the 1960s and 70s were incorporated into a model that lead to, in many cases, an increase in oppression in the form of precarious labour and systemic dependency. Thus, they show how, under the conditions of capitalism, critique becomes a motor for systemic change, yet allied not with the people, but against them and with the forces of accumulation. Demands for authenticity, liberation and flexibility – themselves cogent critiques in the face of an immovable, inflexible, hierarchical structures such as those appearing in the context of early to mid-twentieth century capitalism – became the guiding principles of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. As they suggest, ‘the commodification of the authentic made it possible to revive the process of transformation of non-capital into capital, which is one of the principle motors of capitalism, on new bases and, consequently, to meet the threat of a crisis of mass consumption that loomed in the 1970s’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 443). In order for this transformation into capital to occur, new territories must be revealed, and it is precisely the act of critique that reveals these new territories. The case of eco-products provides a good example of this. As Boltanski and Chiapello suggest, environmental critique often incorporates critiques of capitalism and consumer society, whereby nature is seen to be desirably “authentic”. As capitalism responds by offering new forms of consumerism based on the desires of its consumers to be “green”, the territory of what is capitalised grows. Authenticity is a driver for the growth of capital accumulation.

This internalisation of critique finds another perspicuous example in the history of second wave feminism as explained by Nancy Fraser (2013). Fraser describes the significance of second wave feminism on the cultural and socio-political landscape of the late twentieth century. She constructs an historical description of the uses of feminist critique by the burgeoning ideology of neoliberalism. Fraser takes up the well-known view that the feminist movement's relative success in the transformation of culture has not intrinsically led to institutional change. As she suggests,

‘on the one hand, feminist ideals of gender equality, so contentious in the preceding decades, now sit squarely in the mainstream; on the other hand, they have yet to be realized in practice’ (Fraser, 2013: 210). Without the structural or institutional changes that were demanded, second wave feminism's promises were unfulfilled, and importantly, the cultural revolution that occurred, the vast change in subjectivities, occluded or obscured the lack of institutional change. That is to say, the shift in the cultural landscape (at least in the West), the broad acceptance of the critique at a cultural or discursive level, prevents us from thinking the somewhat more important *lack* of institutional transformation. Culture, then, can counter-intuitively obscure the failings of the movement, instead performing the obverse move of its general “message”; on the one hand, it is furthering the feminist cause discursively through awareness raising, but on the other it is denying the possible transformative potential of that awareness as it occludes the work still to be done at a structural level.

As Fraser asserts, through a reading of Boltanski and Chiapello, feminist critique could harbour a more disturbing possibility: ‘the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society’ (Fraser, 2013: 211). As the feminist critique was recuperated into neoliberal ideology the social currents felt during the period were conscripted into the legitimisation of a ‘new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal’ (Fraser, 2013: 211). Many of neoliberal capitalism's central ideological claims overlapped in significant ways with the aims of second wave feminism, allowing the latter to thrive under the conditions of the former. Feminism founded its anti-authoritarian and anti-systemic critiques in the context of state-organised capitalism, however, it was only under the “tolerant” conditions of neoliberalism, an ideology that argued for similar aims, that feminism became a broad social movement; finding its way into ‘every nook and cranny of social life and transform[ing] the self-understandings of all whom [it] touched (ibid.: 218). Fraser asks whether it was more than mere coincidence that feminism and neoliberalism found success together, suggesting perhaps, there was some logical affinity between them; ‘with welfare and developmental states under attack from free-marketers, feminist critiques of economism, androcentrism, étatism, and Westphalianism took on a new valence’ (ibid.: 218). What started as a corrective to both economic subjugation of women and lack of cultural recognition, splintered into the one-sided culturalism, thus occluding redistribution in favour of recognition. In Fraser's telling of it, the culturalisation of feminist demands coincided precisely with the rise of a neoliberalism and its desire to suppress the memory of social egalitarianism. She understands

how capitalism resignifies the critiques against it to legitimate emergent forms, thus recuperating counter-hegemonic claims to produce the 'higher, moral significance needed to motivate new generations to shoulder the inherently meaningless work of endless accumulation' (ibid.: 219). The flexible, neoliberal capitalism that we are living through today (the "new spirit" Boltanski and Chiapello describe) was in part born from the critiques against the older, more authoritarian regimes. Fraser suggests that disturbingly, second wave feminism has contributed a moral legitimation and a set of logics for this new spirit.

As a discourse of recognition, the role of culture in this formulation is interesting. Unwittingly, it embarks on a two-fold movement; the *domination* and subsequent *concealment* of the discourse of redistribution. Thus, feminism's economic critique gets subjugated and occluded by the relative successes of its demands for cultural recognition. Rather than adopting a multilayered paradigm, encompassing both the economic and cultural registers of the critique, neoliberalism has succeeded in curtailing the demands for redistribution, and foregrounding the demands for recognition as a form of identity politics that has been mobilised *against* forms of statist, communal, egalitarianism. Fraser calls this, in her earlier work, the "cunning of history", and, as it emerges later in her thought, "progressive neoliberalism". The cultural demands of feminism, and similar egalitarian critiques, have been recuperated and turned against themselves. As Fraser (2019) suggests, this alliance between liberation movements and capitalism has created a hegemonic alliance that provides legitimacy for ongoing appropriation. Coherent with logics of capitalist accumulation and exploitation, liberatory vectors have been co-opted into the prominent politics of recognition that have emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Seducing the 'major currents of progressive social movements into the new hegemonic bloc' (Fraser, 2019: 14), progressive neoliberalism has a normative dimension that engineers us as human subjects. We are thus, *homo economicus*, governed by a logic of economisation, and at the same time, *homo virtuous*, bound to the logics of exemplification, that hides the raw economic mode of operation. The elision between social movements and capitalist accumulation makes us in its own image. Additionally, the display of virtue, thus, has no need of a thoroughgoing critical relation to the underlying capital endeavours it occludes.

So too with contemporary art. An axiom thereby emerges in this context that provides ground for the exemplifying practices of an artwork, mobilising the critical valences of art in general which in turn provides a legitimation for all done in its name. Artistic critique, or the critical potential of art, is recuperated into the inferential system of capitalism, allowing valorisation to

occur within the context of previously non-capitalised territories. Critique is the motor of this expansion of valorisation. In the context of the artwork or exhibition or practice that seeks to disrupt, resist or emancipate, the content of this work, while being salutary, still has the potential to privatise capital or provide legitimation for the valorisation of capital in the various forms explored above. That is why it is not adequate to analyse art practices with such limited conceptions as form or content, we must be expansive in our analysis and understand how, in line with the Peircian approach discussed previously, artworks work in their broader sense against their own presumed critical claims.

## **Chapter Five:** **Myopia in Art and Politics**

The law-event duality is at the heart of the conflicts, which run through the history of ideas in the Western world, starting with the pre-Socratic speculations and continuing right up to our own time through quantum mechanics and relativity. Laws were associated to a continuous unfolding, to intelligibility, to deterministic predictions and ultimately the very negation of time. Events imply an element of arbitrariness as they involve discontinuities, probabilities and irreversible evolution.

(Ilya Prigogine, cf. Katherine McKittrick, 2015: 31)

### *5.1 Political Transformation*

It is my contention that the petrocultural is characterised by a limited understanding of the ways in which art can have meaningful political impact. As Gabriel Rockhill (2014) suggests, the inferential fields of art and politics have often been theorised as either ‘completely autonomous spheres, divided by an insurmountable barrier, or they constitute domains that do indeed influence each other through privileged points of interaction’ (Rockhill 2014: 1). As I suggest in this chapter, this question is underwritten by a Liberal framing that determines art’s interaction with politics along very specific lines. As Rockhill asserts, there is no natural, or pre-given field of art and politics, they are both historically constructed and conditioned fields. What is proper to Contemporary Art, then, is linked not just to the history of art, but to the social and political fields as they have emerged throughout history. If we are to assert that art can have traction within the socio-political fields (an assumption that is far from given), then we must understand

the relation between those two fields. In this chapter, my aim is to point towards a route into that project, and suggest that the common understandings of this relation are myopic – that is to suggest, limited in their perception of that relation, either because they assume to readily the capacity for art to have the traction they desire or that art and politics are insurmountably divided fields. As such, these two views occupy extreme versions of Rockhill’s central antinomy; art is unrelated to politics in an undialectical autonomous fashion or it is so directly related to politics that action within the field of art has direct effect in the political realm. The failure of some theorists to make claims around *how* art has political impact rests on this problematic antinomy. These failures, I argue, are not just limited to art theory, but infuse much political discourse, whereby acts of resistance, activism, political organising etc are too often thwarted by their own inability to understand the systemic conditions within which they operate. In this chapter I focus on a number of occasions of myopia to those conditions, for example the case of Extinction Rebellion’s inability to adequately negotiate their own colonialist blind spots or the way in which Olufar Eliason’s work makes an assumption about the nature of political change that limits its impact. While it is important not to suggest that artworks are “failures” because of their inability to produce political change, we do need to understand how the conditions provided by contemporary art hamstrings any political ambitions from the start. This chapter also foregrounds an understanding of the role of spontaneity in the work of Rosa Luxembour, Vladimir Lenin and Marks Fisher’s recent attenuation of these themes in his own works. I attempt to understand how the problems of political myopia play out in terms of a society in which individuals in that society see their capacity to effectuate political change as limited, it draws on the work of Roberto Unger and Emile Durkheim to understand these issues, and seeks to counter this socio-political tendency through a reading of Charles Sanders Peirce. However, to begin with this chapter utilises a reading of the relation of the universal to the particular in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

The question of how artworks produce political transformation has been central to art theoretical discourse for many years. Foremost in these debates is the question of the *relation* between the artwork and the field of politics, between the human agent and the state, or between the individual and the universal. While each of these separate terms should not be elided, we can understand some relations between, for example, the field of politics in general and the concept of the universal – it is through Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas of subjectivation, hegemony and universality that I understand this “knot”. For Laclau, the universal is an empty place; it is through the hegemonic operation, whereby subjects take up temporary hegemonic positions in a

movement of politics, that the empty place is temporarily filled in. In order for politics to exist as such, the universal must be understood as the horizon for any political claim – as he suggests, the universal:

is absolutely essential for any kind of political interaction, for if the latter took place without universal reference, there would be no political interaction at all: we would only have either a complementarity of differences which would be totally non-antagonistic, or a totally antagonistic one, one where differences lack any commensurability, and whose only possible resolution is the mutual destruction of the adversaries.

(Laclau 2007: 61)

Political thought is thus the movement between the particular and universal insofar as the latter is seen to be temporarily filled in with the former – without this hegemonic operation, particulars would exist as mere differences. When I refer to the concept of the relation between the human agent and the political, I am conceiving this as a hegemonic relation that understands the horizon of universality as the rhetorical foundations through which it must operate. While there is a highly fruitful discussion to be had in this area of political philosophy, it is beyond the scope of the current thesis to construct it in its entirety here.<sup>41</sup>

It is precisely the nature of the *relation* between the individual and the universal that concerns us. Understanding this relation gives us a theory of both the human subject and the social world that it is part of, and a theory of political change. Change should be understood through the way particularities gain dominance in discursive fields through a hegemonic operation, as described by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). Insofar as the social world is conditioned by all sorts of material and ideological forces, the description of the human that emerges within the next chapters does so in relation to these forces. It is my contention that the forms of Liberalism that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century underwritten by the oil industry, have a very particular view of these relations – for Liberalism, the human subject has no relationship to other subjects, no relationship to the transcendental realm of politics, and exists in a dominant position in relation to nature. These characteristics, as identified by Roberto Unger (1975), are central to classical liberalism, however, attenuated through the ratcheting inequalities, extractions and exploitations precipitated in large part by the petrochemical industries, they take on a hyperbolic

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<sup>41</sup> For more on this see Laclau (2005), (2007) and (2014), Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and Critchley and Marchart (2004).

character.<sup>42</sup> Central to this chapter is an understanding of how political theory formulates the relation between the individual and the state; these theories map on to the way art assumes its relation to the field of the political precisely because contemporary art exists within, what Unger calls, the family of ideas of Liberalism (Unger, 1975). In the context of the failures of the liberal order in light of the petropolitical, we need to reengineer that very order. As Mann and Wainwright argue; '[c]limate change requires a fundamental shift in our understanding of the political' (Mann and Wainwright, 2018: 79).

Fundamental to a discussion of the way the individual relates to the universal are the dialectical concepts of continuity-discontinuity, invariants-variants, law-event. As identified by Prigogine, above, these conceptual dyads have determined the history of Western thought. When discussing the role art has to play in making changes to, for example, socio-political norms and laws, we are focusing specifically on the way the contingent object of art has traction at the level of *the universal*. How artworks create change at higher levels, how political change occurs, is a matter of asking how something discontinuous creates change within fields of law, norms and tradition that continue and persist over time. This is, as understood by Laclau, a hegemonic operation.

I claim that how art, as a form of discontinuities, auto-institutes at the level of universality, requires a dialectical operation, whereby contingency (tychism in Peircian terms) ramifies commitments to transformation at higher strata. This dialectical relation I call *continuity*. If we think that the universal is merely a collection of individuals not dialectically related to it (a feature of Liberalism that Unger identifies) and that to reach the universal requires the addition of more individuals, as opposed to a synthetic, multiplication and transformation across levels, then we give credence to the view that the world is limitless, that difference is all that exists, and that individuals are unrelated. The concept of continuity in contrast, then, emerges as an expression not of *more and more* individuals, but as the way those individuals *relate* through the concept of universality. Unger's understanding of Liberalism relies on the idea that individuals do not see themselves as related to each other through a universal – the place that God or tradition used to hold – instead, individuals are silo'd off from each other. Here, I am suggesting the concept of continuity works as a corrective to the Liberal tendency to think the capacity for change as an operation that requires just an addition of more individuals – more on this in Chapter Six.

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<sup>42</sup> Hyperbolic in both senses – exaggerated or amplified, but also in its rhetorical sense as embellishment; the neoliberal tendency towards marketisation relies precisely on, as we saw above in Chapter Four, a façade of liberal values to cover over its underlying operations.

As suggested by Laclau, the universal is required precisely for political action to take place, but for him the universal has a very specific character. Instead of being absolute or timeless, the universal must be thought of as an undecidable place holder that can be replaced and overturned through an operation of hegemony. This process is never finally realised nor fixed interminably, but opens out on to new conflicts and new struggles – this precisely is the understanding Laclau gives to “the political” as such. As Linda Zerilli suggests:

Hegemony means that the relation between the universal and particular entails not the realization of a shared essence or the final overcoming of all differences but an ongoing and conflict-ridden process of mediation through which antagonistic struggles articulate common social objectives and political strategies. The very fact that commonalities must be *articulated* through the interplay of diverse political struggles – rather than discovered and then merely followed, as one follows a rule – means, first, that no group or social actor can claim to represent the totality and, second, that there can be no fixing of the final meaning of universality.

(Zerilli in Critchley and Marchart 2004: 96)

As Zerilli suggests, democracy is articulated as the interplay between the particular and the universal, suggesting that neither exclude the other, but rather, they exist in relation to each other. It is democratic politics that asserts this relation as a reinscription of the particular into the universal through the hegemonic struggle. Difference is articulated not as absolute, but as a manifestation of the ways in which particulars relate to each other in reference to the universal. As she suggests, ‘multicultural groups which cling too closely to a fantasy of pure difference risk at once ghettoization by, and complicity with, the dominant community’ (ibid.: 94). As such, politics is the work not of articulating contiguous differences that could be used by the dominant community to exclude and arbitrate between us, but the articulation of these differences in order to approach the universal through a struggle.

There can never be a final decision, but only contingent processes which lead to more struggles, the community is never finally realised, but must be able to be reformed through a hegemonic operation whereby the universal is replaced by new particulars. This conception of universality, at its heart, denies the monolithic nature of power, understanding instead, the necessary struggle and Gramscian “war of position” that must occur for power to be realised and ratified. This

gives us hope – no particularity can ever claim final hold over universality; the universal is always rearticulable.

While I will argue in Chapter Six for a specific conception of the forms of socio-political organisation, and a description of the human in line with this socio-political condition, this chapter will look at the way a number of theorists, artists and writers have conceptualised the capacity art, or culture, has for producing political change. I will focus specifically on what I consider to be a failure in these theorisations to understand the operation required to transition from particular claims around productions of subjectivity towards broader modalities that have traction in the task of systemic transformation – the hegemonic operation as described above. I will argue that not only is systemic transformation desirable, but necessary to move from regimes of violence that I have outlined in previous chapters, but also that contemporary art, so theorised, is incapable of having that traction. However, I will not argue that contemporary art *should* be charged with that role, in fact, I make no prescriptive generalisations in the name of art, but only analyse how art that has political ambitions is thwarted in its task. Equally, I will not suggest that artwork has no broader efficacy or role in society, or that the modalities that I identify aren't in some way interesting or useful, merely that contemporary art, so conceived, maintains the liberal separation between the particular and universal that appears in the way the individual is theorised as non-relational.

This is the third axiom of petroculture – the inability for art to adequately understand the capacity artwork has for political change. Expanding on Robin MacKay's (Mackay in Mackay ed. 2015) notion of myopia, this chapter explores how the relation between art and politics is curtailed by an inability to theorise the transition between the individual and the universal. I also draw on Negarestani's (Negarestani in Mackay ed. 2015) concept of triviality, to understand how art's capacity for systemic transformation can be limited by the way the relation between the individual and the universal is conceived.

How do we measure art's political efficacy? While some theorists have attempted to elide the two regimes, suggesting that art *just is political* or that politics *has an aesthetics*, I will maintain the separation, arguing that, firstly, to perceive the logics of art separate from the logics of politics is necessary in order to understand how the former has traction within the latter, and secondly, that in order for art to be understood as anything other than the aesthetic handmaiden to politics, as propaganda for example, it must have autonomy from that regime. However, as discussed in

Chapter Three, this autonomy must be understood in a specific way, not as a retreat from exogenous forces, but a productive relational engagement with those forces in order to construct new rules, norms and modalities. It is thus precisely this mode of self-legitimation that autonomy brings to the discourse around art and politics that I want to maintain here. Insofar as I identify this distinction between the two regimes, as I will elucidate in the next chapter, this distinction is not absolute, in fact, what I am mostly interested in is the fuzzy, mediation between these regimes, what Charles Sanders Peirce called “thirdness”.

According to Peirce, the philosophical tradition of nominalism, that he identified with a wide range of thinkers including, as Forster (2011) suggests, Descartes, Hume, Locke, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and so on, is coherent with the inability to adequately understand the relation between the individual and the universal. Nominalism and liberalism share key characteristics. Insofar as nominalism, as critiqued by Peirce, believes that only individuals and not universals exist, it is a philosophical tradition that legitimates a renegeing of responsibility to the social. Where nominalism assumes the universal to be made up of additions of individuals, liberalism, as I will examine later in this chapter, cannot but think the social in any way other than in an additive nature. My argument relies on an understanding of this move as a form of *myopia*.

How can art navigate within the context of an entrenched econo-political rationality that overdetermines it as a myopic project? I argue that petropolitical logics underwrite this inability to orient political vectors that have traction on systemic change; our relation to the highly abstract threat of climate catastrophe on the one hand, and the entrenched violent regime of petrocapiatalism on the other, is often either one of tragic resignation or trivial assumptions about our capacity to produce change. Through an examination of a number of practices within different contexts, I shall indicate how these two assumptions – I have no capacity or I have utmost capacity – are both limited responses to these crises. It is important to note here the debt this analysis has to Mark Fisher’s work on Capitalist Realism’s failure to imagine an alternative. As Fisher suggests:

Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to arts or to the quasi-propagandist way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only production culture but also regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.

If capitalism realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance was some hopeless and impotence, where can an effective challenge come from? A moral critique of capitalism, emphasising the ways in which it lead to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naïve utopianism.

(Fisher 2009: 16)

The suite of ideas, policies, laws and norms that have emerged in the period of the last forty years in line with the development of neoliberal capitalism contribute to this pervasive atmosphere of hopelessness – Capitalist Realism. Yes, we are entreated to work on ourselves (entrepreneurs of our selves), but the capacity to alter those laws and norms that make up the hegemon, are out of our grasp – and any attempt to do so seen as pure utopianism. This sense of realism rests precisely on the way the relation between the individual and the universal is conceptualised. In order to imagine political capacity, we must escape the frame of liberalism that restricts our understanding of that relationship.

## *5.2 Myopia*

Both Robin Mackay and Reza Negarestani use the term “myopia” in their work to describe an operation that fails to orient the local towards the global. In Negarestani (in Mackay ed., 2015), this localist myopia appears as a function of conceptualisation that proceeds via a fixedness to a local site – without a function of deracination from that local site, and an orientation towards the global, conceptualisation risks being myopic. Which is to say, thought that is situated in subjective localisation without a relation to the universal reaffirms its isolation from broader strategies of thought.<sup>43</sup> This myopia appears according to a site of utmost contingency, detached and spontaneous. As I shall discuss later in this chapter, the relation between the local site and the global environment is a fundamental operation of the political in art. Without an operation oriented dialectically towards the global, localisation risks limiting the capacity for

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<sup>43</sup> Here, I am using the terms “global” and “universal” somewhat interchangeably – while they mean different things, I understand the work that the concept of the global does in Mackay’s and Negarestani’s work to be similar to that of the universal. Insofar as the global refers to a set of conditions that dominate all local operations, it refers also to notions of globalism and globality, but also to ideas around world creating or “worldviews”. As such, “the global” operates ideologically to create frames through which we act, think and imagine.

transformation. I take the concept of myopia to be one that operates as a restraint on knowing – a form of epistemological limitation – but also as a form of limitation on doing. The capacity to conceptualise and the capacity to act are closely linked here – yet, importantly they must be understood as different – to know, is *not* to do. It would be myopic to limit our human projects to just knowing. The expansion of our epistemologies must be combined with an expansion of our capacities to *act*. This is the basic premise of left accelerationism, our capacities, that have been hampered by neoliberal capitalism, ‘can and should be let loose’ (Srniczek and Williams in Mackay ed., 2014: 361).

