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FREEDOM AFTER NEOLIBERALISM

From Old to New Materialism: Rethinking Freedom after Neoliberalism

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While critiques of neoliberalism have acknowledged its departure from classical liberalism in terms of economic policy, they have failed to recognize its distinctive form of humanism, especially as enacted through the concept of freedom. This essay argues that, because of its antihumanist convictions, new materialism can be to neoliberalism what Marxist materialism was to classical liberalism. Marx's critique of liberalism relies on the liberal view of the human as *homo sapiens*, but neoliberalism reimagines the human as *homo oeconomicus*. Under neoliberalism, state, market, human, and nature have all been subsumed under the flattened logic of capital. Marx might help us take government to task for failing to protect the environment from the market, but a government in the grips of neoliberalism will acknowledge the problem and cultivate creative ways for the market to solve it. New materialism enables an immanent critique of neoliberalism along the lines of Marx's critique of classical liberalism because it shares neoliberalism's flattened ontology. Proponents and opponents alike have sometimes situated these 'new' and 'old' materialisms as hostile to each other, but I maintain that tracing the materialist argument from Marx through figures like Bruno Latour, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Jane Bennett can strengthen the critique of capital under neoliberalism.

On June 8, 1906, US President Theodore Roosevelt signed the American Antiquities Act into law. The act gives the president of the US the authority to 'declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon the lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States to be national monuments' (American Antiquities Act of 1906, 16 USC 431–3). President Barack Obama used this authority more than any of his predecessors, perhaps now most notably on a landmark named Bears Ears in the state of Utah. A few months after his exit from the White House, Obama's efforts, along with those of his immediate predecessors, were called into question by President Donald Trump, who ordered his Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, to review all national monuments created since 1996. In his announcement of the review, President Trump stated that 'The Antiquities Act does not give the federal government unlimited power to lock up millions of acres of land and water, and it's time that we ended this abusive practice' (Eilperin, April 26, 2017). The language of 'lock up', though not uncommon to Mr. Trump and his supporters, seems odd in the context of national monuments. After all, much of the land that composes monuments like Bears Ears is open to the public. Sacred, scientific, and historic sites are protected, but when opened for examination and/or excavation are specifically made accessible to 'reputable museums, universities, colleges, or other recognized scientific or education institutions, with a view to increasing the knowledge of such objects, and that the gatherings shall be made for permanent preservation in public museums', according to the Antiquities Act (American Antiquities Act of 1906, 16 USC 431–3). How can something as public as Bears Ears be understood as 'locked up', in need of being freed? The answer lies in understanding what freedom has come to mean in the age and aftermath of neoliberalism. Unlike the liberal humanist idea of freedom defined as freedom from coercion or government interference, neoliberalism figures freedom as freedom to act economically. How has this view of freedom persisted in the face of so many critiques of neoliberalism from without and challenges to it from within?

The logic of neoliberalism persists, in part, because its critics have failed to demystify one of its most fundamental orthodoxies: humanism. In fact, some of the most prominent challenges to neoliberalism do not question its humanist logic at

all. When David Harvey (2005: 2) describes neoliberalism as a political project ‘that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced’ by policies that promote free markets, free trade, and strong private property rights, he does not contest that ‘human well-being’ should be the goal of politics, only that neoliberal policies are the best way to achieve it. Similarly, when Wendy Brown (2015: 30) joins ‘Michel Foucault and others in conceiving neoliberalism as an order of normative reason’ that extends economic values to ‘every dimension of human life’, she does not dispute the primacy of human life, only the best means of theorizing and practicing it. Such approaches are well-suited to the humanism of classical liberalism, which saw the human as an individual possessor of natural rights. But neoliberalism views the human differently, despite what its proponents may claim. Neoliberalism views the human as an economic entity whose freedom must be sanctioned by the state. If neoliberalism is to be re-examined at its foundation we need a critique that can account for its brand of humanist convictions and its particular view of the human, and that is what I set out to develop in this essay. I argue that a recent antihumanist strain of philosophy can supplement traditional Marxist materialism to offer a more vital critique of neoliberalism. I should say from the beginning, then, that this will necessarily be a preliminary step towards such a critique, since I must account for and reconcile a host of complex histories, philosophies, and political projects. It would be impossible to make the kinds of sweeping claims I believe I must make in order to reorient the critique of neoliberalism without oversimplifying at some key turns in the argument. Thankfully, much of the background work on neoliberalism and its most significant critiques has been done in the introduction to this issue, and the scholarship on the respective traditions I wish to connect is rich and readily available.