Negarestani’s work draws on CS Peirce’s analysis of continuity and contingency, or in Peircian language, synechism and tychism. Tychism, for Peirce is the local occurrence of absolute chance; ‘tychism is responsible for the instantiation of particularities or local contexts [...] it expresses the contingent instantiation or ramification of the universal into its own particular instances’ (Negarestani, in Mackay ed., 2015: 225). Whereas synechism is the doctrine that continuity is crucial to philosophy. Peirce suggests:

Continuity is fluidity, the merging of part into part [...] I draw a line. Now the points on that line form a continuous series. If I take any two points on that line, however close together, other points there are lying between them. If that were not so, the series of points would not be continuous.

(Peirce, Collected Papers Volume 1, 1974: 68)

A commitment to synechism allows us to understand the related nature of discreteness – instead of the siloing off of discrete objects, synechism posits a flow or connectedness between things, linked together *in* the continuum. It is this “anti-discreteness” that allows Negarestani to understand the relation between the local and the global site in terms of continuity. If we were not committed to synechism, we would assume an absolute contingency between local sites rather than a synechistic continuity. Negarestani’s understanding of universality as a ‘complex interweaving of continuity and contingency, synechism and tychism’ (Negarestani, in Mackay ed., 2015: 225), allows us to understand how we might be able to investigate the ‘space of the universal through particular instances or local contexts’ (ibid.). In this formulation, Negarestani is describing the non-trivial relation between the particular and the universal, the local and the global. The environment of non-triviality is one of synthesis. It is only through the synthetic interweaving of local and global contexts – what, as we shall see later in this chapter, can be

understood as a neighbourhood logic – that we can understand how synechism describes collectivising or grouping not as a pluralistic, flat addition of multiple isolated individuals, but as the ‘interlinking multiplication between localities’ (ibid.: 226). He continues in another text:

The local site of knowledge cannot be overextended to the universal landscape of logoi (dogmas – whether conceptual or metaphysical – are mostly expressions of inflating or over-extending the local to the global). Nor can different local sites or conceptual maps be stretched or simply added to one another in a pluralistic fashion (the risk of conceptual conflation, trivialization and anti-universality). Different strategies of navigation and integration of conceptual maps are required in order to maintain a universal orientation and non-trivially participate in the game of truths.

(Negarestani in Rowan 2013: 4)

As discussed later in this chapter, the notion of scale, which, as Anna Tsing (2012) suggests, can only think the relation between the local and the global as one of addition of local contexts, is incompatible with a synechistic account. This scalar approach is what Negarestani would call “trivial” – triviality here describes a relation between local and global that does not go through operations of synthesis. For Negarestani, “universality” is the name given to the ‘analytico-synthetic passage from the local to the global, and through the lenses of synechism and tychism’ (Negarestani, in Mackay ed., 2015: 226). In other words, the notion of universality here is understood as one that incorporates the local contexts, not as a matter of addition, but as a synthetic interweaving and that interweaving occurs in the context of the continuum. Continuity is the name given to the interweaving in the space of the continuum (the space within which this interweaving occurs).

Myopia, however, cannot think this synthetic construction of universality, instead, it thinks the universal as merely the addition of multiple individuals or contingent, local contexts – triviality.<sup>44</sup> It is in this sense that the challenge of the climate emergency is so often posed – if we can only get *enough* people to switch to green energy, to go vegan, or to stop flying, then we can avert the worst consequences of climate catastrophe. In a very real sense, of course, this is exactly what is needed (we *do* need a huge number of people to change their habits), but, as I hope to show in this and the final chapters, this trivial understanding, this myopic approach, misunderstands the

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<sup>44</sup> This is coherent with the logic of Liberalism as described by Unger and the logic of absolute difference as described by Laclau.

complex interweavings of multiple contexts. It is an analysis devoid of the concept of power – and it is only through an analysis that includes a Peircian approach that we can fully understand power as a *relation*. Fundamentally, the worst culprits of climate catastrophe, those who have come to dominate our global system, are not accounted for in this myopic approach. As I discuss later in this chapter, the false universalisation of the notion of “we” in much climate activism, is a myopic understanding of the problems facing us. But this is also the way contemporary art tends to think its political operation. As discussed in relation to the example of Olafur Eliasson’s work *Ice Watch*, art assumes political change through the addition of individual audience members – if enough people see this work, then this will have a global effect. This myopic understanding appeals to the dominant views of the relation between universality and particularity, and, as Negarestani suggests, forms ‘a localism that insists on analysing the problems at the level of the local without any recourse to non-local possibilities’ (Negarestani, in Mackay ed., 2015: 226).

This localism lacks future orientation, is short sighted and cannot understand the complex relation the local has to the global. One might accuse the petropolitical paradigm of this precisely because it favours short term profit over global deleterious effects. The petropolitical, appears as a form of localism that focuses on the local context of oil industrial profiteering (the accumulation of individual wealth), and avoids considering downstream externalities – which reappear in the form of complex, interweavings of the local and global as climate catastrophe, species decline, air quality and habitat degradation, racial discontinuities and other so called “natural” disasters. But, equally, climate change *mitigation* emerges in the liberal context as a localism that is myopic to the complex relationship it must have to global systems in order to have traction within the universal. The capitalistic distillation of energy from liquid hydrocarbons is a myopic abstraction that undermines the local through the misapprehension that individuals exist as discrete entities unrelated to each other, or a realm greater than themselves. A synechistic account of natural history would reintroduce the notion of continuity in order to institute non-myopic modes of existing, behaving and thinking. What comes after this current petro-political paradigm must, therefore, take the work of Peirce seriously. As I show in this chapter, the socio-cultural doctrines of contemporary art are yet to understand these lessons from Peirce, but furthermore, as a doctrine liberalism, given global legitimacy by the massive economic

acceleration underwritten by the oil industry, is fundamentally incapable of thinking synechistically.<sup>45</sup>

### 5.3 *The Universal, the Particular and the Individual*

If we are to understand how political claims made by a particular work of art have traction at a general, or global level, how it might transcend level, or how individual actions might have exigency within broader contexts, it is important to understand the complexities of the relation between the individual and the universal as it appears in art.<sup>46</sup>

In the opening chapter to *Kant After Duchamp* Thierry De Duve (1996) invites us to imagine ourselves an ethnologist from outer space. Faced with the phenomenon of contemporary art, we have to make sense of how humans have grouped together these seemingly disparate objects into the category “art”. It appears that everything can be considered art, and as such, we are faced with the obverse truth, if everything is art, then nothing is art. The category art is an empty set or it is an infinite one (De Duve, 1996: 11). It appears to be the case that anything can be art, and to classify as art, there needs to be no appeal to a universal concept. As discussed above in Chapter Three, art’s autonomy rests on this conception of freedom from genre limitations – insofar as artworks need no appeal to categorical essences, their autonomy emerges as a form of negative freedom. In this context, then, it is coherent to suggest that art appears as a field of discursive multiplicity, determined not by some internal coherence, but by the *name* “art”. As De Duve suggests, ‘art is an autonomous business that is its own foundation, names itself, and finds its justification in itself (ibid.: 12). This, De Duve suggests, is art’s “nominalist ontology”, bound by faith to a belief system centred around the agreement that something is art precisely because *we* call it art.

Unlike modernist painting which held purity or specificity as its regulation, De Duve insists that contemporary art has a form of agreement as its regulative idea. A consensus about what is legitimate forms around the ontological status of an art work. Instead of working to appeal to

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<sup>45</sup> It is not within the scope of this study to explore the ways in which Negarestani’s work could productively be applied to Laclau’s much larger project, instead I hope to hold the two projects together in productive synthesis – perhaps this constellation can produce a useful starting point for further discussion.

<sup>46</sup> While a substantial historical study of these issues would be interesting, it is not within the scope of this thesis to present this. Instead, I will sketch an outline of these ideas here in order to make the main argument.

objective notions of truth or purity, as in his account of modernity, contemporary art thus appeals to a liberal sense of inclusivity – a supposed democratic decision centred on the presupposed consent of “the public”. Drawing on Kant, De Duve (2006) suggests that the nominalist pronouncement of a cultural object as art relies on the concept of *sensus communis*. Not quite translatable as “common sense”, *sensus communis* is closer to common sentiment, suggesting the capacity to *feel* in common. Thus, for De Duve, Kant’s signal contribution to aesthetic theory is the idea that the work of art grounds a community of feeling wherein the capacity to feel is formed around the singular work of art. This communal focal point relies on the idea that the singular work of art appeals to universality through its relation to the universal in the moment of apprehension. Insofar as the relation between the singular work of art and the universal is thus granted through the agreement on the categorical status of that art work, the community formed by the ontological agreement emerges in the moment of apprehension. This concept of community rests on the notion that to belong to it, one has to agree to the ontological status of the work of art. However, as is evident throughout this thesis, this liberal notion of inclusion rests on a deft sleight of hand; what art ratifies is not, in fact, a truly democratic construction of a public, but the superficial *appearance* of democracy that obscures our view of the entrenched hierarchies and emergent structures of the art world. “Everything is art” does not mean that everyone is included in the conversation about what is art, all it does is ratify art’s hierarchical structures whilst pronouncing its own assumed democratic mandate to speak for everyone.<sup>47</sup> As such, the act of naming relies on the powerful position of gatekeepers in order to gain ontological status

Lukács identifies the way in which artworks reflect on objective reality in a mode dissimilar to science. Whereas science focuses on individual occasions of reality – this chair, this table, this rock – in order to draw universal conclusions about the abstract concept of chair or table or stone, art, in Lukács’ account, gives a specific form to reality that holds in tension the individual and the universal. This category he calls the particular, and it is the particular that he places central to his aesthetics. The scientist merely passes through particularity either to abstract universals from individuals or to use universals to focus on new individuals. The artist, however, retains the tension between the sensuous individuality of an object and the universal concept; art would make no sense were it not to rest precisely in the dialectical interplay between the two poles. It is this space for play that Lukács is keen to assert. As he suggests, ‘these categories stand objectively in a constant dialectical interrelationship, that they constantly pass over into one

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<sup>47</sup> Recall, for example, the discussion of democratic politics in Chapter One.

another, and further, subjectively, that the unbroken movement involved in the process of reflecting reality leads from one extreme to the other' (Lukács in Cazeauz, 2000: 221).

Artistic reflection focuses on this single, central mediating point between individuality and universality, around which there is a movement between the two poles. It reveals the truth of objective reality through the interplay between individuality and universality as they are sublated in the dialectical resting point of specific particularity. As such, this resting place is synthetic – a concretion of both the universal and the individual in sensuous form. Artworks, for Lukács are dialectical in this sense of operating in the category of synthetic concrescence – which always involves, instead of a loss, a certain preservation. The Hegelian process at play within the artwork, for Lukács, mediates what is both individual to the object/artwork itself, and signifies the typical – which is to say, articulates a typology. Artworks, thus, reveal typical notions and features that are held in common, whilst also retaining (through sublation) the specificities of the individual objects or forms they present. Form is a forming process of sublation whereby the individual and the universal are held up and preserved in the particular. Every individuality 'stands in relation to particularity and universality' (Lukács in Cazeauz, 2000: 223).

Lukács asserts that the most successful works of art are capable of holding this dialectical tension open indefinitely, it is, however, in periods of "decadence" that artworks are incapable of working through sublation to typical or common concerns whilst also retaining the complex relationship to individuality – 'the richer determination of individuality is lost [...] the theory and practice of decadence always emphasize the moment of individuality, which then gets fetishized as the absolutely unique, the unrepeatable, the ineliminable' (Lukács in Cazeauz, 2000: 224). As will become clear later in this chapter, it is this fetishisation of the individual and the trivial, non-dialectical relation to the universal that emerges in the current paradigm. I would argue, within the context of late stage neoliberal capitalism, the sphere of specific particularity is lost, and, it is my claim that Lukács, *avant la lettre*, points to this in his work. As I explore later in this chapter, the declination of social institutions that allow individuals to have traction at higher social levels, has had an effect on art – contemporary art in turn, is characterised by a similar tendency. The decline of artistic genres is key to understand this.

Fundamental to Lukács' account is the notion of *genre*. Necessary to a dialectical materialist notion of aesthetics, the mediating function of genre is the mode by which artworks relate to their material conditions, to humanity in general and to society. It is within the generic – which is

to say the expression of types, norms and modes – that specific particularity articulates the complex relation between the two poles of aesthetic categories. Without a theory of these generic modalities, contemporary artistic or political praxis is incapable of articulating a dialectical relation between the individual and the universal – the mode by which Marxist history proceeds. Instead it is bound to a flawed, or trivial, relation between these poles. Stripped of the mediating function of the generic, individuals are either assumed to be incapable of speaking to universal themes or they assume a direct relation to the universal. Lukács’ analysis turns on this point, the generic is precisely the mode by which a transition would occur, in other words, the generic is not so much a space between the individual and the universal, but the *process* by which the borders between the individual and universal are articulated and crossed – it is the commitment to the concept of genericity that would allow artworks to approach the universal whilst still maintaining the relation to the individual. Much in the same way that institutions in civil society allow individuals to have causal impact at higher levels – what is instituted in an institution is precisely the capacity it has to increase the social power of groups.

Instead of systematising his thought in the same way as Lukács, Adornian dialectics run between the universal and the particular, with genre as the mode by which individual works of art approach the universality of authenticity. Adorno is concerned with the decline of aesthetic genres – or the advance of aesthetic nominalism – where the ‘universal is no longer granted art through types’ (Adorno, 1997:262). He recognises the ongoing advance of what he calls “*principium individuationis*” – the move towards greater and greater individuation which distances art from the universal. This is a directive rather than a given, which is to say, it is normative. The principle, thus acts as a regulative idea that asserts how art *should* function, rather than merely describing how it does. Insofar as artworks assert their ontological status as artworks through the articulation of that proper name Art (the concept of nominalism that De Duve identified) – the upshot of the Duchampian moment in the early twentieth century – they do so according to a principle of individuation whereby all artworks are individually afforded the condition of art not because they work within or on the limits of genre, but because they are nominated as art *qua* their status as individual works.

The important contribution of Adorno’s work to this argument comes from his insistence on the mediating function of genre; genre acts to guarantee that art is bound dialectically to the universal. The history of art, especially within the context of late modernism, is a story about the dissolution of those genres, what John Roberts names a *deflationary logic* (Roberts 2010) whereby

artistic skill is reoriented away from typical techniques towards assemblage, collage and the readymade. This 'seismic shift' (Roberts 2010: 82) was responsible not just for destabilising genres and conventions but 'demolishing the formal hierarchy in which [mediums of art are] positioned and embedded' (ibid).

By locating meaning in the aesthetically-chosen found object (that is, the object of artistic discrimination) the artist is no longer bound to the expressive demands of covering a given surface or modelling a given material, but, rather to the intellectual demands of re-contextualising extant objects in order to change their sign-value.

(Roberts 2010: 82)

Insofar as genre, historically, operated as a mediator between the individual and universal (a role Lukács recognised occurring in relation to the specific particularity at the heart of the artwork), genre itself, and the attendant aesthetic norms and laws, have dissolved into a free play of individuals shorn from their complex relation to the universal via the mediating operation of genre. This is not to say that artworks have lost their sensuous particularity, nor that something like a role for art has been evacuated in the question of universality, but that artworks no longer emerge within the context of types or norms.<sup>48</sup>

With this in mind, how can contemporary art speak to universals today? As I will analyse later in this chapter, the deracination of the relation between individual and universal is not limited to art. Contemporary political ennui emerges in the gulf between these two poles; the idea of individual capacity in the context of global politics appears useless precisely because of the dismantling of, and loss of confidence in, historical institutions that would serve to mediate between the two poles. This process appears as social, cultural and political power is siphoned towards fewer and fewer members of society and particular social classes. It is no coincidence then, that contemporary art emerged as the best vehicle of cultural capital for the extremely wealthy within the latter part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty first centuries. It is both the cultural image of neoliberal capital and a fundamental progenitor of it, which is to say, contemporary art, precisely because it's relation to the universal is truncated, appears as an apolitical, non-ideological motor of the assumed non-ideological contemporary paradigm.

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<sup>48</sup> Rosalind Kraus' (1999) work here would be an interesting addition to this argument, her discussion around post-medium condition in particular points to notions of purity and ontology that could be useful for my argument.

There is an intrinsic link between the modalities by which liberalism, nominalism and contemporary art understands the relation between the particular and the universal that I wish to claim. Why this might be at stake when addressing issues of the petropolitical, however, is less obvious. My gambit is that these modalities were not only ratified during the eras concurrent with expanded oil sponsored economic growth, but that the petropolitical itself has had traction on developing these modalities. As explored in earlier chapters, oil's logics have extended far beyond pipelines, drilling rigs and petrol stations, they reach into our very lives and create, or amplify certain social relations, and dampen or occlude others. When it comes to climate breakdown, our responses are equally shaped by that same set of logics. As is clear, the foundational logics of liberalism and those of the petropolitical are interwoven, almost, it would seem, inextricably.

#### *5.4 Spontaneity as Triviality*

How we conceive of the role art has to play in creating political change depends on a number of factors. Do we believe that art has a direct relationship to political change? That works of art have efficacy within the realm of the political? At what site do we expect art to effectuate change? When we say “the political”, what, or indeed, *where* do we mean? Is the political restricted to the realm of governmental politics, to activism, or to realms of subjectivity? The term “political” seems to operate across multiple registers, as such it is not always easy to ascertain what an artist or theorist means by political efficacy. Significant attention has been paid to this issue in recent years, however it is not the ambition of this chapter to parse the entirety of these discussions. Instead, I shall be focusing on what I see to be a tendency within contemporary art to think that the political power of art rests on a form of political voluntarism – the idea that all is needed is the will to change for change to occur – and the idea of spontaneity – that all action should come from below with no need to think the structures or institutions through which that action should be mediated. Spontaneity in this context is committed to a contingency that upholds a non-synechistic logic.

The spontaneous order, a name given to the liberalism that emerged from non-planned, free markets – Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” and taken up in, among others, Friedrich Hayek’s work – identifies the order that emerges from the result of the voluntary action of individuals

rather than governmental intervention. As identified by Lenin (Lenin, 2009), spontaneity presupposes, one, the emergence of order from the unconscious working class masses, two, an immediacy of action that does not understand the worker's objective position, and three, a flat field of operation, undisturbed by power relations or structural conditions. Spontaneity, then, relies on forms of individual freedom postulated by liberalism, specifically negative freedom, and, as Lenin suggests, confuses tactics for a plan (ibid.). Central to the disagreement between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg on the issue of spontaneity is their understanding of personal freedom, Luxemburg insisting on the pure spontaneity of the working classes based around the Kantian notion of freedom (undetermined by outside forces), while Lenin's understanding of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat was conditioned by an understanding of autonomy as self-determination – as expressed in the vanguardism of the party form (The Charnel House).

Differentiating spontaneity from the notion of consciousness, Lenin identifies how, in the context of Russian protests and rebellions, spontaneity was, while the emergence of a nascent form of consciousness, not adequate to the latter. For him, socialist democratic consciousness emerged not from within the masses, but arose as the result of exogenous scientific knowledge (Lenin, 2009: 81). For him, 'the spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to its becoming subordinated to bourgeois ideology [...] [h]ence our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to *combat spontaneity*' (ibid.: 82). It is the institution of the Party that operates to mediate between the individual workers and the structures of power they wish to alter. A focus solely on the horizontal, or spontaneous, then, is incapable of thinking non-trivially about the political challenge. Historically, however, the notion of spontaneity, along with its counterpart, voluntarism, has taken hold.

Mark Fisher (Fisher in Gielen, 2013) identifies an ideological elision between the liberal notion of flexibility, spontaneity, networked horizontality and the Big Society of David Cameron; 'practically all mainstream political discourse is suspicious of, and sceptical towards, the State, planning, and the possibilities of organised political change' (Fisher in Gielen 2013: 103). In Fisher's telling of it, hierarchies have been superseded by networks, common sense is constituted by notions of fluidity, plurality, inclusivity and diversity – abolishing the idea there could be something like universal values. The ubiquitous nature of this form of "postmodernity" has rejected all notions of authority, and, according to Fisher has been disastrous for the left. In this telling, Luxemburg's argument has taken hold, while Lenin's vanguardism of the party has been rejected. While I think there has been a shift in recent years – the emergence of figures such as

Jeremy Corbyn in the British context or Bernie Sanders in the American seem to point to a renewal of ideas of the party acting in a vanguardist mode – these tendencies are still prevalent culturally today. Echoing Jo Freeman’s (Freeman, 1996) work on the way structureless organisations tend towards a reintroduction of tyrannical hierarchies through the back door, Fisher identifies the tendency within contemporary politics (and indeed in culture and the discourses around it) to render hegemonic struggle useless through the privileging of non-hierarchised, spontaneous, face-to-face interactions. He suggests, instead of rejecting wholesale authority as such, we should be able to distinguish between authority and authoritarianism:

The task now is to resist the false choice between obsolete authoritarianism and impotent anti-authoritarianism [...] Authoritarianism is the abuse of authority; it is therefore to be opposed, not by a wholesale rejection of authority, but by the conceptualization and constitution of proper authority.