My approach is informed by developments in materialist philosophy that I will loosely gather under the heading of new materialism. New materialism names a diverse range of perspectives, including speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy, object-oriented ontology (OOO), Actor-Network-Theory, and, well, new materialism. The key idea these materialisms share in common and that I want to leverage against the contradictions of neoliberalism is the collapse of the human/nature binary. They offer a philosophical path toward rethinking the

relations between and roles of humans and non-humans in the world. I have pointed out the dangers of dissolving the differences between these philosophies elsewhere, as have others (Mullins, 2016: 15–17; Song, 2017: 52–3). I have chosen to use the term ‘new materialism’ in this essay, not to pretend as if these perspectives are all interchangeable under one title, but because I want to emphasize their connection with what we might call the ‘old’ materialism of Marxist historicism. I argue that what Marxist critique has been to classical liberalism, new materialist critique can be to neoliberalism. While proponents and opponents alike have sometimes situated ‘new’ and ‘old’ materialisms as hostile to each other (Brown, 2003: 13–14; Nealon, 2015: 47), I maintain that tracing the materialist argument from Marx through figures like Bruno Latour, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jane Bennett, and Bonnie Honig can strengthen the critique of capital under neoliberalism, even when these thinkers do not position themselves in the Marxist tradition. I insist on a broader view, one that situates Marxism and new materialism as plot points in a unified and much longer history of materialism.

I am not the first to consider whether new materialism has anything to offer the critique of neoliberalism. In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (2017: 10) interpret the rise of new materialism as a direct response to the ‘much-discussed decline of High Theory that began in the 1990s’:

The critical power of poststructurally inflected Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and other politically committed theoretical approaches loses purchase on a reality fully subsumed by capital. Consequently, ... the 2000s witnessed the full ascendance of a set of philosophical realisms— affect theory, biopolitics, ecocriticism, object-oriented ontology, embodiment theory, actor-network theory, and animal studies—all of which reformulate politics primarily as a way of being rather than as a way of thinking.

If neoliberalism has become, as Wendy Brown argues, more than a dominant ideology but rather the very rationality of our time, then is ideology criticism well-suited to critique it? Huehls and Greenwald Smith interpret the turn away from ideological

criticism and toward a renewed materialism as the logical result of neoliberalism's evolution into a governing rationality. Min Hyung Song (2017: 52, 54) is curious but skeptical about the power of this 'loose confederation of intellectual trends' to produce on its promise to give an 'account of history and of being in time that may be greater than the human but is nevertheless focused on the needs of actual human beings and their aspirations to lead dignified, meaningful lives'. Such examinations are even more preliminary than my own but offer invaluable previews of some of the difficulties I address.

Other critics have dismissed the various strains of new materialism, and especially speculative realism, as complicit with the neoliberal project, as Alexander R. Galloway (2013: 349, 351) does in his essay on realism and post-Fordism. Christopher Nealon has offered the most thorough and direct treatment of the relation between neoliberal capitalism and new materialism. Like Huehls and Greenwald Smith, Nealon sees the rise of new materialisms as motivated by a perceived shortcoming in post-Saussurean theory (Nealon, 2012: 103–4). He nevertheless faults these antihumanist philosophies for turning away from a critique of capitalism and being overly dismissive of Marxism as outdated (Nealon, 2015: 47, 50). Jason W. Moore and Timothy Morton are among the few who approve the synthesis of 'old' and 'new' materialism, maintaining as Morton (2017: 5) does, 'that Marxism can include nonhumans—*must* include nonhumans', but only Morton identifies with new materialism directly (Moore, 2015). I want to extend Moore's and Morton's work to build a bridge between Marxism and new materialism that will provide solid footing for a more robust critique of neoliberalism.

From Liberalism to Neoliberalism

The notion that new materialism can be to neoliberalism as Marxism is to classical liberalism presumes that there are significant differences between classical and neo-liberalism. I follow Michel Foucault's lectures in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, which insist that neoliberalism is not merely a renewed version of the liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. 'Neo-liberalism is not Adam Smith', Foucault (2008: 131) contends; 'neo-liberalism is not market society; neo-liberalism is not the Gulag on the insidious scale of capitalism':

The problem of neo-liberalism is rather how the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy. So it is not a question of freeing an empty space, but of taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, of projecting them on to a general art of government.

If classical liberalism views the market as a natural ecosystem that must be allowed to take its own course, then neoliberalism reverses course and imagines the market as a model for political power. To paraphrase Foucault's summative point, neoliberalism trades a state-supervised market for a market-supervised state. The state apparatus under which Marx composed his critique may have often bent to the will of the economy, but the state apparatus under which critics of neoliberalism work has itself assumed the economic rationale.