(Fisher in Gielen, 2013: 105)

What emerges in the latter part of the twentieth century, coterminous with a faith in horizontalism from both the left and the right – the anti-authoritarian activism post-‘68 and the hyper-capitalism of silicon valley – is an equal faith in the boundless creativity of individuals. This sense of generalised creativity was not, however, conjoined with a political ambition to produce transformations at a political level – or rather, as Fisher suggests, the retreat into individual creativity was in the face of emergent complexities at the level of the global. Faced with an incoherent and opaque globalised world, much political action assumed that change could only come at a local level – and often this meant very much at the level of the *subject* themselves. The rejection of authority, of hegemony, has thus resulted in the rejection of any ambition to reclaim power for the left, coherent with this is the idea that human creativity can be a site of political struggle, but only insofar as what is changing is oneself not the system. Srnicek and Williams identify this as “folk politics” – the politics of ‘localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism [that] remains content with establishing small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure’ (Srnicek and Williams in Mackay, 2014: 354).

In line with this analysis, Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe in Gielen 2013) has criticised tactics of “withdrawal” or the fetishization of autonomy that many artistic practices employ, identifying a

trend in current artistic practice that thinks that in order to resist the marketisation of art institutions and the instrumentalization of the artist, that we must operate outside the institutions. Asking whether ‘critical artistic practices [should] engage with the current institutions with the aim of transforming them, or should they desert them altogether’ (Mouffe in Gielen 2013: 64), Mouffe gets to the heart of a question fundamental to our project here; should art’s autonomy be confined to a form of negative freedom that seeks to withdraw at an individual level from the conditions and contexts it finds itself in? Her answer is a resounding no; artistic practices that retreat from a relation to the institutions that provide them with context deny the very possibility of a ‘counter-hegemonic struggle to disarticulate the constitutive elements of neoliberal hegemony, with the aim of establishing a new power configuration’ (ibid.: 66). Understanding culture as a vital battleground in the war of position that is hegemony, Mouffe foregrounds a counter-hegemonic approach that integrates critical concerns into a constant revisionary practice that engages with institutions. As she suggests, ‘instead of celebrating the destruction of all institutions as a move toward liberation, the task for radical politics is to engage with them, developing their progressive potential and converting them into sites of opposition to the neoliberal market hegemony’ (ibid.: 71). Accounts of spontaneous or individualised withdrawals from the institutions of the art world (or institutions in general) presupposes the capacity to clearly delineate between the inside and outside, as I show in Chapter Six, this clear delineation is not possible. The rejection of hierarchies or authority, the rejection of that necessity to use institutions to increase our political capacities is expressed as a faith in a horizontality that prevents political transformation. Or, as Rodrigo Nunes (2014) suggests;

The time has come to be openly polemical and say once and for all that networks are not and cannot be flat; that prefiguration cannot be a goal in itself; and that an idea like horizontality may have moved from a fresh critical antidote to outdated ways of organising, to becoming an *epistemological obstacle*  
(Rodrigo Nunes 2014: 12)

While this is a highly truncated telling of the story of spontaneity, my aim here is to lay some groundwork to understand a critique of the way that art comes to assume its action in terms of spontaneity, instead of through mediating institutions (in the context of Lenin’s Russia, this mediating institution is of course the party, for Mouffe those may be understood as institutions of civil society, Nunes’ focus is on grassroots political organisations). What can be understood

clearly from this account, is that the theories of spontaneity and horizontality do not allow for an organised body of conscious subjects to emerge. Instead, presupposing that change will emerge, as though natural, from the masses with no organisational structure in place, spontaneity and horizontality imagine that the gulf between the individual and the universal to be crossed in one leap. This is the same supposition, as noted in Chapter Two, made by liberal economists who assumed that, left alone, *homo economicus* would prefer the most prudent choices thus producing a spontaneous order best suited to distributing wealth successfully, and equitably. This is an individualism of the highest order.

### 5.5 *Artistic Spontaneity*

Seeing as the conditions assumed by political spontaneity, an equal starting point, are rarely afforded individuals, it is an inherently poor theory for a discussion of how individuals – or art – participates in the construction of a social order. Any theory of social ordering, thus, must start from a description of the subject as co-constituted by power relations and social structures. Thus, a theory of art's political potential cannot rely on the idea that it emerges as though by fiat, it must account for the social and political structures that support it and make this emergence possible – it must contain a theory of power and a theory of institutions.

So, when artworks assume that their relation to transformative politics is direct, which is to say, the content is magically identical to the action produced, we should be cautious – they think that transformation is contingent on the actions of the people viewing the work. Let's examine this in the following example.

*Ice Watch* (2018) is a work of public art by the Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson that appeared in two sites in London in December 2018 – outside the Tate Modern and, as a smaller iteration, in front of the Bloomberg offices. The work outside the Tate consisted of 24 large blocks of ice arranged like an ancient stone circle on the banks of the Thames, that, over time, melted. The work has appeared twice previously, in Copenhagen in 2014 and Paris in 2015 – both times to coincide with a Conference of Parties meeting about climate change. The ice for this sculpture was harvested from the Nuup Kangerlua fjord in Greenland, where it had broken away from the ice sheet. In collaboration with the geologist Minik Rosing, these large chunks of ice were hauled in refrigerated ships to their resting place in London. During the lifespan of the work, the ice

melted, allowing visitors to see, hear and smell the popping and hissing of melting ice as it released its centuries old air into the London atmosphere. The air being released is, according to Rosing, 'air that that was trapped before we started polluting the atmosphere. Those bubbles have almost half the CO2 content as the air outside the iceberg. It was trapped maybe 10,000 years ago, maybe 100,000, so you can smell what air used to smell like before we polluted it' (Rosing cf. Jonze 2018).

*Ice Watch* was developed in response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's stark warning that we only have twelve years to avert climate catastrophe. In the face of such a terrifying prognosis Eliasson suggests that art and culture have a vital role to play; rather than presenting audiences with difficult to understand statistics, abstract concepts or vast scales, we need to make them *feel* the experience of ice melting. It is only in this immediate way that the audience will be moved to action on climate change. He suggests we need 'a positive narrative to make people change their behaviour' (Eliasson cf. *ibid.*). *Ice Watch* makes us witnesses to the melting of the ice caps, bringing the tragedy of climate change into the public consciousness in a visceral way. Eliasson invites us to:

Put your hand on the ice, listen to it, smell it, look at it – and witness the ecological changes our world is undergoing. Feelings of distance and disconnect hold us back, make us grow numb and passive. I hope that Ice Watch arouses feelings of proximity, presence, and relevance, of narratives that you can identify with and that make us all engage.

(Eliasson cf. *Ice Watch is heading for London*)

For Eliasson, the bodily experience outweighs the rational understanding of statistics – we will only respond to the immediate sensation of the melting of polar ice but not to knowledge that this is happening at a distance. Apparently, Eliasson has been reading behavioural psychology and has learnt that action can only be prompted by an immediate, proximate experience, not by abstract knowledge – as a species we shall be forever limited to our immediate, local surroundings. This assumption of rational limitation in his audience is conditioned by Eliasson's understanding of the way art conceives its role in political change. Precisely, art here is the direct presentation to our senses of the tragedy of melting ice caps, instead of the mediation of that knowledge through scientific institutions and epistemologies, presumably because we can no longer trust them. Art thus stands in for our inability to trust authority, presenting us with

immediate experience that keeps our concerns local – we are moved not by the knowledge that the populations of island nations are losing their homes and livelihoods, that equatorial countries are experiencing record temperatures causing crops to fail not to mention taking the lives of many poor inhabitants, or by the very current crises of extreme weather conditions in the Global South, or the flooding, strong winds or wild fires happening in even developed countries. Instead, we are moved to action by the experience of ice melting *in our home city*, an experience that places front and centre the concerns of the inhabitants of *that* city. This threat to the local presupposes and thus determines the types of political responses that would emerge – insofar as the political here is both determined by and preordains responses according to a logic of spontaneity, Eliasson’s work will result in localist political voluntarism.

The hope of *Ice Watch* is that *enough people* experience it in order to precipitate political change – however, adequate theorisation of how that occurs is not given. Instead of a logic of mediating contexts or intermediary institutions that might modify or enlarge that political intent, art here appears to have direct access to the sphere of political change – it must leap across the abyss separating the particular work of art and the universal realm within which the political claims gain traction. And it assumes to be able to do this through an accretion of subjects – plus plus plus. This logic assumes that change occurs through the addition of enough individuals whose personal motivations are sufficiently altered in order to make radical change possible.

The concern here is not that the people will not know how to articulate their political will, but that spontaneous political action can only emerge from an immediate experience rather than an expanded epistemology that foregrounds rational or abstract understandings of the struggles that appear outside our direct experience – what Negarestani calls triviality. Furthermore, these accretions of subjectivities are not understood as synthetic multiplications whereby local contexts interweave with global, but as a question of numbers; *if enough people see the work*. As explored later in this chapter, this understanding of political change thinks groups as an accretion of individuals, in, what Peirce would call a nominalistic fashion, rather than a form of realism that understands the continuity of groups.

Whereas Eliasson suggests it is not enough to know, one must *feel* in order to construct political subjects, I would argue that this feeling without knowing forecloses a political subjectivity that can account for the conditions of subjects who are not like us. Assuming that we respond more urgently to the smell of centuries old air and the cold touch of an ice block instead of testimonies

of those populations on the frontline of a tragically changing climate, or the wealth of scientific data predicting the catastrophe, assumes something very tragic about the human condition. In this narrative we are myopic subjects, incapable of parsing information about worlds outside our own. In place of international solidarity, self-interest and nationalism is foregrounded, our horizons limited to the localities in which we live, what matters is what is close.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, this work operates in a romantic anti-capitalist frame that prioritises authentic, direct, immediate experience, over what is considered abstract about contemporary capitalism – data, information, finance. Romantic anti-capitalism presupposes that human political agency should be directed towards escaping the trammels of capitalist society by creating an authentic relationship to the land, nature, or human “essence”.<sup>50</sup> As if to prove this, note the title of Eliasson’s 2019 Tate show.

Eliasson’s 2019 retrospective at the Tate Modern, *In Real Life*, contains work from his student days until now, tracing his playful engagement with nature, weather, and human interaction. The last room of the exhibition is a somewhat haphazard recreation of “Studio Eliasson”. Known as The Expanded Studio, it documents some of his projects, including *Ice Watch* and *Little Sun*, a small plastic light that seeks to provide solar powered lights to communities without electricity – but, in the final analysis one could argue creates a business opportunity out of poverty whilst at the same time maintaining the appearance of goodness.

On one wall there is an array of notes, sketches and research arranged in an alphabetical order, offering a kind of glossary to the work itself. Amongst many other quotes, images, and notes, Eliasson has pinned a quote from Rebecca Solnit (source text unattributed), written in capital letters in red pen. It is a poem of sorts:

I want better metaphors.

I want better stories.

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<sup>49</sup> Further to this it is worth noting that both Eliasson and Rosing describe this work in terms of beauty – it is beautifully pure water and air that is being released, the sound is beautiful, the blocks themselves – the beauty, of course, emerges precisely because it is pure, before the emergence of industrial activity, before pollution, before humanity. This prelapsarian idea of beauty is telling. Is the political project that the artist and geologist embarking on one of population reduction or control? Are we witnessing an example of neo-Malthusianism in artistic form?

<sup>50</sup> Iyko Day’s (2016) work on this is instructive.

I want more openness.  
I want better questions.  
All these things feel like  
they give us tools that  
are a little more  
commensurate with the amazing possibilities  
and the terrible  
realities that we face.  
(Rebecca Solnit cf. Olafur Eliasson, 2019)

The “poem” is likely taken out of context, so none of the following should reflect on Solnit, but the centrality of these sentiments to Eliasson’s practices resonate with an analysis of voluntarism. Progressive, ecological or left critical movements rarely lack metaphors, stories or programmes, what they have lacked is the *power* to enact these stories. If we continually assume that better stories will save us, whilst concurrently giving no credence to very real material constraints on the enaction of those stories, we will be destined to repeat the failures that have historically befallen us. What voluntarism, a central component of much art that supposes its role as modelling future solutions, assumes, then, is that all we need to do is create expanded epistemologies. Fundamental to a description of political myopia, then, is one of two ideas; the idea that power relations do not exist, or if they do, they can be easily bypassed by adequate imaginative narrations; or that intransigent power relations ultimately restrict our capacities to act, limiting our engagement with the question of political transformation to a performative imaginary. “All we need are better stories” is accompanied by the idea that faced with ratcheting crises, our capacities are ultimately lacking and the only arena we have left to act in is the imaginary. The left melancholia identified by Fisher in his description of capitalist realism, thus prevents us from doing the hard work of working on intermediary institutions, organisational or solidarity projects, and foregrounds artistic or creative projects within which capacity to imagine better futures is rewarded by the accrual of cultural capital and the self-satisfaction of “having done something”.

### 5.6 *The Racialised “We” of Extinction Rebellion*

It is this retreat into individual claims to having had “done something” that has beset much of the discourse around climate change amelioration. Granted, recent conversations in the popular discourse have included, at least in some sense, the idea that systemic change needs to occur; George Monbiot’s<sup>51</sup> many introjections into the debate, for example, have focused on political and economic matters instead of personal or subjective ones, localism still pervades within the common sense. While I shall explore how market solutions to political problems are inadequate in Chapter Six, it is important to note that this localisation of political ambition and the retreat from hegemonic struggle, ideas straight out of the liberal playbook, are behind calls to recycle, buy local produce, use energy saving lightbulbs and even to go vegan. This personalisation of responsibility dangerously risks absolving the main culprit of climate disaster – the very economic system that determines and regulates our activities.

Emerging in the latter months of 2018, the climate action group Extinction Rebellion have already become a global force, having organised marches in over 90 cities around the world, caught the attention of journalists, politicians, celebrities and the general public alike and staged many “successful” public demonstrations of varying form, including the general strike-like “International Rebellion” that, in London at least, managed to significantly disrupt transport and economic activity in multiple sites across the city for over a week. As a direct response to this and other similar marches by organisations such as The Wretched of the Earth and the Youth Climate Strikes, the British Labour Party called for a Climate Emergency in Parliament. By many metrics the wide-reaching campaign, that has taken many lessons from previous activist organisations, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and so on, has been successful; the climate crisis is now listed as a major source of public anxiety by a YouGov poll (Carrington 2019), the 2019 European Elections saw a Europe wide “green wave” as political parties with the climate as their number one priority won many seats, and many major political parties now list climate change amelioration as policy.<sup>52</sup> Yet, in the final analysis there is something fundamentally limited about their tactics. While vocalising the truth of the global climate crisis, its nature as an

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<sup>51</sup> For Monbiot see, for example 2019 (i) and 2019 (ii)

<sup>52</sup> Since then, however, we have seen, in the British context, that the main driver for voters turned out to be Brexit by any means necessary, climate be damned. So short lived was the environmental concerns of the general population that even while Australia’s bush burned, destroying lives and decimating farmland, we voted in, by a significant majority, a politician wholly unconcerned with climate disaster.

emergency, and the need for governments to act, the counter-hegemonic move is not made, rather, it is withdrawn from.

In the Principles and Values section of the Extinction Rebellion website, there are ten clear statements that allow us to understand the politics of this organisation. While a number of the statements clearly outline need for “systemic change”, the eighth Principle says this:

We avoid blaming and shaming: We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame.

(Extinction Rebellion)

While it is admirable to name the system, the reticence to articulate which subjects (and which nations) work to maintain and reinforce that system lacks the teeth needed for a counter-hegemonic operation. As I outlined above, in Chapter One, and will discuss later in this chapter, the nations that profited most from colonial settler extraction and plunder are those contributing most to carbon emissions. As James Trafford suggests, ‘[w]ealthy countries like Britain are built on, and sustained by, impoverishing the global south. This means they have the resources to weather the storm whilst others are consigned to fate’. (Trafford 2019)

Failing to identify the largest emitters of carbon, and declaring that “we” are facing a climate emergency ‘we are facing an unprecedented global emergency. Life on Earth is in crisis: scientists agree we have entered a period of abrupt climate breakdown, and we are in the midst of a mass extinction of our own making’ (Extinction Rebellion), Extinction Rebellion frames the crisis as a moral, universal one, affecting us all equally. The refusal to name names takes the focus off specific actors – large corporations, governments refusing to sign in new environmental legislation etc – and, to the advantage of those corporations, turns it towards everyone. Indeed, as Kate Irvine (2018) asserts, ‘climate change is not the great equalizer’, she continues:

Rather, its impacts filter through the complex and often highly unequal social, political, and economic structures that define human social systems globally. And not surprisingly, efforts to mitigate climate change and ameliorate its impacts are likewise channelled through those very same structures; indeed, climate change has emerged out of them.

(Irvine, 2018: 29)

As I discussed in Chapter One, the use of the term Anthropocene links responsibility with a universalised individual subject – the whole of the Anthropos. This is not as much a paradox as it seems; instead of relating the individual to the universal through synechistic weaving and multiplication, this assumption totalises the figure of the individual within the universal, assuming a direct correlation between the two. The universal “we” here operates as a totalitarian identification between the local human subject and the global crisis, imparting responsibility universally, and equally, across all subjects, despite the fact that that responsibility is not ours. Precisely, Extinction Rebellion’s argument ratifies a form of totalitarian thinking that presupposes individuals are *identical* to the state not that power is divided unequally amongst different actors and groups.

As I shall discuss later in this chapter, this “we” occludes black and indigenous epistemologies, experiences, and subjectivities, flattening them, yet again, into the image of European universality – as a corrective to this it is worth noting the work of the climate activist group The Wretched of the Earth, who re-embed the racialised subject at the centre of a discourse around climate disaster. Their open letter to Extinction Rebellion (Wretched of the Earth 2019) does not shy away from the idea that ‘we did not get here by a sequence of small missteps, but were thrust here by powerful forces that drove the distribution of resources of the entire planet and the structure of our societies’ (WotE 2019). Suggesting that it is precisely the drive for profit that produced the colonial relations inherent in the economic systems that have driven us to this point, Wretched of the Earth (whose name comes from Frantz Fanon’s famous work) identify the failure of Extinction Rebellion to challenge these very economic systems. Their demands resonate with ideas around racial justice and accountability to communities in the Global South, much of what follows in this chapter owes a debt to the analysis WotE open up.

How we construct the idea of who or what matters will determine our future politics and action. Challenging the idea of the universal “Anthropos” at the heart of the term Anthropocene, Kathryn Yusoff (2018) critically examines the way blackness has been (and still is being) constructed in relation to white universality, and how recent scientific evidence pointing to potential environmental harm has led to racial imaginaries and political action that repeats colonial relations.

If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these

harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism.

(Yusoff, 2018: xiii)

This sudden emergence of environmental violence that the white liberal communities around the world are experiencing, so often narrativised in terms of threat to *our* land, *our* children or *our* future, prevents us from seeing that the same violences have been occurring in sites distant from “us”. Yusoff calls this a wilful blindness that permeates our comfortable position – the privilege of not having to worry about climate catastrophe. The material geopolitics of race infuse and infect not only the colonial projects of extraction – extraction of value from land and people not deemed “human” – but the very ways in which we respond to these threats. As is well documented, liberal comfort is underwritten by violent actions, dispossessions and the racial organisation of space; insofar as this comfort must be maintained, we are entreated not to foreground the struggles of marginalised communities within our climate action (see, Trafford 2019). However, as long as we construct our political actions in the liberal frame, colonialism will be repeated. As Yusoff asserts, local political struggles often centre around material infrastructure – pipelines, coal fields, water rights etc – yet these local scenarios are not constructed away from economies of power that are ‘preconfigured through a racialised geosocial matrix’ (ibid.: 13). Like Yusoff’s claims for the racialisation of geology, it is important to identify artistic practices as preconfigured by racialised matrices; in order to conduct ourselves in just ways, we must account for the racialised geopolitical materialities and imaginaries that construct our worldviews. Immediacy, then, in the form of spontaneous politics, as exemplified by artwork that foregrounds white comfort, will only ever repeat the racialised matrices it is predetermined by. Eliasson’s work can be read as deeply embedded in this expression of comfort – what the inhabitants of London are meant to feel is not actually the necessity to produce radical change that could repair damages caused by colonial relations, but the idea that change to our psyches is adequate to political change – as such, we come away from viewing this work *better people*. Far from having to engage in the struggle that characterises the lives of many migrant and indigenous populations of the world, we, white, liberal subjects, have our consciences massaged by the knowledge we can assuage our colonial guilt through “thinking virtuously”.

The expression of environmental virtue, as identified in Chapter Four as a form of exemplification, that retains white comfort often foregrounds goodness without thinking through the material and structural conditions that allowed it to emerge and reproduce the

violence it is superficially concerned with. Gloria Wekker (2016), identifies this as “white innocence” – the idea that one can hold up examples of ethical, green or antiracist behaviour whilst also participating in and benefiting from systems that predominantly privilege whiteness, and relationally, marginalise and violate blackness, indigeneity and migrancy. The metabolisms of land, matter and bodies that afford us this innocent position, that insulate us from the worst effects of the climate disaster, are thus denied in this white innocence. Reducing racism to the subjective experience of prejudice, as Robin DeAngelo (2018) suggests, rather than understanding it as a structural condition, allows white progressives to overlook those very structural conditions – we can declare our innocence because we do not hold reprehensible views, yet we fail to address systems of oppression and violence – we can feel better about ourselves for having the “correct” views. This form of myopia, wilful or otherwise, underwrites Eliasson’s work, and I would argue, is fundamental to the condition of contemporary art as such. Because contemporary art foregrounds voluntarist action based around the individual subject, and understands this action within the context of a politics of spontaneity, it forecloses the continual and ongoing process of unlearning and challenging oppression that is required.

As Yusoff, Ghassan Hage (2017), François Vergès (in Johnson and Lubin 2017), T.J. Demos (2016 and 2017) and others assert, the racial dimension of climate change is one of domination, extraction and exploitation. It is not one of innocence, but of agents and systems fundamentally responsible for causing, through racialised violence and settler colonialism, environmental disasters globally and locally. Racial domination relies, as Yusoff argues, on prefiguring blackness as not just inferior to whiteness, but of a different category. In order to exploit bodies, just as land and natural resources are exploited, whiteness has to imagine blackness as inhuman, thus more proximate to “nature”. As Yusoff suggests, ‘humanness becomes differentiated by the inhuman objectification of indigenous and black subjects’ (Yusoff, 2018: 35). This elision between exploitable bodies and exploitable nature allows the primitive accumulation of petrocapiatalism to occur. Underwriting the white innocence and comfort of colonial power relations is the double extraction of value from blackness and from land – with oil, of course, being front and centre of this extraction. Rather than exploitation being a by-product of racial prejudice, the category of blackness, then, is *created* in order to exploit – thus, Vergès description of the racial capitalocene as a long history of capital domination. This history is only possible, as Yusoff suggests, because the description of universal “Man” appears as ‘the ontological signification of Whiteness’ (Yusoff, 2018: 34), whereby, whiteness signifies a fullness of humanity that lacks in blackness. Within the context of Eliasson’s work, the universal subject

appears as localised and nationally bound, neutral, unmarked – thus in the position of whiteness. How we construct a non-localised subject then, is of utmost importance when considering the capacity for art to produce just political change that accounts for the racialised, gendered and class relations at play within contemporary capitalism.

### *5.7 Petro-political anomie*

Domination of one group or community by another, either through oppression, violence, systemic, carceral or political means, requires the construction of a system in which the oppressed group lack access or the capacity to make systemic changes. As we have seen, gradual consciousness raising exercises have made some ground in the counter-hegemonic project, yet have so often had their demands incorporated into those dominant systems in ways that do not provide justice for the oppressed – but in fact, create further oppressions. The incapacity to have demands for systemic change heard, much less acted on, bests many activist or political projects. One way of understanding this incapacity is through the concept of myopia. However, sometimes lacking the means necessary to construct struggles for universality is not the failure of those movements or people themselves, but the way in which society is constructed in ways that make that task impossible. The climate emergency and the ways in which the oil industry has built global financial and political dominance are real, material conditions that truncate political ambitions raised against that power. There is no natural domination, every form of power is constructed in order to capitalise on that differential level of power, as such, politics is the proper name for the struggle for and against domination. Petropolitical domination is no different – climate collapse is a form of power differential.

The political is not an arena in which dominant groups impose their interests and subaltern groups resist; it is, rather, the ground on which the relation between the dominant and dominated is worked out. In other words, there is no nonpolitical or apolitical domination. Thus, the fundamental adaptation that climate change demands of humanity is political in this sense. It is the only way in which the dominant can continue to dominate – and the only way in which that domination can be undone.

(Mann and Wainwright, 2018: 80)

In order for the petropolitical domination of individuals, society and nature to be undone, the political system must be rethought in terms of the justice for these parties. How we apportion that justice, how we work out what is valuable to us as a species as opposed to us as individuals, or a community as opposed to corporate interests, is determined by how we view those relationships. Within the frame of, for example, Liberalism, those relationships are characteristically different to other paradigms, say socialism. Petropolitics grounds those relations in terms of a specific notion of valuation. When land, labour and people become valuable as resource, rather than as ends in and of themselves, the economic logics of extractivism is applicable to them. Liberalism views those resources as determined not by a communal value, but by an individual one – whereby a resource is only valuable insofar as it increases the capital wealth of an individual (whether that is economic or cultural capital). As Unger suggests;

Ends are viewed by liberal theory as individual in the sense that they are always the objectives of particular individuals. By contrast, values are called communal when they are understood as the aims of groups [...] the political doctrine of liberalism does not acknowledge communal values. To recognize their existence, it would be necessary to begin with a vision of the basic circumstances of social life that took groups rather than individuals as the intelligible and primary units of social life. The individuality of values is the very basis of personal identity in liberal thought, a basis the communal conception of value destroys (sic).

(Unger, 1975: 76)

Democracy acts then, as the fundamental mediator between the individual and the group. However, within neoliberalism, democracy has, as Streeck (2014) suggests, withered, and with it the institutions tasked with ensuring its operation. Coterminous with the emergence of this regime is the decline of institutions, either through defunding, neglect or the erosion of public trust. What Emile Durkheim (1960) called anomie – the degradation of the relation between individuals and the social norms and values of the given society – results in, or is a product of, a type of limitlessness. A derangement, as he calls it, whereby social values are no longer being marshalled by society; instead social norms no longer apply. He characterises forms of anomie with the experience of infinity; individuals have become ever more free from the social bonds that used to guide them, this desire without limit leads to an ever greater intensification. It is certainly coherent to argue that petropolitics imagines no limit; a world with natural, or inherent,

limits is one in which future economic value cannot be withdrawn.<sup>53</sup> As such, the petropolitical tries to impose the false experience of limitlessness on society – the freedom of the market – in order to maintain its market capitalisation.

This social anomie results, as Durkheim suggests, from the breakdown of institutions that mediate between the social body and the state. In order for anomie to be staved off, individuals need to have adequate relation to the processes by which political decision is made. Durkheim:

A society composed of an infinite number of unorganized individuals, that a hypertrophied State is forced to oppress and contain, constitutes a veritable sociological monstrosity. For collective activity is always too complex to be able to be expressed through the single and unique organ of the State. Moreover, the State is too remote from individuals its relations with them too external and intermittent to penetrate deeply into individual consciences and socialize them within. Where the State is the only environment in which men can live communal lives, they inevitably lose contact, become detached, and thus society disintegrates. A nation can be maintained only if between the State and the individual, there is intercalated whole series of secondary groups near enough to the individuals to attract them strongly in their sphere of action and drag them, in this way, into the general torrent of social life.

(Durkheim, 1960: 28)

If democracy is incapable of mediating successfully between individual and communal needs, or restricting the capacity individuals have to make changes in society, then anomie emerges. This is true even if the balance is in favour of assumed communal needs, whereby societal norms are oppressive, and the individual has little to no traction in changing them. Polanyi's (2001) work on the economic history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries points to a historical precedent for this type of social degradation. According to him, the collapse of nineteenth-century civilisation was not due to any exogenous pressures, but to the failure of the societies to adopt measures to protect successfully against the changing market systems. Fast paced industrialisation and the "modernisation" of the economy based on the concept of *homo economicus* imposed, as discussed in Chapter Two above, market conditions on the organisation of society. In this context, the description of the human follows the concept of economic rationality, yet, as Polanyi has shown, economic rationality is not the natural condition of human

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<sup>53</sup> See Chapter Three

subjects and must be invented by state intervention. In such societies, whereby capital growth is privileged over other markers of a healthy society, human capacities are kept in line with the economic desires of the country, in order to maintain this arrangement, individuals must be restricted from having a close relation to the institutions and mechanisms by which power can be altered – it is out of this restriction that anomie emerges.

Insofar as current industrial activity is precipitating ecosystem collapse, and our capacities are being suppressed by entwined economic and political systems intent on continuing down that destructive path, our relationship to those systems is deeply malignant. The lack of traction between our desires and those systems, a degradation of democracy itself, will, as Polanyi's historical account shows, result in social collapse. Coterminous with, what I would consider to be the signal failure of liberalism, global ecosystem collapse, these anomic conditions presage a global systemic crisis. Further to this analysis it is important to understand how financialisation, as explored in Chapter Two, has returned us to the paradigm of accumulation by dispossession. Exploring the case of Monsanto, Kari Polanyi Levitt (2013),<sup>54</sup> suggests we have returned to a regime of violent serfdom, whereby farmers are in bondage to the global corporations who own the patents on the crops they grow. As she suggests, '[t]ransnational companies have increasingly secured monopolistic control over markets on a global scale [...] more powerful than governments' (Polanyi Levitt, 2013: 185). Financialisation binds us to a specified future, its temporal horizon one of greater and greater accumulation by dispossession as the limits *must* be crossed, all the while binding its human subjects to violent contractual arrangements. Furthermore, corporate interests, so divorced from the interests of the community and individuals, come to supersede the latter to such an extent that corporations occupy the site of power in society.

The failure of the current socio-political regime to avoid this crisis, I argue, is due to the deracination between the individual and the political. This crisis of legitimacy will not be solved only by the spontaneous rising up of groups of individuals nor by the top down imposition of limits. Instead, I suggest, following Negarestani, we need a properly dialectical understanding of the relation between the individual and the universal that understands the crossings of the void to be bound by non-trivial logics.

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<sup>54</sup> Karl Polanyi's daughter.

## 5.8 *The Failure of Liberalism*

While I think it is important to note Patrick Deneen's conservatism, there is something important in his critique of liberalism. While social conservatism and forms of localism seem to be the end point of Deneen's analysis (something this thesis will not abide), his work on the failure of liberalism (Deneen, 2018), is instructive. Not least because it links social maladies to liberalism's first principles in much the same way Losurdo (2014) does – understanding the role of liberal society to be one of exclusion and ratcheting inequality – but because it brings the analysis up to date. Losurdo calls liberalism a form of “master-race democracy”, that subjugates servile labour and land to decimation and destruction (Losurdo, 2014: 229), while Deneen attenuates a reading of this analysis through the idea that neo-liberalism, far from being a break with the liberalism before it, was its logical conclusion, whereby liberalism became *more* itself (Deneen, 2018: 3). As we've seen in previous chapters, its logic is bound to the concept of self-marketing – ‘it pretends to neutrality, claiming no preference and denying any intention of shaping souls under its rule. It ingratiates by invitation to the easy liberties, diversions, and attractions of freedom, pleasure, and wealth.’ (ibid.: 5). This pretence allows it to shape societies unnoticed. As Deneen notes (in the context of higher education), liberal governments, far from renouncing control over their subject's lives as the advertising line would have it, have expanded their domination:

The liberties that liberalism was brought into being to protect – individual rights of conscience, religion, association, speech, and self-governance – are extensively compromised by the expansion of the government activity into every area of life. Yet this expansion continues, largely as a response to pupils felt loss of power over trajectory of their lives in so many distinct spheres – economic and otherwise – leading to demands for further intervention by the one entity even nominally under their control.  
(Deneen, 2018: 7-8)

As such, the intrusion of liberal governance into life has expanded. More power accrues upwards, into corporate hands, removing power from intermediary institutions that would otherwise act as our representatives. As Deneen suggest, ‘[s]uch a keenly felt distance and lack of control is not a condition to be solved by a better and more perfect liberalism – rather, this crisis of governance is *the culmination of the liberal order*’ (my italics) (ibid.: 8). In the face of countless environmental catastrophes, deaths, species extinction and ecosystems collapse, our feeling of

helplessness has intensified by a significant degree. Petropolitics is a liberalism, the privatisation of our lifeworld.

Deneen's subject of critique is the expansion of personal freedoms associated with liberalism; because his conservatism prevents him from understanding this historical tendency as a dialectic of personal *and* collective freedom, he cannot think this sufficiently. Instead, personal freedom just is the evacuation of communities, laws, norms and culture. While I certainly find this argument persuasive, and have in part relied upon it, I would be very keen to assert the necessity to think beyond what it seems Deneen is calling for; a return to a prelapsarian state where social and cultural norms had a significant impact on personal lives. There is no return to repressive normativity; communal freedom must be dialectically linked to the expansion of personal freedoms. However, it is important to follow the historical narrative of how the escape from norms has, in part, tended towards a declination of social and cultural values and the attendant institutions that would uphold them, at least in order to understand how we might reconstruct these institutions with an expanded (and non-liberal) notion of freedom in mind.

Deneen argues that the liberalisation of society is shaped by a freedom from positive law, the sense that natural limits should not bind us, instead, we should (and it's a normative claim) transcend any limit where it appears. Ironically, however, the expansion of personal liberties in the form of escape from social and cultural institutions such as family, religion, associations and so on, requires an increased 'regulative behaviour through the imposition of positive law' (Deneen, 2018: 38).

Liberalism thus culminates into ontological points: deliberated individual and the controlling state [...] the state consists of autonomous individuals, and these individuals are "contained" by the state.

(Deneen, 2018: 39)

Deneen's work should be taken with some caution, while his historical account is seemingly accurate, indeed it tallies with others given by, for example Erich Fromm (2001), I would argue that the positive content he accords these institutions disallows him from thinking a future that is not, in some way, a return to the past.

The story of the twentieth century, as told by Fromm, is one of escape from social bonds and norms.

Once the primary bonds which gave security to the individual are severed, once the individual faces the world outside himself as a completely separate entity, two courses are open [...the second] open to him is to fall back, to give up his freedom, and try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world. This second course never reunites him with the world in the way he was related to it before he emerged as an “individual”, the fact of his separatedness cannot be reversed; it is an escape from an unbearable situation which would make life impossible if it were prolonged. The course of escape, therefore, is characterised by its compulsive character, like every escape from threatening panic; it is also characterised by the more or less complete surrender of individuality and integrity of the self.

(Fromm, 2001: 121)

As human societies escape and transcend their limits, either socially, culturally, ecologically or economically (with the use of the derivatives market), the relation between the individual and the world is widened.<sup>55</sup> This deracination emerges in societies in which communal values are suspended in favour of the individual desires of those in power; insofar as the petropolitical is a regime dedicated to the apportioning of value to natural resources in order to further increase individual wealth, it is one that cannot acknowledge the existence of objective communal or social values. Value only exists as exchange value – a mediating function between individuals represented by the pricing mechanism – not as something objective outside of individual desire or intervention. What this means, as Unger (1975) shows us, is that objective value (abhorrent to the political theory of liberalism), is superseded by naming conventions. Insofar as an object

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<sup>55</sup> It is important to note that this deracination or alienation from the “natural” world should not be seen as a loss or lack of essence. Insofar as humans have always coexisted with nature through some kind of lack, whereby we have never not been “fallen”, there does not exist some past to which we can escape nor some idealised relation to nature that we must retreat. In many cases, alienation from nature is desirable, it is the figure of the alien in fact, that allows us to think otherwise, a productive imaginary that foregrounds the deracination from nature as a positive step. Romantic anti-capitalist or small “c” conservative critical approaches to this very same question would see us attempt to close the gap between culture and nature, assuming them to be two distinct spheres in the first place. The type of democratic socialism that I am advocating for here, rather, understands the necessity to produce institutions through which justice will be upheld – it is only through the very actions of alienated human actors to utilise rationality to produce these institutions that we shall find the understanding that neither culture nor nature exist as separate entities but are always already entwined.

belongs to a category of similar objects, it does so according to the *name* given to it. Is this not exactly the condition described by De Duve above? Artworks no longer appear to have some relationship to formal or conceptual essences that bind them together as works of art, instead, as De Duve suggests, they appear within the regime of art precisely because they are *called* art.

How then, we understand the relation between individuals and universals is central to political theory precisely because the condition of relating is one of valuation. It is through the idea of universal value that individuals relate to one another within groups. Within the context of liberalism, groups are *only* collections of individuals, they do not have an internal essence or value that binds them together. As Unger asserts, liberalism affirms that the group is a ‘sum of its parts’ (Unger, 1975: 81). Insofar as the group is ‘simply a collection of individuals’ (ibid.), the relation between the individual and the group is one of non-transcendence. Unger calls this the principle of individualism.<sup>56</sup> For him, the principle assumes that society is artificial, value is individual and subjective, the group is merely the association of individuals and what is true of those individuals is true of the group. One can ascertain all that is needed to know about groups from the summation of what we know about individuals. Under these conditions the transition between the localised individual and the global or universal – between the individual and the group – is fundamentally truncated. How we navigate this transition is vital for political theory, but equally, as shown above, for art theory.

As Jameson (1990) acknowledges, the spatial discontinuities of political modelling so they might be generalisable are limiting to political action – the problem appears as one of scale. Jameson names the strategic capacity to expand models at more general levels “cognitive mapping”, as he suggests ‘the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience’ (Jameson, 1990: 350). In this concept, the inability to overcome discontinuities between the local and the global are analogous to the inability to navigate the space of a city. Without the requisite mapping institutions, way-markers and structural conventions, we are lost, much like Foucault’s prisoner of the passage<sup>57</sup> – this is what I call myopia.

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<sup>56</sup> Recall here Adorno’s similar formulation.

<sup>57</sup> Deleuze’s (2016) telling of the Foucauldian idea of freedom is interesting here. In Deleuze’s work Foucault imagines freedom as man aboard a rowing boat in a vast flat ocean, unable to make a rational decision of which way to navigate, the boat’s passenger is in fact a prisoner.

This myopia appears because of spatial discontinuities – scalar disparities – particulars struggle to gain traction at general levels. This incapacity to generalise particulars is sometimes understood as a problem of scale, however, as Anna Tsing (2012) argues, this is the wrong approach. Scalability approaches the world as discrete but identical components that can be adequately scaled up without change in type or nature of the components. As Tsing suggests, it is the central notion in supply chain capitalism – she gives the example of how production lines scale up. Tsing tells us ‘to scale well is to develop the quality called scalability, that is, the ability to expand—and expand, and expand—without rethinking basic elements’ (Tsing, 2012: 505). She describes scalability as a triumph of world making and the conquest of nature, yet it does so at the expense of the heterogeneity of the world. Instead she proposes we think of the world as non-scalable. Nonscalability theory acknowledges that as things expand, they take on new forms and meanings. Whereas economic growth only understands the world in terms of its capacity to be scaled up – operations of accumulation that can be mapped into other scenarios (models) – we have to think nonscalar modes that do not approach the world through the frame of economic growth. Transformative relationships emerge when you scale - these are the basis for the inclusion of diversity, without the acknowledgement of the transformative nature of increasing and expanding scalability will always exclude diversity as it seeks to increase the size of the same. Scalability is what allows labour and nature to be commodified as separate units of value. As she suggests,

Projects that could expand through scalability were the poster children of modernization and development. Agribusiness expanded. Biological populations expanded. Scalable approaches to knowledge expanded. We learned to know the modern by its ability to scale up. Scalable expansion reduced a once surrounding ocean of diversity into a few remaining puddles. Project advocates thought that they had grasped the world. But they have been confronted with two problems: first, expandability has gotten out of control. Second, scalability has left ruins in its wake. Nonscalable effects that once could be swept under the rug have come to haunt us all.

(Tsing, 2012: 523)

Scalability presupposes direct relation between the small and the large. This ruinous mythos has allowed capital to exploit the local in the name of the global, a plantation logic that determines all nature (and indigenous peoples, seen as close to nature) as available for exploitation. Thus, when we think the cognitive mapping project required for transitioning local, particular claims to

universal positions, we must think in nonscalar terms. It is the capacity to understand the heterogenous nature of the world, that relationships are transformative, and that as one transitions political claims upwards, the process necessarily alters and distorts those claims. Tsing's work on the nature of scale is vital for us to understand how political theory must approach the processes involved in this transition.

This is also an aesthetic problem. For Jameson, the act of representing the global within the local, in the form of a cognitive map, draws on aesthetic concepts of representation. These representational operations are an integral part of any socialist political project, but operations that have been eroded by, as Jameson suggests, a declination of the role of class consciousness in contemporary societies. The ability for an individual to represent to themselves the relation she has to a class, and thus to society, is precisely the operation that has been foreclosed. For CS Peirce, this foreclosure emerges in the context of what he calls nominalism, it is through an analysis of nominalism that we might hope to understand the decline of the nontrivial relation between individual and the general. While Unger doesn't explicitly name Peirce in his earlier work (1975), his later work, specifically *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* (2007) draws heavily on the American philosopher. It is to Peirce that we now turn.

### 5.9 Nominalism

If, as Unger suggests, value is ascribed only subjectively or individualistically, it is given to objects only by human intention and cognition. Insofar as objects then appear only *for* human cognition, only of value because they have been ascribed it by thought, and do not possess any value intrinsically, it is coherent to suggest that it is human intervention that *completes* the object. Within this context, the meaning of material objects is given through the perception by mind. As such, dead matter takes on value only by being used for human projects – such that nature becomes a *resource*. Liquid hydrocarbon, oil, thus emerges as valuable only insofar as it is useable and exchangeable. Thus, as Yusoff describes above, civilisation is able to exploit land, labour and bodies precisely because nature (without culture) is seen as free from human thought and thus not complete. It is this relation that underwrites all colonialism – extraction and exploitation just is, for liberalism, the fair use of “blank nature”. While there is significant scholarship within a number of traditions that critiques this post-Kantian position (eco-Feminism, indigenous thought, Speculative Realism and New Materialism being only a few examples), I want to focus

on Peirce, not least because I think his work has been somewhat overlooked when it comes to these discussions and it offers us a useful perspective, but also, because I think the description given to nominalism is axiomatic to the construction of liberal political theory.

Peircian pragmatism poses itself against nominalist philosophy, calling the latter ‘the most inadequate, and perhaps the most superficial [...] the silliest possible’ (Peirce cf. Forster, 2011: 2). For Peirce, nominalism represents an anti-scientific, anti-realist object to progress, a worldview with disastrous consequences. Nominalism is the assertion that universals or abstract objects do not exist, and are merely the products of the mind. Only individuals exist, shorn from their relation to each other through the universal. Such that two objects that share the same colour, say green, cannot share the universal greenness because, for a nominalist the universal “green” does not exist except (in some variation of nominalism) as a predicate to nominate something green. Nominalists, as opposed to realists, would assert that because only individuals or particulars exist, there can be no such thing as laws or norms; general concepts exist, then, only in as much as they are products of the mind. For Peirce this is something that must be defeated. Not only because it is logically fallacious, but because it has seeped into the ‘average modern mind’ (ibid.: 3). It is in this way that Peirce can be seen as a critic of neoliberalism before the fact. He says this:

The question of whether the *genus homo* has any existence except as individuals is the question of whether there is anything of anymore dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the *community* is to be considered as an end in itself, and if so, what the relative value of the two factors is, is the most fundamental practical question in regard to every public institution the constitution of which we have it in our power to influence.