Nowhere is this blurring of the lines between market and state clearer than in the attitude of neoliberals toward corporations. As Philip Mirowski (2014: 64) explains, 'corporations can do no wrong, or at least they are not to be blamed if they do. This is one of the stronger areas of divergence from classical liberalism, with its ingrained suspicion of power concentrated in joint stock companies and monopoly stretching from Adam Smith to Henry Simons'. Viewed by classical liberals as potential threats to the natural ebbs and flows of the market and thus subject to regulation by the state, corporations become unquestioned actors under neoliberalism who must themselves be enabled by the state. In the United States, this view reached its apotheosis in the controversial Supreme Court decision popularly known as *Citizens United*, in which the court ruled that First Amendment rights applied to both non-profit and for-profit corporations. This example is especially appropriate because the question at issue was whether or not corporations could make the same kinds of 'electioneering communications' as individuals. The case intervened at the intersection of the campaign industry and the election of public officials. Rather than viewing the market as a delicately balanced ecosystem that must not be disrupted by the unnatural consolidation of power in the entity of a corporation, the neoliberal rationale rejects the idea that there could ever be any entity outside the

market. If both Harvey (2005: 13) and George Monbiot (2016: 219) claim 'we are all neoliberals now', then we might also claim that we are all individuals now, including corporations. Rather than protecting the market from unnatural influence, the court used its power to apply the market's rationale to the campaign and election process.

If classical liberals assumed the principles of laissez-faire and competition were natural, then neoliberals have seen these conditions not as given but rather as a form, or structure, that must actively be cultivated through policy and state control. Nature will never be allowed to take its course; there is a new telos. At its most fundamental and practical levels, neoliberalism measures everything by the tape of economic growth. Nothing is allowed which might hinder economic growth. Everything, including the state, is economic. Brown (2015: 62) argues that the

Political rationality of the state becomes economic in a triple sense: the economy is at once model, object, and project. That is, economic principles become the model for state conduct, the economy becomes the primary object of state concern and policy, and the marketization of domains and conduct is what the state seeks to disseminate everywhere.

The key idea for me here is the dissolution of the concept of nature. The market is not some natural, or given, force that can be understood in isolation from or a priori to the state or social policy. The state 'must govern for the market, rather than because of the market' (Foucault, 2008: 121). Such a view implies a fundamentally different set of relations between the state, the market, and the individual human than the one propagated by classical liberalism. Nature is no longer natural in the liberal sense, and so humans are no longer humans in the liberal sense. At the heart of the neoliberal matrix lies a transformed liberal humanism that necessitates a different concept of freedom.

From Liberal Humanism to Neoliberal Humanism

For classical liberals such as John Locke and Adam Smith, 'humanity has certain rights that inhere in each person as an individual' (Koyzis, 2003: 49). Liberalism sees the individual human as the fundamental unit of society. She is entirely free and

entirely autonomous. Her rights are natural; they exist prior to the formation of the state. While Locke and Thomas Hobbes may have disagreed as to the relative peace or hostility of the natural state of humans pre-society, they both agreed that the absolute freedom of the individual in the state of nature would inevitably lead to the trampling of some humans' natural rights by other humans. Thus, the state must come into being and function in as limited a capacity as possible to protect individuals from one another while minimizing its infringement on them. As we have already seen in the distinctions between liberalism and neoliberalism, such a view need not entail a feeble state. The liberal state has the power to do whatever is necessary to protect the individual; it may even restrict or break up rich and formidable corporations.

So, what is the human for liberalism? The human is individual, autonomous, and central. The human has an inherent right to herself, and that right comes from nature. It is this emphasis on nature that prompts Kathryn Sutherland to remark in her introduction to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* that "the epithet "natural" is the most overworked word in the *Wealth of Nations*". She goes on to argue that Smith's 'new model of free commercial enterprise' is 'comprehensively endorsed in terms of a whole range of naturalizing strategies—in terms of human nature; in terms of natural law; inevitability, freely, even innocently of intended outcome; and, paradoxically in terms of moral approval' (Sutherland, 1998: xvii–xviii, xxi). The human is thus a natural creature that exists prior to and independently of the state, and all state action must take this state of nature into account. For this reason, Smith can repeatedly maintain that 'the natural course of things' is for individuals to drive the social order and for government to secure that order. When conditions change and government is no longer in sync with nature, the dissonance results in an 'unnatural and retrograde order' (Smith, 1998: 232). For classical liberalism, there are thus natural and unnatural orders. When humans are free and autonomous, things go well. Any coopting of human individualism is unnatural. And the human, in this figuration, is *homo sapiens*, a distinctive and independent species.

Is this the same human at the center of neoliberalism? While it may seem so at first glance, neoliberal humanism is in fact significantly different from liberal humanism. Neoliberalism is predicated not upon the human as *homo sapiens* but

upon the human as *homo oeconomicus*, as Foucault argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. As Brown (2015: 10) explains it,

Neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*, which itself has a historically specific form. Far from Adam Smith's creature propelled by the natural urge to "truck, barter, and exchange," today's *homo oeconomicus* is an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues.

Economic reason becomes synonymous with reason itself. Under neoliberalism, the human is no longer human because it has natural, or inherent, rights. Instead, what makes the human a human is its individual responsibility to function as an economic actor. Anything that hinders that function is seen as an attack on human freedom.

F. A. Hayek is among the most important thinkers in the neoliberal tradition to reframe humanism and freedom. In *The Constitution of Liberty* he criticizes his liberal predecessors for attributing too much to the state of nature:

The increasing belief that all natural phenomena are uniquely determined by antecedent events or subject to recognizable laws and that man himself should be seen as part of nature led to the conclusion that man's actions and the working of his mind must also be regarded as necessarily determined by external circumstances. (Hayek, 1960: 72)

The laws of human nature, it seems for Hayek, are not so natural, not so self-evident after all. Nature cannot merely be left to its own devices and allowed to take its course. Such a view leads to what Hayek describes as a 'universal determinism' that eclipses individual freedom and responsibility. He rejects this determinism on

principle and because 'we can, in fact, often influence people's conduct by education and example, rational persuasion, approval or disapproval' (Hayek, 1960: 74). His larger point in this argument is to restore the significance of individual responsibility as a necessary piece of individual freedom, which he sees as foundational to any free society. But we can infer from this argument that if the liberal tradition of natural rights leads the individual towards a determinism that results in stasis or a lack of individual responsibility, then under neoliberalism it will turn out to be the state's job to cultivate an environment in which the individual will not simply go with the natural flow. Hayek advocates a system that stimulates individual responsibility to act. One is only truly free if s/he takes individual responsibility to act, but acting is no mere philosophical phenomenon. To act is to contribute to the telos of economic growth. Freedom becomes the freedom to act economically.

Freedom, in fact, is the foundation of human nature for Hayek. However, as he argues in his rejection of universal determinism, freedom is not merely freedom to do as one wishes. Rather, freedom has a very specific definition. Freedom is 'that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society' (Hayek, 1960: 11). He represents freedom as negative, arguing that 'it describes the absence of a particular obstacle—coercion by other men' (Hayek, 1960: 19). However, he immediately follows this definition with an important admission. He clarifies that liberty is not merely negative; 'it becomes positive only through what we make of it. It does not assure us of any particular opportunities, but leaves it to us to decide what use we shall make of the circumstances in which we find ourselves' (Hayek, 1960: 19). Thus, liberty is not only freedom from coercion but also whatever is done with that freedom. Neoliberal philosophy and policy construes human freedom as unhindered production and consumption, 'thoroughly revis[ing] what it means to be a human person', according to Mirowski:

Not only does neoliberalism deconstruct any special status for human labor, but it lays waste to older distinctions between production and consumption rooted in the labor theory of value, and reduces the human being to an arbitrary bundle of "investments," skill sets, temporary alliances (family,

sex, race), and fungible body parts. “Government of the self” becomes the taproot of all social order ... The manager of You becomes the new ghost in the machine. (Mirowski, 2014: 58–9)

The human may still be individual, autonomous, and even central, but for entirely different reasons. Her individuality, autonomy, and centrality are all features of her role as *homo oeconomicus*, not inherent rights bestowed by nature.