(Peirce cf. Forster, 2011: 3)

Nominalists would argue, Peirce suggests, as humans we have nothing in common, just particular occasions of individual existence – the mind organises a chaotic rush of independent data into a coherent whole, but there are no laws or universal qualities that hold across those individuals. Individuals are not in a part-whole relation to the categories they exist within, but are foremost singular and divorced from those categories. As Paul Forster explains ‘[n]ominalists hold, then, that the choice of conceptual scheme is determined by knowers’ interests rather than

by objective features of the world' (Forster 2011: 5). For a nominalist, desire is a subjective expression of individuality, but, and this is important, value is not determinant of desire, merely conferred on an object *by* desire. This means that value is set by the individual's desire of it, not by any inherent quality of the object.

The nominalist is committed to the idea that because reality is constituted by individuated, discrete fragments, something like infinity only exists insofar as it is a collection of multiple particulars. For our purposes, then, it is possible to understand how Peircian pragmatism infers a critique of liberal political thought. If a nominalist cannot understand how collections of individuals can share properties outside of themselves, how there can be something like generality, then it describes a situation in which the communal does not exist. The communal aspects of social bonds make no sense to nominalism insofar as they can only understand the communal as a sum of its parts. Liberalism, in this very real sense, is a nominalist philosophy.

Contra to this form of individualism, Peirce is committed to a project that upholds the conceptual category of continuity. The continuum, he asserts, exists against the notion that knowledge claims can be exhausted by individuals, instead it is a special type of generality that is not contingent on particularity but on universal adherence to an Idea. The continuum is not a collection of individuals, but transcends individuality through the synthetic weaving of local contexts into generality. In this way, it is not additive, but synthetic. One cannot reach continuity by the addition of more individuals, but by the assertion that there exists commonality between individuals, the continuum requires multiplication not addition. For Fernando Zalamea (2012), reading Peirce:

'Peirce's *continuum* – generic and supermultitudinous, reflexive and inextensible, modal and plastic – is the global conceptual *milieu* where, in a natural way, we can construct hierarchies to bound possible evolutions and local concretion of arbitrary flow notions' (Zalamea 2012: 23, italics in original)

The continuum is that which binds individuals to each other, the reflexive generic quality of thirdness, or mediation. Peirce links this to the rational ability to reason about the world in an abstract way, rather than an acceptance of immediacy or actuality. The direct or trivial collection of particularities that obtains under nominalism, then, is not a description of continuity. The *continuum* is the name given to the site in which both abstract and concrete, particular and

universal are woven together in plastic ways. Because, as Atkin (2016) suggests, Peirce has ‘committed himself to the view that possibilities, generalities, laws, are *real*, not merely modes of expression’ (Atkin 2016: 55), he rejects the radical individualism inherent in the liberal model. As such, the logic of continuity exists as a description of the ways in which laws, norms and cultures emerge and are ratified, not as an eventual rupture, nor as a dogmatic adherence to immutable laws, but as a reflexive, synthetic relation between the individual and the universal. As such, it challenges assumptions about political transformation that hold that those transformations come from heroic individuals and, instead, foregrounds the reflexive space of thirdness that appears as a mediating function between individual and universal. Community, or the social, as such, then not only exists as a thing in and of itself but emerges through the synthetic multiplication of relations, not as a collection of discontinuous individuals. This is an important intervention. Insofar as Peirce allows us to articulate a mode by which individuals can have traction at a universal level, the logic of continuity emerges as a guiding principle of any articulation of political transformation. I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter Six: The Image of the Human in the World

By cartographic gesture I mean accounting for the regimes of power and subjectivation one is embedded in, and pursuing an alternative vision of one's own embodied, critical situatedness – a situatedness that is never one's own. This involves a cartographic apparatus of cutting loose from the universalist humanist paradigm that has anchored colonial Euromodernity, and of generating a living map toward intersectional, decentred, transversal, anticolonial, non-linear, and non-unitary imaginaries and practices of figuring otherwise, despite and beyond the dehumanizing geopolitical hierarchies of our present. (Athanasiou in O'Neill, Sheikh, Steeds and Wilson 2018: 79)

### *6.1 Conceptions of the Human-Society Nexus*

Art speaks of and to a human subject, it produces and addresses that subject, determining it in its address, producing its own demos in each instantiation of address. Through this address it also produces a world. What type of world it produces is determined by the logics that it articulates and adheres to. Within the context of contemporary art, as I understand it, that world is linked to the figure of the human according to an individuated project, coherent with a differentiation between, and mastery of, culture over nature – thus, one that is coterminous historically and ideologically with the petropolitical project of exploitation, extraction and expulsion. The axiologies of contemporary art produce an individual, isolated, monad, separated from the world through the logic of liberal humanism. As liberalism is the philosophical defender of capitalism, it is also only feasible as a world view within the context of capitalism – in the context of late stage, neoliberalism (the paradigmatic twin of the second age of oil) that world view is inculcated

by the idea of *homo economicus*. As shown in chapter two, that image of the human should be attenuated through the logic of petropolitics – the logic of extractivism and exceptionalism that underwrites the latter part of the twentieth century and the early stages of the twenty first.

Within the context of post-petropoliticality (a politics committed to a post-petroleum world), a new description of both society and the human figure within that society will emerge. However, it is not quite correct here to say “within”; the description of the human is recursively related to the description of society that I will sketch. It is only through a dialectical, synechistic relation that it is possible to understand how societies and individuals relate to each other. The emergence of these recursive descriptions relies on a foregrounding of certain modalities, values and practices. In this chapter I will hold the work of Sylvia Wynter in constellation with that of Reza Negarestani; these two thinkers provide us with necessary tools to understand the labour and the orientation required to move beyond paradigms committed to exploitation and extraction. Wynter’s deconstructive work, as I shall explore, is complemented by Negarestani’s project of construction. Wynter’s discussion of the image of the human, and the concept of worth is central to this chapter. As the chapter progresses, there is a focus on how colonial logics come to shape the current world and how, if political transformation is possible, it needs to be a task of reengineering these logics. I draw on the work of George E Lewis, who’s critique of European avant garde music is a useful tool to understand the ways in which freedom should be reimagined in the axiological task of reengineering. This leads on to a discussion of complex systems theory where the work of Elena Esposito, Brian Massumi and Niklas Luhmann is held together with an analysis of William Stanley Jevons’ work on fossil fuel use and economics in order to understand how a systemic analysis can draw on the idea of the metabolic to provide a more adequate description of the world from which to work. This chapter closes out with a discussion of the concept of normativity and how this could be a useful lever (to use Massumi’s term) in a pragmatic project of reengineering.

As described above, in Chapters One and Two, the Second Age of Oil has been determined by a certain conception of what it means to be human. Economisation underwritten by the oil industry, combined with a theory of human capital and a notion of value only as resource determines in large part this image of the human. If we are serious about understanding the recursive role culture has to play in the interpellation of us as humans, then this descriptive statement of humanity is important. Petroculture, then, is the mode by which human expression emerges within the context of the Second Age of Oil; Contemporary Art is the paradigmatic

example of petroculture. As we have seen, the narrative of the Second Age of Oil combines these extractive economic descriptions with a liberal idea of individual freedom, the self-legitimizing display of virtue and a myopic conception of the relation between the individual and universal.

Sylvia Wynter's work draws specific attention to the ways in which hegemonic epistemologies present a certain *genre* of the human that concretises ideas of humanness in line with Western origin stories. The narrativisation of what it means to be human, Wynter asserts, revolves around a biological mechanism tied to an economic script. In the name of economic freedom, this origin story normalises accumulation as a mode of economic freedom. As shown above, in Chapters Two and Three, this valorisation of freedom as the accumulation of capital forms a fundamental axiom of our cultural-social-political-economic nexus. As Wynter suggests, freedom vis-à-vis accumulation, comes to determine the generic description of human per se, attenuating any and every descriptive statement through an ideologically capitalist framework. This mythic script writes into the very notion of humanness the idea of capital accumulation, rewarding those subjects that "play by the script" and punishing those that do not. As she suggests:

[T]he genre-specific preprescribed "truth" of economics must itself analogically elaborate an ethno-class *descriptive statement* mode of *material provisioning* that can, law-likely, be *only that of homo oeconomicus's* single absolute model of free-market capitalism. This model's imperative supraordinate telos of increasing capital accumulation thereby predefines it as the *only* means of production indispensable to the enacting of the economic system of free-trade-market capitalism's unceasing processes of techno-industrial economic growth. (Wynter in McKittrick ed. 2015: 22)

The ethno-class distinctions that free-market capitalism makes, what/who is, in Wynter's terms, selected and "dysselected", those who are able to participate in and enjoy the processes, systems and rewards of capitalist accumulation and those who are not, those included and those dispossessed (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013) or expelled (Sassen 2014), marks humanness along colour and class lines. Thus, black and brown, or lower-class subjects are not merely not represented in political life, but radically, and violently, disincluded in what it *means* to be human. It is, as analysed by Vergés (Vergés in Johnson and Lubin ed. 2017), race that was the single most important factor determining where toxic waste facilities were sited in the United States – these intentional strategies on the behalf of authorities have, as Vergés explains, lead many to

assert the colour line at the heart of the Anthropocene. In this context then, “whiteness” as such comes to represent inclusion along capitalist lines – with punitive repercussions for those excluded. This universal “referent-we” of whiteness maps directly on to humanness, whereby blackness is seen as outside of the idea of the human. The descriptive statement of humanness, the ‘West’s liberal monohumanist’ (Wynter in ed. McKittrick 2015: 23) bourgeois model, thus articulates not only what is normal, but what is *normative*, prescribing into all relations modes of acceptableness, reasonableness and rationality. Thus, on the one hand, behaviour outside of the frame of *homo economicus* is seen as irrational and on the other, actions by racialised subjects are *apriori* also seen as irrational. However, as Polanyi has asserted (see Chapter Two), human action is anything but economically rational, so any system that selects only for what it sees as “rational” behaviour will “dysselect” significant proportions of human activity and subjects. Homogenisation of human behaviour thus appears as a mode of calculation; what is calculable becomes of value insofar as it exists for economic exploitation, only what is calculable is thus of value, and the normative statement enacted by this mode of calculation homogenises humanness. This descriptive statement of humanness, as analysed by Wynter, thus becomes normative, delimiting acceptable modes of being in accordance to calculation, conceptualising human singularity as only *for exploitation*, giving credence to the Freidmanite claim that economics is a science divorced from ethics and interpellating humans as actors in economic dramaturgies. Humanity appears in accordance with a script ‘whose macro-origin story calcifies the *hero figure* of *homo oeconomicus* who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of economic freedom’ (McKittrick in McKittrick 2015: 10).

## 6.2 Worth Beyond Calculus

This world narrative identified by Wynter, gives legitimacy to the idea that humans (and of course nature) are viable only insofar as their worth is calculable – humanity is thus subsumed to economically rational axiomatics. But furthermore, the racial lines along which this calculability is drawn are highly pronounced. While whiteness (and middle classness) affords a certain ability to achieve singularity (being recognised fully as an individual), blackness is identified as a general category (whereby black people are marked by their generic signifier “black”) valuable only for exploitation – thus, only *for* whiteness. Blackness emerges here as a category that exists in the wake of servitude to whiteness.<sup>58</sup> Here, we can draw parallels to Yusoff’s work on blackness and

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<sup>58</sup> Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) illustrates how black lives today are swept up in the aftermath of slavery. Sharpe shows how to be ‘in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the

inhumanness; the figure of blackness and the crude resource of oil is surprisingly similarly conceived. Oil is not seen as of intrinsic value as part of the ecosystemic conditions for planetary continuation (insofar as its extraction and combustion appears as an auto-destructive activity), but only valuable as a resource *for human exploitation*. Blackness like oil is considered not an end in itself, but a means to an end – the capitalist exploitation of enslaved populations being only one pertinent example. Concomitant with that form of slavery, is the capitalist exploitation of the earth – something that will bind us all to its climate catastrophic eventuality. The ‘fossil fuel-driven, thereby climate-destabilizing free-market capitalist economic system’ (Wynter, in ed. McKittrick 2015: 22) determines our life-threatening relation to natural scarcity, a bond that, as Wynter suggests, is seen as only escapable through ‘unceasing mastery of natural scarcity by means of ever-increasing economic growth!’ (ibid.: 26). Unable to think outside the axiom of freedom as accumulation, capitalist determined humanity will attempt to escape the ever more destructive climate catastrophes through more and more accumulation, but, perversely, will be returned to the bonds of a climate-disrupted world ecosystem as it approaches inhospitality. The freedom expressed by petrocapiatist activity exists within a liberal framework incapable of articulating or comprehending the externalities of fossil fuel dependence, a dependence that will, due to the exhaustion of natural resources, eventually kill its master.

The concept of the human instituted by this logic was, as Wynter asserts, not naturally occurring, but emerged from and through origin stories; stories we have to keep retelling ourselves in order to reproduce and recalcify the system by our commitment to it. Thus, as Wynter’s work allows us to think, these capitalist socio-cultural axioms require continual reinvestment in order to maintain their hegemony, and this reinvestment is precisely part of the system of accumulation. Insofar as the system itself requires and necessitates continual ideological reinvestment, Wynter understands it, following Humberto Maturana, as an autopoietic system that self-generates. Recursively defined, then, the human, as part of the autopoietic socio-economic system, emerges through and within the systemic narratives that obtain in that paradigm. Following Fanon, Wynter’s understanding of the human includes this narrativization – whereby the descriptive statement of the human includes Fanon’s concept of “sociogeny”. As Wynter suggests, ‘the human is, meta-Darwinianly, a hybrid being, both *bios* and *logos* (or, as I have recently come to

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continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding [...] rather than seeking a resolution to blackness’s ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*’ (Sharpe 2016: 13-14). Sharpe’s argument is to understand blackness as a form of consciousness that must acknowledge the history of slavery, rather than erase it. I find this approach useful precisely because the erasure of these histories, perhaps something that might occur in a Western perspective (see my discussion of George E Lewis’ work on jazz music later in this chapter), only serves the interests of whiteness.

redefine it, *bios* and *mythoi*). Or, as Fanon says, phylogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny, together, define what it is to be human' (Wynter in ed. McKittrick 2015: 16). To understand, then, the concept of race in these terms is to understand that, as Walter Mignolo suggests, 'race is not in the body but rather built in the social imaginary grounded on colonial differences [and] becoming black is bound up with being perceived as black for a white person' (Mignolo in ed. McKittrick 2015: 116).

In order, then, to continually reproduce the system and the human according to that system, we require a narrative function, or the continual retelling of the conceptual or ideological frameworks that sustain those systems – in Wynter's terms, *mythoi*. So as to reinforce the distinctions and hierarchies in place, the re-narrativisation of that mythoi must reinforce the selection/dysselection of human bodies based on their biologically defined traits. Insofar as blackness, then, appears as a relation, one that relies on the systematic re-articulation of selection/dysselection based on *bios*, it emerges as a result not in fact, of a purely biocentric description, but hybridly in accordance to *mythoi* as well as *bios*. As Wynter suggests, '[i]f humans are conceptualized as hybrid beings, you can no longer classify human individuals, as well as human groups, as *naturally selected* (i.e., eugenic) and *naturally dysselected* (i.e., dysgenic) beings' (Wynter in ed. McKittrick 2015: 17). Thus, the universal description of the human, in accordance to whiteness, sustains an imperial relation that presupposes dominance and exploitation – the slave relation. In order to produce a true to the human principle, we must understand the historical contingency of this relation. These characteristics are not, as shown by Wynter, naturally occurring, but features of an origin story that legitimises and produces the conditions for capital accumulation, and thus for the exploitative behaviour necessary for the extractivism inherent in the Age of Oil. Wynter:

The logic of environmental disasters is one itself, which, correlatedly and empirically, *also* enacts the descriptive statement of *homo oeconomicus-on-the-model-of-a-natural-organism*, its codes of a non-biologically determined principle of causality. Hence, the fact that the ever-increasing ratios of fossil fuel-driven capital accumulation, are themselves also law-likely equated with ever increasing ratios of global warming, climate change, and environmental instability.

(Wynter in ed. McKittrick 2015: 65)

The circularly reinforcing human-capital system, according to the logic of accumulation as freedom, thus determines and is determined by a logic of ever increasing ratios (eternal growth) that demands exponential valorisation as a form of human liberty (the axiomatics of liberalism), on the one hand, underwritten by extractive labour and, on the other, legitimised by the image of virtue according to human liberty. All the while, this liberty is won on the back of a relation that presupposes but occludes dominance and exploitation. These are the axioms at the heart of capitalist accumulation, and, when Wynter asks what it means to be human, she is challenging the assumed naturalness of these contingent historical processes. In order to address this question, then, new axioms must be produced, and adhered to accordingly, that can delink us from the mythoi of capitalist accumulation that determines the selection/dysselection axis.

Because *culture* is the registering of the calcification of values and norms within the context of societies, Wynter's thought, that foregrounds the sociogenic narrative functions at the heart of the descriptive statement, allows us to understand how cultural expression reiterates and ratifies the selected/dysselected distinctions that capitalism valorises. As Wynter suggests:

Cultural conceptions, encoded in language and other signifying systems, shape the development of political structures and are also shaped by them. *The cultural aspects of power* are as original as the structural aspects; each serves as a code for the other's development. *It is from these elementary cultural conceptions that complex legitimating discourses are constructed.* (italics in original)

(Wynter cf. Mignolo in McKittrick 2015: 113)

Culture becomes the site within which economic and political power continues to exert its dominance, but it also, importantly, exists as the site from which challenges to that power could be forged. Generational battles over cultural norms, then, emerge as radical contingencies that devalorise and revalorise existing and new norms. This ongoing renewal of norms, however, should be understood within the context of neoliberal capitalism as the axiomatic expansion of the space of capital accumulation. We must, for example, be alert to Fraser's analysis (see Chapter Three) that identifies how the culturalisation of liberatory politics in the latter part of the twentieth century denuded the redistributive potential of those politics in favour of a focus on a politics of recognition. In which sense, new stories are fundamentally *not enough* to create social and political transformation. Only a materially concerned, counter-hegemonic project to,

at one and the same time expand cultural and social norms, while protecting that expansion from co-option by capital valorisation as celebratory intellectual ballast, can have a hope to re-engineer society in the image of an epistemologically and narratively just descriptive/normative statement, a project therefore, that relies on the institutionally guaranteed vertical counter hegemonic project. While in the next section of this chapter I will complicate that reading through the notion of metabolism, it is worth noting here that what is emerging is a project of revalorising/revaluation and not a project of the creative expression of novelty. Without a radical reappraisal of collective value, determined democratically, restrictive or oppressive norms return through the back door – in the liberal retreat from normativity and the neoliberal assertion of negative freedom the collective agreement on value is avoided, but as Massumi suggests:

In the absence of a strong alternative conception of value, it is all too easy for normative gestures to slip back in. Priorities are still weighed, orientations favored, direction followed. Without a concept of value, by what standards are these choices made? Usually none that are enunciated. Standards of judgement are simply allowed to operate implicitly. Normativity is not avoided. It becomes a sneak. This can prove to be just as oppressive.

(Massumi 2018: 3)

What is required then is not an avoidance of value and valuation – insofar as neoliberalism reduces all value to economic value it cancels deliberation around value – but a discursive engagement with collective construction that refuses to calcify around a one off consensus, but leaves open the radical possibility space of further political contingencies. Massumi's assertion is to recognise value for what it is, 'irreducibly qualitative' (ibid.: 4). In this sense he wants to rescue value from quantification/calculation – value then, should be not a matter of arithmetical addition, but of *multiplication*. Recall here the description of the continuum explored in Chapter Five above; the continuum, according to Peirce, is not the addition of individual parts, but something qualitatively different from its parts. Value then, it must be asserted, emerges from the continuum, agreed upon collectively it underwrites all norms and laws and is not just an assertion of numerical democratic summation, but a properly synthetic multiplication. To reassert the Mouffian insistence on agonism explored in Chapter One, there is no final agreement that should bracket out the political from ongoing intervention in the construction of the future, instead, this descriptive statement must be thought of as being open to constant renewal and reconstruction. This goes too for her collaborator, Laclau; as suggested, for him the

universal is not fixed, but a matter of continual hegemonic struggle, it is forever in a process of articulation.

How our normative statements reproduce, ratify and delimit value is thus key; the future oriented derivative market, for example, valorises ongoing and temporally displaced capitalisation in order to achieve best ROI. If oil futures cannot be realised, the whole notion of value is disrupted and must be reimagined. Any post-petrocapitalist world must reintegrate notions of value that capitalism has disregarded/occluded/devalued – thus, a world such as this obtains precisely, and only, when *value-for-capital* axiomatics are replaced by *value-in-and-of-itself* axiomatics. This is why I reject carbon tax initiatives that use price mechanisms to offset carbon emissions, thus reincorporating *value-for-capital* into the system intended to offset the damage done by that very logic.<sup>59</sup>

If the preprescribed descriptive statement of Wynter’s work – that ossifies us as supposed rational economic actors and predetermines hierarchies that exploit labour, land and bodies – needs updating, we can look to Negarestani’s (Negarestani in Mackay 2014) work in order to discover modalities of thought capable of producing new descriptions of what it means to be human. Committed to an updated project of enlightenment rationality, Negarestani’s “inhumanism” is a conceptual gambit that understands the description of the human as written in sand. In order to rethink the limits of the human, inhumanism understands the task as one of continual revision. This revision should be thought of in the context of continua and contingency, whereby certain invariances of the human must remain while others should be seen as protean. Contra any description of all human limits as permanent (or epistemologies as necessary and ahistorical), then, Negarestani’s work reimagines these limits as open to revision by us. As such, it is of use in a counterhegemonic operation aimed at re-describing the human and society – holding Wynter’s and Negarestani’s work together in this context might prove fruitful. Wynter’s “undoing” of the preprescribed descriptive statement becomes complimented by Negarestani’s revision.

As a challenge to the liberal humanist tradition Negarestani’s work seeks to posit real freedom in the radical capacity to reimagine what human means;

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<sup>59</sup> Equally, elections and national referenda have an inadequate understanding of democracy insofar as they see democratic engagement only as a matter of one time arithmetical calculation not as a discursive practice that upholds disagreement. Calculation always risks a dangerous marginalisation of sectors of society, and when referenda are making decisions *for* the ignored sector the legitimacy is always weak.

[T]he net surfeit of false alternatives supplied under the rubric of liberal freedom causes a terminal deficit of real alternatives, establishing for thought and action the axiom that there is indeed no alternative. The contention of this essay is that universality and collectivism cannot be thought, let alone attained, through consensus or dissensus between cultural tropes, but only by intercepting and rooting out what gives rise to the economy of false choices and by activating and fully elaborating what real human significance consists of. For it is, as will be argued, the truth of human significance—not in the sense of an original meaning or a birthright, but in the sense of a labor that consists of the extended elaboration of what it means to be human through a series of upgradable special performances—that is rigorously inhuman.

(Negarestani in Mackay 2014: 428)

This labour, or commitment to rational elaborations of what is possible, is, for Negarestani a navigational struggle of reengineering the notion of human through ‘the space of reasons’ (ibid.: 438). To be human is to struggle, human freedom emerges not as a bolt from the blue, but as a process of labouring. As Negarestani asserts:

This is why it is the figure of the engineer, as the agent of revision and construction, who is public enemy number one of the foundation as that which limits the scope of change and impedes the prospects of a cumulative escape. It is not the advocate of transgression or the militant communitarian who is bent on subtracting himself from the system or flattening the system to a state of horizontality. More importantly, this is also why freedom is not an overnight delivery, whether in the name of spontaneity or the will of people, or in the name of exporting democracy. Liberation is a project, not an idea or a commodity. Its effect is not the irruption of novelty, but rather the continuity of a designated form of labor.

(Negarestani in Mackay 2014: 464)

This perspective is coherent with Gabriel Catren’s analysis. In a critical appraisal of the typologies that support a relation between, what he names, ‘terrestrial finitude and the heavenly infinite’ (Catren in Bryant, Harman and Srnicek 2011: 342), Catren asserts the existence of three different approaches to this transcendental relation – through grace, prayer or ecstasy. If the relation between finitude and the infinite, or between the individual and universal, is one

constituting the process of effectuating transformation (of one's self, the concept of the human or the system), Catren's argument helps us resist haphazard ecstasy – the miraculous irruption of the transcendental noumenal in the phenomenal world. The miracle relies not on the arduous labour of either negative or constitutive politics, but the capacity to leap across the void separating the two poles of individual and universal (the sites of political endeavour). As Catren writes:

The infinite process of theoretical knowledge does not advance by attempting to grasp an 'uncorrelated absolute' through a philosophical 'ruse' capable of discontinuously leaping over the subject's shadow, but instead through a continual deepening of scientific labour seeking to locally absolve it from its conjunctural transcendental limitations, expand its categorical, critical, and methodological tools, and progressively subsume its unreflected conditions and presuppositions. Far from any 'humanist' or 'idealist' reduction of scientific rationality, this reflection upon the transcendental localization of the subject of science should allow the latter to radicalize the inhuman scope of knowledge by producing a differential surplus value of un-conditionality and universality. In other words, such a reflexive torsion should permit the subject of science to continuously go through the transcendental glass and force its progressive escape from the transcendental anthropocentrism of pre-critical science: it is necessary to think the particular—empirical and transcendental—localization of the subject of science within the real in order for theoretical reason not to be too human.

(Catren in Bryant, Harman and Srnicek 2011: 342)

Catren's assertion does significant work in articulating the claims here. The desire to escape or change political conditions, to produce new axioms, or revalorise previous norms and laws must be understood not as a leap across the void (between the individual and universal, an ahistorical rendering of the past as forgettable and the future as all there is), but as a labouring process whereby human agents increase their capacities through a dialectical synthesis, precisely resting on achievements of the past and righting the injustices from history. This can most easily be seen in the way institutions such as the judiciary multiply individual's power through the use of precedent and tradition. Here, it is an institutional lever that increases capacity. Art too, is bound by these requirements, we cannot expect artworks to miraculously produce the political outcomes we want them to. Recall Rockhill's critique of the assumption so often made in art

theoretical writing of the talisman like powers of artistic artefacts to create direct political consequences (Rockhill 2014: 6).

Labour, then, is central to any project to increase our powers, to change our conditions or produce counter-hegemonies. Thinking beyond the constraints of the human, and conterminously the constraints of the system, requires not a leap, or magical thinking, but the ongoing project of revolutionary revision – a goal-oriented process of revising boundaries rather than a discontinuous leap into the void. Working contiguously together in order to construct a descriptive statement that delivers justice, the labour required is a “step-wise” project that utilises functional hierarchies in order to transition between local and global sites. For Negarestani, it is the space of reason that ‘harbors the functional kernel of a genuine collectivity, a collaborative project of practical freedom referred to as “we” whose boundaries are not only negotiable but also constructible and synthetic’ (Negarestani in Mackay 2014: 434). The space of reason is constituted by discursive practices. Discursive practices, the act of giving and asking for reasons, understand reason not as the *apriori* access to norms, suggests Negarestani, but as a landscape of navigation that can operationally update descriptive and normative statements in line with a project of increasing freedom. To do this, it is necessary to understand the system and how to navigate through it. Note here I did not say “around” or “outside” it; any political project must understand that one cannot escape the systemic conditions by fiat. Heuristic approaches to navigation rely on an expanded epistemology of a system determined by nested hierarchies, not clearly delineated insides or outsides – there will be no radical break from the descriptive statements, but a reworking process that adapts to, and adjusts, the conditions of complex systems. The engineering required for such a task must work through multiple nested hierarchies, transitioning between functional and systemic levels in order to rewrite the constitutive and institutional conditions for just futures.

### *6.3 Alienation and Exnomination*

Any project that foregrounds reason, or any specific mode of being/thinking, will, however, run the risk of privileging certain types of humans. Who has access to the capacity to reason, to work on the project of reconstructing the image of the human, is never explicitly named by Negarestani (although he does make the case for his project of inhumanism as an unlearning of racism), but there is a risk, just as there is a risk in all projects like this, that reasonableness is

narrowly defined around capacities but occludes the privileges inherent in the possession of those capacities – the occlusion would, of course, be a case of exnomination (the phenomenon of hiding one’s own name in order to naturalise one’s ideology – this process occurs most in discourse that presupposes a “natural” state from which other behaviours are seen as deviant). In order to engage multiplicities in the discursive practice that would adequately meet Wynter’s challenge to undo the racialised conception of human and not re-concretise conceptions around other narrow criteria, we can look to the work of the Xenofeminist collective Laboria Cuboniks. Central to their work is the concept of alienation; this appears here as a positive force for reconstructing the concept of the human away from narrowly defined natural boundaries and biological norms.

It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy. Freedom is not a given—and it’s certainly not given by anything ‘natural’. The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labour of freedom’s construction. Nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent, or ‘given’—neither material conditions nor social forms. XF mutates, navigates and probes every horizon. Anyone who’s been deemed ‘unnatural’ in the face of reigning biological norms, anyone who’s experienced injustices wrought in the name of natural order, will realize that the glorification of ‘nature’ has nothing to offer us—the queer and trans among us, the differently-abled, as well as those who have suffered discrimination due to pregnancy or duties connected to child-rearing. XF is vehemently anti-naturalist. Essentialist naturalism reeks of theology—the sooner it is exorcised, the better.  
(Laboria Cuboniks: 1)

For them, the work needed must be considered as an open and experimental practice that eradicates the “natural” restrictions on human freedom. But instead of foregrounding embodiment type theorisation that some critical post-Enlightenment thinkers have, Xenofeminism instead posits rationalism as the vector through which this work can proceed. As we see in the quote below, the focus on rationalism is one that opens up the space of reason rather than closes it down. For example, reason itself is not seen as *naturally* dominated by masculinity but *contingently* so:

Xenofeminism is a rationalism. To claim that reason or rationality is “by nature” a patriarchal enterprise is to concede defeat. It is true that the canonical “history of

thought” is dominated by men, and it is male hands we see throttling existing institutions of science and technology. But this is precisely why feminism must be a rationalism—because of this miserable imbalance, and not despite it. There is no “feminine” rationality, nor is there a “masculine” one. Science is not an expression but a suspension of gender. If today it is dominated by masculine egos, then it is at odds with itself— and this contradiction can be leveraged. Reason, like information, wants to be free, and patriarchy cannot give it freedom. Rationalism must itself be a feminism. XF marks the point where these claims intersect in a two-way dependency. It names reason as an engine of feminist emancipation, and declares the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular.

(Laboria Cuboniks: 2)

This sense of the historical contingency of reason’s association with masculinity is fundamental to the XF project. In order to not be guilty of exnomination, we must alienate our positions from a natural assumption about rights, norms and laws. The question of who gets to create those rights, norms and laws – semi-invariant components of a society – reaches deep into a conceptualisation of a project of decolonialisation – and out of this, a radical project of democracy. A radically democratic practice then, should not be seen in arithmetical terms – merely a matter of accounting – but in terms of a just reworking of the conceptions of the demos itself in light of historical injustices.<sup>60</sup> We must not then, be tempted, to redefine access to political justice based on biological facts, nor on social norms, but on the very concept of alienation of those norms – with the notion in mind that norms are, necessarily, revisable features of society – to be alienated.

A commitment to humanity, Negarestani tells us in coherence with a Xenofeminist perspective, is one that asks what *else* human can be, it is committed to this question rather than the acceptance of the given. Wynter’s work, then, emerges in this context; a commitment to the expansion, or heuristic reworking, of the description of the human. To unsettle or undo the conception of humanness inherent in the prescribed conditions, in accordance with Wynter’s work, requires a continual struggle that understands how the systemic conditions in place are

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<sup>60</sup> This cashes out in the idea that merely including more minorities in the system is not enough, what is needed is a radical reformulation of that system around lines that support justice. The former method, just including more minorities, is clearly within the liberal playbook.

more or less conducive to certain actions. In the context of The Second Age of Oil, for example, to cut global oil trade without adequate developmental or resilience measures in place would, as described above in Chapter Two, have such enormous global systemic consequences to be undesirable. The description of the human is so intrinsically entwined with the systemic conditions of our current paradigm that the two *must* be thought together. Thus, transformations made at one level recursively impact at others, but, as Negarestani tells us, not by fiat, but through a complex leveraging of functional, institutional and structural hierarchies. Equally, as I will discuss in the next section, changes made at one level are not reliably causal at other levels – due to the complexity of our systemic conditions, attempts to “make right” injustices can lead to further entrenching of those injustices, or consequences unseen by the agents themselves due to their own limited horizons (myopia). Thus, projects to reimagine the human without the necessary epistemological descriptions will fail to have traction on those descriptions. Individualised actions that seek to produce political transformation, when silo’d off from the contexts from which they emerge, lack the capacity to transform those contexts. There is no “human out there”, no individual that exists outside of context; systemic conditions thus, must be functionally taken into account in any political project. As such, in order to transition from the extractive, neoliberal, colonial-capitalist system that is our context, we cannot, on the one hand, attempt to live as though that system does not exist, nor on the other, can we attempt to produce transformation through individual actions that we assume accrue arithmetically in desired outcomes.

#### *6.4 Binding Oneself to History*

Writing about improvised music in the latter half of the twentieth century, George E Lewis (1996), distinguishes between Eurological and Afrological perspectives – historically and culturally emergent rather than ethnically essential categories. The former, exemplified by John Cage, is characterised by a number of features coherent with the European avant-garde; specific notions of freedom, chance, spontaneity (that excludes history), temporal immediacy and the valorisation of novelty. Distinct from the Eurological perspective, Lewis identifies the Afrological perspective, exemplified by bebop and jazz (styles emerging earlier than Cage’s avant garde compositions), most particularly, but not limited to, Charlie “Bird” Parker. This form of improvisation is characterised by relations to rules, tradition, discipline and experimentation on and with the pre-existing formal “heads” (the name given to precomposed melodic material).

The differences between these two forms of improvisation is pertinent; while Cage, no fan of jazz music due to its perceived “childishness”, would foreground the aleatory and ideas of freedom as a complete rupture with the past (in the context of European avant-gardism this rupture, or “blank slate”, approach was clearly in evidence across many art forms – one only has to think of Malevich’s *Black Square* to see this), Parker, and improvised jazz music in general, tended towards freedom as understood as a *reworking* of the past, rather than a rupture with it. From Lewis’ perspective, the Afrological challenges assumptions about avant garde improvisational music precisely because it exposes, on the one hand, Cage’s pseudo-universalism – the assumed objectivity of whiteness that constitutes itself as universal – and, on the other, the privilege of Eurological approaches that are only able to think freedom through individualistic frameworks that delink themselves from their historical emergence (manifesting an a-historicity that refuses to think inheritance, nor the value of political struggle), and an American frontier spirit where ‘that which lies before us must take precedent over “the past”’ (Lewis, 1996: 109). African-American composers, in contrast, viewed sonic symbolism as a social project to address racial justice through ‘black social expression and economic advancement’ (ibid.: 94), and understood composition as an historical project that drew on tradition and norms – for African-Americans, the erasure of the history of slavery and oppression would be unconscionable. The value, then, of the Afrological perspective to the project here is that it understands how political transformation emerges through social vitality, through a working *on* and labouring *with* pre-existing conditions rather than a radical break from the past that is only available to those subjectivities privileged enough, and a exposure of how whiteness seeks universalisation (the erasure of lineage and rewriting of history associated with settler colonialism and slavery).

Lewis’ Afrological perspective, then, becomes valuable in rethinking the descriptive statement insofar as it foregrounds labour and struggle as a mode of freedom rather than the thunder-like freedom of the Eurological perspective – a dominant mode of transformative politics in the twentieth century (and one that still conditions our thinking) that operates through the liberal model of methodological individualism. Any project of transformation then needs to pursue an approach, such as the Afrological improvisational music of Lewis’ work, that refuses to think transformation as a radical, ahistorical break, instead understands the historical and cultural conditions through which it must work, and that transformation *must* be a common, not individual, project.

Lewis' understanding of freedom through labour is coherent with the argument made by Martin Hägglund that appears earlier in this thesis. Hägglund's argument revolves around the idea that freedom is not constituted by the escape from responsibility, but through the adherence and commitment to projects that we set ourselves. As he suggests:

The exercise of freedom requires a practical identity that cannot be invented out of nothing by an individual, but is formed by social institutions. To be free is not to be free *from* normative constraints, but be free *to* negotiate, transform and challenge the constraints of the practical identities in light of which we lead our lives.

(Hägglund 2019: 274)

The project Hägglund is proposing, Democratic Socialism, which, coherent with Unger's work on this, sees the democratic control of the institutions themselves as an aim, understands the necessity for its success not to be tied to individuals gaining thunderlike freedom by fiat, but working together on the production of institutions that support and undergird the freedom of many.

### 6.5 *Complex Systems*

In order to think the project of political transformation as a *common* project of labour, we need an adequate theory of the complex environmental systems that we exist within. In this section, I will point towards an analysis that combines complex systems theory with questions of ecology; while it is beyond the scope of this thesis to develop this fully (or review an adequate quantity of literature related to complex systems theory), I hope to indicate the direction of travel needed for this kind of work. It is important to think this through an artistic frame insofar as the question of culture should always be asked in accordance with the problem of the environment. According to Wynter, to think globally is to understand that what we have is not an energy problem or a pollution problem and so on, but a 'poverty-hunger-habitat-energy-trade-population-atmosphere-waste-resource problem' (Wynter in McKittrick 2015: 44), and that this interactive problematic has to be understood in relation to dimensions of power and culture. In order to grasp the enormity of this emergent phenomenon, Wynter entreats us to think according to a logic that includes the narrative dimension of the construction of power; the sociogenic theory she adapts from Fanon allows us to see that power emerges within a cultural model that

symbolises values within a normative frame. Insofar as power exists within and through culture, it is pertinent to understand the entwined systemic problematic as enforced and reproduced through cultural narratives. But, furthermore, that culture itself produces (not just reproduces) its own structural and normative functions that impact on the system itself.

The proliferation of conjoined problems in our global interactive systemic problematic, relies on an understanding of a “general ecology”. Insofar as this general ecology describes the way individuals relate to each other (or the way individual fields/inferential systems relate), it shall be understood as a complex system – a complex system, according to Melanie Mitchell, is that ‘that exhibits nontrivial emergent and self-organising behaviours’ (Mitchell 2009: 13). This theory of complex systems posits that environmental concerns exist in conjunction with concerns of the individual/system within that environment – the environment never exists in and of itself, but always already in contextual relation to the individual/system within it (we must note here that this is not to make a counter realist claim that the *world* exists only insofar as it exists *for us*, but that the term “environment” describes something that is not independent of the individual that it is the environment of). How we understand the individual/system then, must pass through an understanding of the environment and vice versa – as such, we need a conceptual schema that adequately tackles the problem of environments in accordance with nontrivial emergent and self-organising behaviours.

Drawing on Gregory Bateson, Elena Esposito (Esposito in Hörl ed. 2017) posits cybernetics as the solution to this problem. Exploring two questions of an ecological approach – borders and control – Esposito identifies the way the individual/system and the environment interrelate through exchanges of information, materials and energy between the inside and outside. Insofar as the border between an inside and outside exists, it will be crossed, but not destroyed – as such, boundaries between systems and individuals are not eradicated, but are maintained and regulated. The science of cybernetics emerged historically to make sense of this control or regulation across borders and boundaries, giving credence to questions of how the inside can influence the outside and vice versa. The concept of feedback is the key discovery of early cybernetics; as Esposito suggests, ‘[t]he ingenuity of feedback is that the boundary is assumed in order to be neutralized – the separation serves to indicate the forms in which the operations of the system make it fluid and allow for a constant, reciprocal influence between inside and outside. But the separation must exist, otherwise there could be no influence and everything would get lost in indeterminacy’ (ibid.: 286).

What emerged later, Esposito recalls, was a more complex notion of feedback, one that relied upon the notion of a *double feedback loop*. As she suggests, ‘the classic loop of feedback circuits becomes a double loop – and as such, much more complex and difficult to deal with. The observer observes a system facing its environment, and discovers himself to be involved in the object he observes [...] the observation of feedback between the environment and the system produces a second feedback circuit between the observer and his object’ (ibid.: 287-8). This complexification of the above argument leads Esposito towards an interesting conclusion that I will reconstruct here. Instead of relying on notions of hybridity (drawn from Latour), whereby two poles (nature and society for example), are understood as *apriori* blurred, or hybrid, Esposito proposes the opposite; ‘[o]nly if you are able to indicate clearly what’s in and what’s out, what belongs to the system and what is part of the environment, will you also be able to study the complex forms produced when the inside reflects the outside and vice versa’ (ibid.: 289). Thus, the distinctions between systems must be foregrounded in an understanding of cybernetics in order for us to be able to make claims about their interrelations.

Brian Massumi (2018) makes a somewhat similar but subtly different claim. Insofar as he sees the relation between capitalist systems and their immanent outside as constitutively open, whereby the exchange across boundaries rests on the concept of excess and affect, Massumi understands the relation between inside and outside as conditioned by *potential*. This passage from Massumi is enlightening:

The movement of double becoming is a processual coupling between two systems. The processual coupling belongs to neither system per se, but enters as formative force into the becoming of both. It constitutes their immanent outside. Process is the immanent outside of the in-betweens of system. Since it is unbounded by any given system or set of systems, that immanent outside overflows systematicity as such. Considered in itself, this in between is a wide-open. It is the expanded field of where systems’ becoming may go, beyond where and what they are now. It is the fielding of potential. Process is by nature in excess over the system. This means that every system a constitutively open system [sic]. This distinction between internal/external (systems environment) and immanent outside (processual ecology) becomes extremely important for understanding complexity and resistance under capitalism.

(Massumi 2018: 10)

The constitutive openness of the system as it approaches its immanent outside is, however, conditioned by its operative closure – the operations any system performs have identity with the inside but a non-identity with the outside. It is only through this open/closed dialectic that we can understand the system. Both art and capitalism work on the limits of their systems to reconstitute the outside *as* the inside – capitalism does this through extractive or exploitative modes and art does this through the continual introduction of creative novelty. “The New” is thus of value to both insofar as it constitutes the field into which each system expands. Thus, the systems are only constituted by their relation to the immanent outside as a force of axiomatic expansion that relies on “potential” – capitalism’s relation to nature then, is one that relies on potentialising that nature as a resource for capitalist expansion. And art potentializes the particularities of local sites into global circuits of distribution, exhibition and discourse via the dialectical relation between art and non-art, or centre periphery, that occurs, for example, in the biennale circuit.<sup>61</sup> Ever expanding biennialisation processes seek to include peripheral sites into the logic of the centre – instead of just being seen as the incorporation of these sites into a circuit of display, the very axioms of contemporary art are expanded into these sites. In order for this operation to make sense, we have to have something we understand as art and something we understand as *not-art*, that is, society.

These conclusions echo Niklas Luhmann’s (2000) descriptions of art as a social system. Luhmann understands art’s relation to society as one of operative closure, insofar as there is a relation, then, it operates across a boundary. As Luhmann suggests:

Art participates in society by differentiating itself as a system, which subjects art to a logic of operative closure – just like any other function system [...] Modern art is autonomous in an operative sense. No one else does what it does [...] The societal nature of modern art consists in its operative closure and autonomy, provided that society imposes this form on all functional systems, one of which is art.

(Luhmann 2000: 134-5)

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<sup>61</sup> Whereby local sites are subject to the demands of the global market; the accumulation of cultural capital that becomes of interest to ‘collectors, private donors, and real estate investors’ (Arsanios in O’Neill, Sheikh, Steeds and Wilson eds. 2019), precisely, the exploitation of land and labour by the global art world in previously “empty” sites. Or, as Nkule Mabaso writes in the context of institutions in Cape Town, South Africa, where ‘the institution is not only outward facing, but also reproduces methodologies inward the further marginalize local knowledges and knowledge systems in favour of “universal knowledge”’ (Mabaso in *ibid.*: 99). The associations with settler colonialism are here hard to ignore.

As we know from discussions above (Chapter Three), the autonomy of art rests on this differentiation between systems, something that contemporary art has sought to reduce. Indeed, in the system/environment dyad (whereby environment might be understood as capitalism as such, or a capitalist society), contemporary art has taken one of two paths – a liberal individualistic escape from that society that denies the dialectical relation or, the pessimistic inverse, an absolute coherence with it, which also denies the dialectic. It is only, thus, through an approach proposed by Esposito, whereby the distinction or boundary is upheld, and not through a Latourian insistence on hybridity, that we can proceed dialectically to understand adequately the double circularity of this relation. It is also through this approach that we can understand the non-identity between the human and the world narrative – precisely that, as Wynter asserts, the human must tell a story of itself in the environment as a mode of double circularity – the observer observing themselves in the image of the world – and not as a form of either direct identification with or total divorce from that world. In other words, Wynter’s work demands an updated idea of cybernetic reflexivity, in line with Esposito’s findings, that sees human narrative as a contingent cultural expression of power not as a necessary expression of “truth” as such. Contemporary art, then, to have political traction, has to think in a similar mode. While being an operatively closed system, the reflexive relation between it and society, across inferential spheres, must be understood as one whereby it sees a nontrivial relation that accounts for systemic transformation through complex differentiations and laminar functionality, not as a hybridisation of art-society that sees their relation to be *apriori* conjoined. The capacity to understand art as a project of laminar traversing then, must be coherent with a theory of cybernetic reflexivity.

### *6.6 Metabolic Systems*

This double circularity of feedback relationships is evidenced in numerous systems theory contexts, not least in the discourse around pollution, or negative downstream externalities. Why it is important to build a descriptive statement that accounts for the concept of cybernetic feedback between systems/individuals/environments should become clear; precisely, neoclassical economics, that sees itself as a pure science, delinked from the world, is incapable of understanding how the externalities of economic activity feedback into the world-capitalist system itself. This failure, as reported in the scientific literature around climate change, is exactly what the neoliberal theoretical frame prevents us from seeing. With its focus on individual

behaviour, a theoretical inheritance from classical liberalism, neoliberalism fundamentally misunderstands the complex relationships that exist in our global interactive system model – this is a central contradiction at the heart of the Second Age of Oil. In order to produce an adequate description, I will develop briefly a concept I call metabolic systems theory.

To understand the metabolic, I will turn to an essay on the grandfather of neoclassical economic thought, William Stanley Jevons. In a work about Jevons' Paradox – the claim that increased energy efficiency counter intuitively often leads to a rebound effect where more energy is eventually consumed – Mario Giampietro and Kozo Mayumi (Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008) discuss in some detail complex adaptive systems. Concerned with the organisation of living systems over hierarchical levels and multiple scales, they make the claim for a more complex epistemology capable of understanding the complexity of evolving adaptive systems. In line with this they underscore the concept of the metabolic system with the concepts of holons and holarchies. The chapter asks how we orient ourselves for the best course of action, making the claim that it is impossible to use efficiency to do this. As they suggest:

when representing and analysing evolving metabolic systems organized in nested hierarchies, innovative theoretical frameworks are needed that can properly take care of the analysis of circular [...] and multiple scales. This requires going beyond the paradigm of reductionism.

(Mayumi and Giampietro in Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008: 81).

What this theoretical development speaks to is the capacity to understand the complex relationship between the micro and the macro scales, when a particular event or occurrence at a micro level has macro level effects. As we shall see, this has significant implications on the conceptual apparatus required to think the individual as separate and non-relational. Precisely, it collapses. Thus, it is increasingly impossible to speak of a non-dialectical inside or an outside – feedback exists between them. Where neoclassical economic science seeks to purify and particularise, to understand economic activity as separate from its ground in nature or its effects in society, a metabolic theory demands that we think any division between the inside and outside as contingent, temporary and revisable – and, importantly, circularly feeding back across that boundary (as Esposito suggests). Under these terms, then, the conceptual buttress of competitive individualism, the ontological claim that we are all alone and make our own lives for ourselves without help from anyone, loses traction.

Society, the economy, culture and nature are all metabolic systems; they are in a constant state of autopoietic flux, not in thermodynamic equilibrium, they constantly exchange matter and energy from the environment around them and between each other, and are organized in a nested hierarchy based on the concept of the “holon” (Giampietro and Mayumi in Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008). A holon is something that is simultaneously a part and a whole, autonomous from the environment, but connected to it via a mereological relation (a mereological system is one in which parts and wholes are in relation to each other through nested hierarchies). As Giampietro and Mayumi tell us, the holon, developed by Arthur Koestler in his book *The Ghost in the Machine*, is a combination of the Greek “holos”, meaning whole and relating to the macroscopic and the suffix “on”, meaning particle or part, relating to the microscopic. Thus, a holon is a part-whole that combines constraints of both the macro and the micro. Individual humans, their societies, and cultures are all organised as holoarchic systems – as nested hierarchies, not as distinct systems apart from each other. Every autonomous example of economic activity, an individual action or cultural phenomenon is in a part-whole relation to the epistemological system of society as such. Which itself is nested within broader spheres such as nature to the extent that the actions and effects are indiscernibly located. Instances of economic activity for example have macro-political effects. Thus, when we analyse the systemic nature of society, we must be aware of the modalities of relations between the individual parts and the whole, as such we cannot express axiomatic statements about individuals divorced from their relation to the whole system in which they find themselves. Nor can we make similar statements about wholes that are derived from experience of individuals. Such as, individual (x) in category (a) is blue therefore all of the individuals in category (a) are blue.

As Giampietro and Mayumi suggest:

The phenomena of emergence, [...] points at the obvious, but often neglected, fact that a metabolic system must be necessarily a ‘becoming system’ and therefore requires a continuous update of the selection of attributes together with proxy variables and their relationships – the formal identity assigned to the observed system – used to describe its behaviour [...] Therefore, once the attributes selected for the formal identity of the observed system become no longer relevant for predicting behaviours of the system, the proxy variables and their analytical relations must be automatically discarded. Then a new set of attributes with a new set of proxy variables and relations should be introduced.

After these selections are made, both a new formal identity (a given and finite set of relevant attributes which can be represented using a given and finite set of proxy variables) and a new inferential system (a finite set of axioms, rules and algorithms) must be introduced

(Giampietro and Mayumi in Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008: 92)

A metabolic system thus requires constant updating of its variables and epistemic boundaries, none of which appear as historically necessary, nor independent from revision. These occur as a continuous emergence of proxy variables that reach a tipping point to create a phase change. Systemic change is thus achieved by the constant revision of boundaries and formal qualities to create new forms of framing that allow the introduction of new inferential systems. Therefore, systemic change cannot occur by fiat, nor as an eventual or revolutionary eruption, but through the constant updating of variables to create the conditions of systemic change. Unger (2007) describes a form of thought against an institutional dogmatism that denies ‘the truth that the promises of democracy can be kept only by the ceaseless experimental renewing of their institutional vehicles’, suggesting this form of necessitarian thinking ‘nails our interests, ideals, and collective self-understandings to the cross of contingent, time-bound institutions’ (Unger 2007: 23). Unger’s claims revolve around a reappraisal of the pragmatist claims to the revisability of democratic limits, suggesting that neoliberal ideology that seeks to occlude its own historically contingent nature, or indeed to naturalise its existence, is precisely engaged in a rhetorical production of what he calls false necessity - exnomination. Against this we must assert the capacity for systemic political change through continual revisability and not through catastrophe or crisis.

Granted, revolutionary or eventual iterations *do* have impact within inferential systems, often significant impacts, but what the work on Jevons’ paradox shows us is that these impacts are often unreliable due to cybernetic effects – precisely the way positive and negative feedback produces unintended outcomes within and outside of systems. In order to explore this further, it is necessary to expand on the description of Jevon’s fundamental paradox and also understand the complex systemic nature of art.

## 6.7 Rebounds and Dark Matter

In the foreword to *The Jevons Paradox* (Giampietro and Mayumi in Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008), Joseph Tainter examines the well-known paradox that gives the book its name. Identified by William Stanley Jevons in his work *The Coal Question* (1866), the paradox concerns the usage of coal in industry, but can be equally applied to all energy sources. The assertion is, that whenever a resource saving is made, through increased technical efficiency for example, that saving is put to use increasing the output of the company, country or individual who has made that saving. As Tainter suggests; ‘as technological improvements increase the efficiency with which a resource is used, total consumption of that resource may increase rather than decrease’ (Tainter in Giampietro and Mayumi in Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008: x). Insofar as resource use might in fact *increase* rather than decrease as a result of the initial saving, an effect known as rebound, the suggestion that climate disaster can be “solved” by increased efficiency runs into trouble. In the current system, individuals will compensate for any efficiency gains by higher levels of consumption – this should not be seen as some form of psychological failing on the behalf of human individuals, more a reaction at multiple levels to the foundational principles of economic theory that reduced use impacts cost of consumption. Because the paradox ‘cannot be circumvented through voluntary restraint or any other *laissez-faire* approach’ (Tainter in Polimeni, Mayumi, Giampietro and Alcott eds. 2008: xv), one cannot think of efficiency savings through either individuals’ voluntaristic approaches or market mechanisms. Both these solutions to the problem tragically result in the potential for increased use of the resource as the logical reduction in cost of the resource that the market imposes will result in higher levels of use. Thus, state intervention is a required step to prevent the inevitable price decrease.

In the current discourse around climate catastrophe amelioration the responses are often centred around increased efficiency of individuals, companies and nation states – as though the accumulative effect of a reduction in resource use will passively result in overall reduction in environmental harm. This approach proposes using market mechanisms to produce desirable outcomes. However, because the central axiomatics of supply and demand determine the behaviour of the market, this approach will result in Jevons’ paradox. Indeed, as the authors of this study show, an increase in efficiency often leads to not just a rebound, where the consumption of a resource returns to previous levels, but a backfire, where consumption exceeds it. This paradox is evident elsewhere – often increased efficiency, seen as the display of moral

virtues (something explored in more detail in Chapter Four above), can give us social license for other activities that may cause a backfire effect. If we think of politically transformative approaches that rely on individual actors “doing good”, the potential for paradoxical backfire is significant. Politically transformative artistic practice, for example, often provide a license for local or national governments to renege on their social contract. Resulting in decreased public funding or support for important institutions, socially engaged art excuses cash strapped councils from their duty to the public. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, then, art, when thought of within a “market” formation, works counterproductively to “backfire” on the very communities it wished to help. How we understand the notion of legitimation within and outside the inferential system of art, then, is important.

In *Dark Matter* (2011) Gregory Sholette explores the concept of the eponymous “dark matter” in astrophysics as it relates, metaphorically, to the contemporary art world. Sholette understands the small scale, unseen, amateur, “creative dark matter” as a necessary but invisible component of the system that props up and provides symbolic ballast to the famous, successful artist. As he suggests, ‘[a]ll these forms of dark matter play an essential role in the symbolic economy of art’ (Sholette 2011: 3). The invisible elements of the system provide a stable and reliable economic function in the whole system (the non-famous artists buy the books, go to galleries, work in arts administration, teach art and so on) – without them the system would collapse, but furthermore Sholette asks;

How would the art world manage its system of aesthetic valorization if the seemingly superfluous majority—those excluded as non-professionals as much as those destined to “fail”—simply gave up on its system of legitimation?

(Sholette 2011: 3)

The symbolic legitimation aspect of Sholette’s analysis is important. If works of art not seen to be valuable as such can provide symbolic legitimacy for the system as a whole, can act as buttresses for valuation/valorisation, it is coherent to suggest, following Sholette, that legitimacy is conferred upon all aspects of the system by any and every work of art, or practice within that system. As such, we can make the claim that works of art that seek to delegitimise, critique or move away from the commodity form, the marketisation of the art world, or indeed any aspect of the contemporary paradigm, paradoxically work to accrue symbolic legitimacy for those very things they attempt to critique. In this sense, when understood as a system of legitimation, the

art world hoovers up cultural capital to the centre from even the most critical work at the margins. It is therefore coherent to suggest that critical art acts in a self-canabalising fashion to undermine its very authority, unintentionally returning value via symbolic valorisation to the aspects of the system it deems unacceptable. Thus, artworks that seek political transformation are limited if they act independently. A liberal model of isolated individuals is inadequate here, we must imagine a project that conjoins and mobilises multiple ecologies of artworks, institutions and subjects within the inferential system of the artworld and beyond. A commitment to structural change must operate at, and across, multiple levels, acknowledging the necessary transformations and distortions that occur as levels are crossed. It is not the case that artworks can propose themselves as small scale models that can be directly scaled up – no, the scalar approach is inadequate.

Both Jevons' paradox and Sholette's concept of creative dark matter, or my attenuation of it, allow us to understand the complex system processes involved in the project of political transformation as it relates to art practices. Critical or political work in one area, while salient and thought provoking, often has a rebound or backfire effect elsewhere in the system, giving credence to the analysis above that understands the metabolic nature of the system. While this analysis might lead some to a political quietism, to give up on any political action in the assumption that all action is compromised or useless, this is not my aim. I argue instead, that it is only through an understanding of these complexities that political action can be directed in such a way as to have traction not just at a particular level, and thus, have causal power at a universal level.

### *6.8 Normativity*

How individuals and social structures have causal power has been described in some depth by Dave Elder-Vass (2010). In this section I wish to understand the concept of normativity as described by Elder-Vass in relation to Zalamea's (2012) work on Peirce. This relation could generate a PhD study in and of itself and as this thesis is nearing its end the rehearsal of this narrative will be necessarily limited. Describing his own work as recognising 'the contributions of both social structure and human agency to [explain] social events' (Elder-Vass 2012: 8) Elder-Vass is keen to offer an emergentist solution to the question of causal power, suggesting that it emerges from the interactions between individuals and social structures rather than being

ontologically attached to one or the other. Distinct from both methodological individualist and methodological collectivist positions, and, what he calls “central conflationist” positions (exemplified by Anthony Giddens) that ‘seek to bridge these other two positions by treating structure and agency as ontologically inseparable’ (ibid.), Elder-Vass’ emergentist approach could be seen as being conditioned by a complex synthetic interweaving of the individual and the structure. Central to this emergentist approach is Elder-Vass’ concept of “normative social institutions”; these types of institutions are created by interactions between members of social groups called “norm circles”. As he suggests, ‘[n]ormative social institutions [...] are an emergent causal power of norm circles’ (ibid.: 115). As discussed in Chapter Three, individuals and social structures engage recursively in the production of norm circles, from which normative social institutions emerge. It is worth expanding on this theory here in order to understand how norms operate as a form of semi-invariant – a set of revisable descriptions that we must intercede in if we are keen to reassert different values for our society. Norms, then, as I hope to make clear, are a fundamental lever in the project of social causality. They are not, however, of the same order as axioms – norms proceed from axioms and not the other way round. However, my contention is, norms are utilisable in the project of developing new axioms – if we understand the causal power of norm circles, as expressed by Elder-Vass, I argue that we can exploit them to intervene in the creation of axiomatics.

A norm circle is a collection of individuals that cohere around the agreement upon, and commitment to, a set of shared norms, for Elder-Vass, the norm circle has causal powers (not the individual or society as such, but the norm circle which is seen as an iterative function of individuals relations to each other). As he suggests:

Although institutions depend on the members of the norm circle sharing a similar understanding of the norm concerned, emergent or collective properties cannot be produced by such formal similarities [...] It is the commitment that they have to *endorse and enforce* the practice with each other that makes an norm circle more effective than the sum of its members would be if they were not part of it. The members of the norm circle are aware that its other members share that commitment, they may feel an obligation to them to endorse the norm concerned and have an expectation that the others will support them and they do so. In other words, the members of the norm circle share a *collective intention* to support the norm, and as a result they each tend to support it more actively they would if they did not share that collective intention.

(Elder-Vass 2012: 123)

The emergent or generative qualities of norm circles rests on this collective commitment to maintain or reinforce norms. The existence of norm circles results in the increased likelihood of conformity to norms as members of the circle pressure others to adhere to those norms. Thus, invariance is registered across social groups in accordance with commitment to norms. This commitment to norms is not necessarily bad – all social groups conform to this logic whether they have oppressive or liberatory politics, despite protestations in the popular discourse that freedom from norms is the central tenet of liberation – norms are a fact of social engagement and have neither positive nor negative valence.

This model is usefully applied to descriptions of all social collectives, insofar as society is composed not of a collection of unrelated individuals, but of norm reinforcing subjects that exacerbate the strength of those norms through their explicit, public commitment to them, the relation between individuals emerges as one of commitment and conformity. As such, in the case of oppressive social norms, the collective endorsement of them can induce fear in individuals who deviate as the power of those norms exceeds that held by individuals – insofar as social pressure is also backed up by institutional or state power in the form of (often violent) penalties for transgression, these norms have the weight of more than just norm circles behind them. Social norms have emergent causal power, often, but not always, ratified, by state or institutional power.

Far from endorsing the reintroduction from above of repressive social norms – no matter how “progressive” those norms might appear – this theory can help us understand on the one hand, how social causal power emerges from groupings, and how radically democratic engagement in norm construction is possible. If we, following Negarestani, agree that social norms are revisable by individuals, then Elder-Vass’ emergentist conception of normativity is useful. Social norms, in his conception are seen neither as properties of social systems nor as belonging to individuals, but as emerging from the relation between the two. As I pointed out in Chapter Three, however, this theory does not have an adequate theory of power that would understand how some individuals and social groupings have privileged access to the production and ratification of norms. In fact, a similar criticism could be levelled at Negarestani’s work – the subject of revision is exnominated, and thus seen as potentially neutral. The danger of that neutrality is

clearly evident in the work of Wynter, Fanon, Yusoff, Hirschmann, Butler and other black radical or feminist thinkers. Neutrality is so often coded for whiteness, maleness, ablebodiedness.

That being said, the formal logic at work in Elder-Vass' work is fundamental to an approach that could be fruitful. His work understands the causal power of groups, how agency operates across social laminations, and how intervention in the production of social norms is possible, and, importantly, how collections of individuals are ampliative not additive. As he suggests:

it is one of the strengths of the emergentist perspective that it accepts that entities at many levels of a laminated whole can simultaneously have causal powers and that these powers may interact to produce actual events [...] it is not only true that individual beliefs themselves are causally effective but also that they are a crucial part of the mechanism underpinning the causal power of the larger group.

(Elder-Vass 2012: 124)

This multi-laminar approach underwrites the theorisation here. It is only through the capacity of socially constituted groups – norm circles – that can intervene at many levels in order to have emergent and amplifying causal powers, that we can hope to have traction at higher levels. The emergentist perspective allows us to understand how collectives of individuals can have causal power whereas isolated individuals cannot. However, while not everything is a norm, and certainly we would likely think about our political actions in multiple different ways, the function of norms described above is a coherent strategic tool to understand how commitments can be ramified and enlarged in radically decolonial ways; if norm circles have emergent powers, then, in order to orient them against colonial projects of extraction and exploitation we can mobilise multiple subjects in amplificatory roles. To live according to principles decided collectively, then, valorisation of notions of goodness need to be tied to multi-laminar analyses of the effects of actions and statements.

It is to this multi-laminar approach that I now turn.

Zalamea's intervention in Peirce scholarship is important here. Specifically, the way he discusses the logics of continuity in Peirce can help us understand the multilaminar approach discussed above. Understanding the continuum as a form of genericity, Zalamea, drawing on Peirce, provides the following description:

The continuum is thus a *general*, where all the potentialities can fall – overcoming all determinations– and where certain modes of connection between the parts and the whole (local and global) become homogenized and regularized – overcoming and melting together all individual distinctions. The generic character of Peirce’s *continuum* (thirdness) is thus closely weaved with the overcoming of determinacy and actuality (secondness). In this process the threads of indetermination and chance (firstness) become essential, freeing the existent from its particular qualities in order to reach the generality of *possibilia*.

(Zalamea 2012: 12)

Zalamea’s engagement with Peirce’s continuum derives from the understanding that the continuum cannot be constructed out of a collection of particular individuals, rather, it is the generalness or vagueness associated with transfinite supermultitudinous collections. Insofar as the supermultitudinous nature of Peirce’s continuum refers to a genericity, it should not be thought of as merely the addition of many separate parts, but as amplificatory and undetermined – whereby it reveals the true universal. Existents or individuals are then seen as a rupture from the continuum, rather than as components that accrue to construct it. Individuals are a form of discontinuity, that weave into and through the continuity of the transfinite universal continuum. This discontinuous mark, Peirce names Secondness, and refers to the actual, discrete or the existent. As Zalamea tells us:

A generic continuum is always present in the universe, reflected in multiple layers (single continuum of qualitative possibilities – line in the blackboard) and “meta-layers” (double continuum of qualitative possibilities – blackboard). Through acts of “brute force” are then produced breaks on the continuum which allow to “mark” differences: secondness, existence, discreteness, emerge all as *ruptures* of the real, the third, the continuous. Vagueness, indetermination, amalgamation, present in a “primitive” continuum (the Parmenidean “One”), evolve towards a logic of identity, more and more determined, capable of recording differences *by means* of successive breaks, ruptures, discontinuities.

(Zalamea 2012: 29)

Between secondness and thirdness, then, emerges a protean weaving and possibility space that extends in a three-dimensional spiral. The discrete and the continuous are recursively bound in this spiral that entwines firstness (immediacy, spontaneity, sensation), secondness (facts, alterity, resistance) and thirdness (law, continuity, knowledge, generality). This is the continuum, within which the relationships between individuals and the universal are played out. It is in this context that laminar traversal takes place. The interweaving between laminations goes in a back and forth motion that places local sites in global contexts and conditions global contexts by those global sites – this description allows us to understand how discrete practices (of art or politics) entwine with their contexts, ramifying global conditions in local sites. This logic intertwines with Peirce’s pragmatic maxim, that affirms, as Zalamea suggests:

we can only attain knowledge after conceiving a wide range of representability possibilities for signs (firstness), after perusing active-reactive contrasts between sub-determinations of those signs (secondness), and after weaving recursive information between the observed semeiosis (thirdness). The maxim acts as a *sheaf* with a double support function for the categories: a contrasting function (secondness) to obtain local distinctive hierarchies, a mediating function (thirdness) to unify globally the different perspectives.

(Zalamea 2012: 58)

The boundary crossings and mediating functions inherent in the continuum glue information, energy and material from one site to another, allowing, as Zalamea tells us, ‘the “transit” of modalities, the “fusion” of individualities, the “overlapping” of neighbourhoods’ (Zalamea 2012: 22). Vital, then, in a theory of counter-hegemonic organisation that would seek to revise the descriptive statement, or the limits of the human, Zalamea’s Peircianism allows us to understand how values, norms and laws can interact with individuals. Far from retreating into an methodological individualist approach that prioritises individuals over the universal, or a methodological collectivist approach that subsumes individuals *into* the universal, or indeed a conflation of the two that seeks a centre ground, determined by a trivial relation between individual and universal, this approach understands the complexity involved in the relationship. Instead of understanding the transition between local site and global context as a leap across the void, we can now see how local concerns can increase their capacities, bootstrapping their way to hegemonic positions. Any theory of political transformation requires a theory of *how* those transformations manifest, combining Zalamea’s theorisation of Peirce’s continuum with Elder-

Vass' concept of norm circles allows us to understand how amplification across laminations can occur. This is true not just of norms – statements, concerns or values can be mobilised in the same way. In fact, it is through the process of ramification that a transformation of values into norms occurs. And it is equally through this amplificatory process that we can hope to intervene on the construction and reconstruction of axioms.

Returning to Chantal Mouffe's analysis, the counter-hegemonic struggle she proposes engages with the conditions and contexts provided by institutions, rather than withdrawing from them altogether. Assuming a puritanical relation to inside and outside, the withdrawal approach misunderstands the metabolic nature of the system described above. Mouffe's approach, however, is more in line with my analysis. Instead of assuming that political change can occur by fiat as a leap across the void, this work proposes utilising the hierarchies and modalities of institutions in order to produce counter-hegemonic operations. These operations, instead of prefiguring a horizontal, or spontaneous order, then, must understand how multilaminar approaches will utilise the amplificatory nature of norm circles to institute differently a just descriptive statement. Mouffe's model rests on the capacity for institutions to stage agonistic positions in order to imagine a new order that could emerge to challenge neoliberalism. However, this is inadequate – staging or imaging alternatives is only a portion of the project, hegemonic operations require a theory of action that understands the steps necessary to utilise these imaginaries in a project of increasing capacity of individuals. Mouffe's work stops short of proposing an organisational model capable of doing this, favouring the narrative functions of culture over the norm reinforcing function. Without a theory of how norms operate to reproduce, reinforce and amplify values across multiple sites, imaginaries remain in their local site and thus foreground individual subjectivities over institutional models.

The privileging of individual subjectivity in the liberal order and the reliance on catastrophic revolutionary practice lacks the necessary stepwise practices, as Roberto Unger suggests;

The history of modern social ideas has misled us into associating piecemeal change with disbelief in institutional reconstruction, and a commitment to such reconstruction with faith in sudden and systemic change. The most important expression of this prejudice is the supposedly all-inclusive contrast between two styles of politics. One style is revolutionary: it seeks the wholesale substitution of one institutional order by another, under the guidance of confrontational leaders supported by energised majorities, in

circumstances of national crisis. The other style is reformist: its concerns are marginal redistribution, or concessions to moral and religious anxieties, negotiated by professional politicians among organized interests, in times of business as usual.

We must now jumble these categories up, associating fragmentary and gradual but nevertheless cumulative change with transformative ambition. To jumble them up in practice must first jumble them up in thought. The foremost expression of this jumbling up is a style politics defying the contrast between revolution and reform and therefore exemplifying the practice of revolutionary reform. Such a politics practices structural change in the only way such change generally can be practised: piece by piece and step by step. It combines negotiation among organized midnight minorities with mobilization of disorganised majorities. And it dispenses with calamity as the enabling condition of change.

(Roberto Unger 2005: 31-2)

Far from being a conciliation to power or a renegeing of revolutionary ideals, this stepwise approach necessarily includes not just multilaminar operations but multiple subjects – as such, the procedure of capacity increase is radically democratic. Thunderlike or revolutionary transformation that relies on catastrophe is only available to certain subjects, often those who already possess the most power in any situation, and often does not result in predictable ways. In order for multiple subjectivities to have access to the means by which change occurs, there needs to be a reshaping of the methodologies of organisation and transformation in line with a stepwise logic that increases commitments to universal rather than personal freedoms, that mobilises normativity rather than imagines the possibility to escape from it and a commitment to the complex, intertwined relation between local and global, discontinuity and continuity, discrete individual and general context, that can glue together individuals through the mediating function of institutions.

**Conclusion:**  
**In Defence of the Institutional**

To be sure, a set of principles does not by itself entail an effective transformation of our society. Given the power relations of capitalism under which we live, the achievements of democratic socialism can only be the result of a sustained and difficult political struggle.

(Hägglund 2019: 347)

The axiological conditions of contemporary art emerge in conjunction with those of neoliberalism, which in turn is underwritten by the politics of the oil industry – what I call the petropolitical paradigm, or The Second Age of Oil. As discussed in this thesis, there is a recursive relation between these inferential fields. Thinking about contemporary art without, for example, a theory of how it relates to the modes of extraction and exploitation inherent in petropolitics, misunderstands important ontologies. This is not to say that contemporary art and petropolitics are somehow *necessarily* bound together, in fact I would be keen to assert the opposite, that the petropolitical and the cultural are only *contingently* bound. The capacity to wrest culture away from the political paradigm it appears within – the task of autonomy – must be renewed, but only if it can be reimagined as a Castoriadian-Hägglundian project of self-legitimation; freedom as a commitment to the projects we hold dear in the face of finitude, and the production of, not escape from, norms. What I hope to show through this thesis is that there exists a coherence or similitude between the logics of contemporary art and that of petropolitics. I call these the axioms of petroculture, and they rest on three points – freedom, exemplification and myopia. Under the heading of freedom I explored how the concept of autonomy has been transformed in recent years; the roots of current forms of autonomy as escape (or the tragic

acceptance of the impossibility of autonomy) *are* to be found in Adorno, but the transformation is so great as to have shaped contemporary conceptions of autonomy in the image of neoliberal logics of freedom. I understand this logic as a combination of Isiah Berlin's ideas of negative liberty and the idea of differential freedom, as drawn from Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan's work on differential accumulation. Freedom has, on the one hand, been, as Wendy Brown suggests, reduced to the limited view of freedom from coercion – causally linked to current forms of neoliberal, and neo-fascist discourses – and on the other, relies on the fact that personal freedom is so often to be won at the expense of the freedom of others. Petropolitics rewards the exploitation of natural resources, labour and land – it is a colonialist project par excellence and one that relies on the declination of universal freedoms.

The contradiction at the heart of liberalism (that individual freedom relies on both the unacknowledged work and unfreedom of others) is inherent in the project of contemporary art precisely because, while something like art practice (the practice of making art as a mode of commitment) can act to enhance freedoms, the products of art and their attendant economies and distributional effects rely on a liberal understanding of individual freedom whereby only a select few rise to the top by “leaning on” their counterparts.<sup>62</sup> Yet the presentation of virtues, such as freedom, is a central component of contemporary art, even especially the work that commits itself to political transformation. This form of contradiction does not just maintain the virtuous nature of artistic activity whilst reproducing inequalities and power relations, but presents autocritique as a form of virtue. The similitude with the corporate environmentalism that is characteristic of neoliberal corporations (such as BP) and institutions (such as The Design Museum) is striking. This practice is known as exemplification. In the context of oil production and distribution, the drivers for exemplification emerge in the context of decreased legitimacy for extractive activities – the loss of public consent – and the need to increase or maintain shareholder value. In contemporary art, the drivers are no different. Economies of attention dictate that both economic and cultural capital accrue to the artists and institutions that are seen to express values desirable by investors of both forms of capital. This is evidenced by the phenomenon of financial support from mainstays of global capital for artistic activity meant to critique or attack those very same mainstays (corporate sponsorship for the arts). Thus, artistic value is determined by the artwork's capacity to accrue critical and public consent and the best

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<sup>62</sup> Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser (2019) criticise the “lean in” feminism of liberal feminists such as Sheryl Sandberg, suggesting their form of feminism tends to “lean on” the ‘poorly paid migrant women to whom they subcontract their caregiving and housework’ (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019: 11-12).

way to do this is through expressing virtues shared by the most people (or virtues people would prefer to express). As I have shown, the progressive values that supposedly underwrite much art production are also shared by major players in the corporate world as well as in the art institutions that ratify neoliberal ideology and power relations – having the “right” values is not enough.

In these politically turbulent times it is important to maintain and reinforce our political commitments. Artworks are often seen as the medium by which to participate in this process of commitment, yet the liberal conception of contemporary art frames this commitment in a certain way. Instead of a collective articulation, this frame overwhelmingly enjoins us to think and act as individuals, whereby the experience of viewing art is an individual act of contemplation and cognition. Many theories of change regarding art have repeated this conception – transformation occurs primarily through the accretion of like-minded individuals acting as individuals rather than through a principle of organisation. The myopia this relies on is a symptom of being cast adrift in a society in which the social institutions that would increase, support and modify our democratic demands have been in decline for decades. While this is not a direct result of only the massive growth and enormous market cap of the petroleum industries, these industries *have* historically been instrumental in increasing corporate interference in global politics, contributing to global carbon emissions that destroy our lifeworld in uneven ways and the increase in inequality – all of which lead to a democratic deficit. As identified in this thesis, petropolitics is a threat to a healthy democracy. How we conceive of the capacity for art to have transformative power is important for how we engage in politics in general as theories from the art sphere map across to the sphere of political organisation. Thus, the necessity to reconceive of the artwork goes hand in hand with the necessity to reimagine the figure of the human in the world.

The last chapter in this thesis takes on that task. Focusing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, Reza Negarestani and CS Peirce this chapter looks at how the economic script that underwrites our current paradigm “dysselects” certain subjects, and how an engagement with what it means to be human can open vistas of opportunity for rethinking the political conjuncture. I also introduce the concept of the rebound – or Jevons’ paradox – and ally it with Gregory Sholette’s idea of dark matter, in order to discuss how attempts to utilise art for the sake of progress can backfire. Olufar Eliasson’s work here is exemplary in that regard – what could seem to be a politically virtuous project brings with it a set of unintended consequences that undermine its objectives. This is accompanied by a discussion of normativity; here I made the claim that in order to think

about political power, we must theorise how causality works in groups, as grouping amplifies power. This could be used as a way to think the use of political organising as a model for activity, or be a theoretical tool within the epistemological field of the curatorial. What is intrinsic to this discussion is an idea that amplificatory power can reside within the people and not be proper only to already existing institutions. Precisely, this power is in itself an act of instituting.

Chantal Mouffe (in Gielen 2013) asks how art should relate to already existing institutions, whether art should ‘engage with the current institutions with the aim of transforming them, or should they desert them altogether?’ (Mouffe in Gielen 2013: 64). Mouffe here is recalling, and critiquing, the tactics employed by some critical art practices that attempt to escape from the institution, but we have to ask, how can one escape “the institution”? This seems to rely on a somewhat prosaic understanding of the institution that exists only as bricks and mortar (equally, the either or binary around which this question is posed misunderstands the systemic conditions inherent in our contemporary world). Instead, as I hope to have shown, the current institutional boundaries are porous, there is a flow of material, energy and information across these boundaries and the dialectical nature of the institution means escape is not the right tactic to use. This critical approach, as I suggest, legitimises the existence of the institution. Furthermore, the act of instituting itself does not begin and end with this thing called the institution. All activity within an inferential system works to institute some norm, law or continuity. It is the recursive nature of systems that allows for institutional action to occur at lower levels. As such, the question should not be “what do we do with existing institutions?”, but, “how do we leverage the institutional capacity of our actions to produce transformations we wish to see?”.

As Mouffe recognises, the escape or exodus approach forecloses ‘an immanent critique of institutions, whose objective would be to transform them into a terrain of contestation of the hegemonic order’ (ibid.: 66). Her critique suggests these practices and theorisations (she does not name them, but we can imagine what type she means) view the institution as a monolith, and that the strategy taken is to escape or withdraw from them. Mouffe’s approach, on the contrary, understands that the encounter between art and politics occurs not only within the ‘traditional political institutions’ but it also takes place ‘in the multiplicity of places where hegemony is constructed, i.e. the domain of what is usually called “civil society” [...] where a particular conception of the world is established and a specific understanding of reality is defined’ (ibid.: 67). This understanding is useful for us. If we can appreciate that critical artistic practice can have traction at higher levels from a multiplicity of places, then the capacity for transformative

political work to be done from the margins is increased. The role I see institutional practice taking (work that understands its capacity for creating change through an institutional methodology), is through the way it intervenes within what is continuous about society – what makes up the laws and norms within a given conjuncture – precisely this is work that occurs at the level of the axiological. To change society, the axioms need to change. This thesis understands how transitioning up levels, or increasing capacity, is not thunderlike nor aleatory, but a work of commitment and struggle. The work of hegemonic construction that Mouffe advocates for requires processes that I am not convinced she conceives of – for her, artistic practice can ‘play a part in the process of disarticulation/rearticulation which characterises a counter hegemonic politics’ (ibid.). However, she does not seek to provide an adequate analysis of art in the sense I have provided here. “Art” seems to be untroubled in Mouffe’s analysis. We have to be aware that if we wish to use art as an instrument of political transformation, art itself needs to reformulate its axioms as well.

This thesis has, in large part, been about identifying the axioms of what I call petroculture, within which the genre of contemporary art exists as a paradigmatic form. I have chosen to focus on contemporary art for this reason, not because I think it has any privileged access to transformative potential, but because it exemplifies in significant ways the axioms I have identified. Thus, the question of whether we can use an instrument such as contemporary art, that is so intrinsically linked to the socio-political conditions of our time, whether we can, to paraphrase Audre Lourde, use the masters’ tools in order to change that system, is pertinent. My contention is that unless the axioms of this form of art are reimagined, art will forever rehearse the same script, ratifying the already existing power relations and only offer *some* the chance to participate in the privileged space of socio-political change. Art is formed in a certain image coherent with the historical period it emerges within, and in order to alter those conditions it needs to be out of time, from the future. It cannot hope, however, to have that capacity merely as an *image* of the future – as Hägglund suggests, it is not sufficient for some of us to have the “correct” set of principles, hard work needs to be done. In order for art to truly say it is useful in the project of transformation, it should become a labourer in that process; dedicated to freedom not as an escape, but as a commitment to a project, understanding the necessary work that needs to be done at the level of art’s extra-artistic consequences (labour rights, environmental impact, redistributive work and so on), and how the relation between the particular and the universal should play out as a form of capacity increase.

As I suggest in the last chapter, this project can utilise the power of social institutions and the instituting power of grouping to leverage the multiplicatory factor of norm circles within the context of the continuum. The non-trivial transition between the particular and universal that Peircianism imagines is a coherent methodological approach to thinking the capacity for art to have traction at a political level. Without a theory of change that incorporates how to replace the lost – or redefine the existing – political, social and cultural institutions, there is no sense in placing the responsibility for that change on art. As Unger suggests, the ambition for social and political change must be taken up by all of society. Without the democratic involvement at the level of social, the capacity for change will only be held by a small group of elites. As he suggests:

The guiding impulse of this Leftism is not the redistributive attenuation of inequality and inclusion; it is the enhancement of the powers and the broadening of the opportunities enjoyed by ordinary men and women on the basis of the piecemeal but cumulative reorganization of the State and the economy. Its watchword is not the humanization of society; it is the divinization of humanity. Its innermost thought is that the future belongs to the political force that most credibly represents the cause of the constructive imagination: everyone's power to share in the permanent creation of the new.

(Unger 2005: 23)

This approach to radical left democratic transformation is fundamental to my conception of the ways in which art must transform its axioms in order to create significant political change. Holding Unger's work in constellation with Castoriadis' concept of the institution would be a useful theoretical starting point to enlarge and develop our commitments to the task at hand.

For Castoriadis, social institutions in their broadest sense, are sedimentations of the ways in which social activity and patterns emerge and proliferate over time. As suggested by Johann P. Arnason (in Adams ed. 2014), these institutions are 'patterns of action and thought, imposed on the individuals but also subject to changes in the course of historical events' (Arnason in Adams 2014: 103). The institution in Castoriadis' work appears as a fundamental aspect of power, providing what he calls the "impersonal" paradigm of power. In this sense, the institution is more fundamental than intersubjective relations in that it grounds and animates those relations. The potentialities in Castoriadis' theory of institutions and institutional power would be vital for a thoroughgoing future study of this area, and it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis to expand these ideas much further than to merely point to their utility.

There are many routes this thesis could have taken, and could, hopefully, lead on to. A thoroughgoing critique of liberalism's foreclosure of the social power of institutions, or an analysis of how contemporary art and the emergence of the far-right could be related, for example. For my own part, the next stages of this research have led me on to developing two further projects. I am currently working on an edited book project about freedom that speaks to the need to reimagine the concept for the left. This book, *Constructing Cultures of Collective Freedom*, embarks on an analysis of current discourses around freedom from multiple perspectives, and seeks to reinscribe the concept with new articulations. The second direction I am taking is research into how the political theory of liberalism emerges within the context of the Anthropocene, specifically understanding how the current conditions provide fertile ground for new forms of fascism to grow. Both of these projects feed from the theorisation contained herein. And allow for a further expansion of these ideas.

This thesis could also feed into a project to reimagine the art world. What would an art world look like that took on characteristics of more democratic or socialist values? Would we experience significant shifts around who has control, or who is included? In order to make significant changes, a radical rethinking of the structures of the system is needed, not just to increase the representation of diverse subjects, but to redistribute power within the system in more equitable ways. This is, of course, a worthwhile project, and while the art world is certainly an exemplary site of exploitation and injustice, it is not unique, however, the practical implications of these changes at broader systemic level, at the level of politics in general, would not be immediately apparent. As is so often the case with art, one would imagine changes to make the art world more equitable would be narrativised as a "model" for broader systemic change, and would never seek to utilise the causal power that would be inherent within groups of artworkers. If, for example, the art world could be reimagined, as many are now doing, as a site of *labour*, then contestations could be reformulated along the lines of workers rights. Equally, the work done on Fernando Zalamea's conception of Peircian pragmatism has connotations for the inferential system of the curatorial. The way we conceive of the curatorial has been under discussion for a number of years, and this thesis cannot hope to intervene in that discussion (especially within the final pages), but a future project could attenuate a reading of the concept of the continuum through the field of the curatorial in quite successful ways.

As if to exemplify arguments contained herein, the coronavirus crisis that has beset our world over the last months has brought some very important articulations to the fore. Questions around freedom, personal autonomy and society have emerged in relation to public health and infection, where those that hold freedom to signify only “freedom from coercion” assert their own autonomy not to wear masks or get vaccinations. These arguments rest, of course, on the forms of freedom I have been keen to critique in this thesis. Furthermore, the modes by which social support has been rendered across different nation states has pointed up their underlying political ideologies – the more neoliberalised nations, those in which public health or social services have been in decline, the greater likelihood of high infection rates. While this is not a universally accurate analysis, the trend in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, both enthral to market logics, has been towards higher rates of infection in contrast to countries in which state intervention is greater. One interesting piece of data that also emerged during this time is the apparent reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions due to decreased air travel, personal travel and general demand. As more people worked from home and planes were grounded during the forced “lockdown” periods, demand for energy dropped considerably. According to some reports the global demand dropped more precipitously than it had done during either the 2007-8 crash or just after the second world war. However, despite the significant drop in emissions, the almost total shut down of global movement only accounted for approximately 5% drop in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Le Quéré et al 2020).

What this points to is the idea that global production of greenhouse gases is overwhelmingly the responsibility not of the world’s citizens who remained in their homes, but of large-scale industrial production, activity that did not stop during the period. This analysis suggests that it is almost nonsensical to approach the climate crisis through the lens of personal choice whereby individuals are entreated to take responsibility for their own carbon emissions, instead, what is needed is a systemic transformation that reimagines the entire value chain and the intersecting economic, social, political, cultural and ecological systems in line with new axiomatics. It is only this approach that will produce a radical enough transformation to prevent the worst effects of climate collapse. To achieve this, I suggest, is not something that should be left to a miraculous break, but a project dedicated to the progressive, stepwise, trans-strata increase of our capacities that seeks to produce counter-hegemonic operations utilising both normative processes and institutional levers.





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