From Marx to New Materialism

If freedom for classical liberalism is individual and must be preserved at all costs, then individuals must be free to act as they see fit. The sole exception would be if an individual's actions infringe on the freedom of another individual. In this classic liberal configuration, humans are free to do to nature whatever they please so long as their actions do not appear to inhibit the freedom of other humans. The implications for nature are disastrous. Marx's critique of liberal capitalism accounts for this lacuna to some extent, though his concept of nature is notoriously unsystematic. He has no single work devoted to nature, and we must often infer his views from passages about other topics that also mention nature. Neil Smith (2008: 50) points out that Marx ‘used “nature” in a variety of ways. These different uses of the concept were not random, however, and a close reading of Marx's work demonstrates a rational progression in his treatment of nature’. I follow Harvey (2010: 195) here, who positions nature as one of six interconnected categories (the others being technology, the labor process, reproduction of daily life, social relations, and mental conceptions) that Marx uses to understand change in the world. A change in nature may cause a change in our mental conceptions of the world just as a change in our mental conceptions may alter the way we see nature. Marx thus conceived of nature as an active and integral part of the world. The capitalist system requires what Marx calls ‘means of production’, and nature typically provides the raw materials that serve as means of production. From the beginning of *Capital*, he describes the relation between humans and nature as one of ‘metabolism’, in which energy is created via the production and destruction of nature, and the driving force of this metabolism is labor. Humans are thus limited by nature; they ‘can only proceed as nature does

herself' (Marx, 1990: 133). This metaphor of metabolism introduces a problem in the relation to nature that troubles the edges of *Capital*: the dual threat of degradation and scarcity. In other words, Marx calls attention to the human/nature binary by acknowledging that humans can degrade and use up nature.

But Marx himself is ultimately a humanist in the liberal tradition, and, as we have seen, neoliberalism has developed a different sort of humanism. Neoliberal humanism conforms the human to the market, rather than orbiting the market around the human. Humans and nature alike have been flattened into the same economic condition as part of the market. The binary between human and nature no longer holds, as both have been swallowed by the same logic. Neoliberalism, through a series of contradictory views, cannot be convinced of degradation and scarcity, much less of the need to protect humans or nature from the market, because the market is always the solution to whatever problems arise. If corporations are the cause of degraded or scarce resources, the solution is to make it easier for the corporations themselves to remedy the temporary problems. This shift in the understanding of humans, nature, and economy is what requires us to extend, or supplement, Marx's critique. As Morton (2017: 7) argues, 'Marx is an anthropocentric philosopher'. What we need is a critique that, like its object, does not center the human as ontologically distinct.

Under the humanism of classical liberalism, humans must be left to their own devices to cultivate and make use of the natural world. There is a separation between civil society and the state of nature, but there is also a significant distinction between humans and nature itself. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009: 201) describes it as 'the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history'. Tracing this tendency from Thomas Hobbes and Giambattista Vico to twentieth-century historians such as R. G. Collingwood, Chakrabarty (2009: 201) explains the thrust of this binary as the 'idea that we, humans, could have proper knowledge of only civil and political institutions because we made them, while nature remains God's work and ultimately inscrutable to man'. Because of this systemic philosophical separation between humans and nature, Charkrabarty (2009: 208) insists, 'In no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked

to their acquisition of freedom'. For Chakrabarty, climate change represents a crisis of sufficient magnitude to disrupt this separation by shattering the illusion that humans exist entirely separate from nature. Morton (2007: 1) argues that 'the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art'. In other words, when nature is imagined as a realm ontologically independent of human being, humans treat nature differently from how they treat other humans.

This is one of those points in my argument where I am necessarily, and perhaps a bit reductively, making multiple claims at once. My primary goal is to bolster the critique of neoliberalism, but this argument requires that I distinguish between 'old' and 'new' materialism. And because I value Marx's approach, I must make the distinction without devaluing his critique. Jason W. Moore, an environmental historian and historical geographer working largely outside the new materialist conversation, has studied the philosophical limits of current environmentalist critiques of capital that come from within Marxism. 'The essential problem with both Red and Green approaches is their acceptance of modernity's most basic assumption: Humans are separate from Nature' (Moore, 2014: 254). While Moore (2014: 254) does not credit Marx with collapsing the categorical distinction between humans and nature, he does maintain that:

Marx's contribution pointed towards a much different line of thinking: Humans are "natural forces"; they are linked to nature internally; capitalism "robs" us of our "vital forces" in *the same way* as it robs the soil of its nutrients; our life-activity simultaneously changes us, our relations within nature, and the "historical natures" around us. (Original emphasis)

I agree with Moore here, overall. Marx represents a shift in the humanist-inspired view of the human/nature binary. However, he still belongs squarely in that genealogy. From his early work to *Capital*, Marx relies on the human/nature distinction. Here he is early on in 'On the Jewish Question': 'Money is the general, self-sufficient *value* of everything. Hence it has robbed the whole world, the human world as well as nature, of its proper worth' (Marx, 1994: 24). And in *Capital* he wants to do for human history what Darwin had done for natural history.

It is my contention that Marx's worry over degradation and scarcity paradoxically distinguishes him from the fold of humanist philosophers and historians and keeps him in that camp. While he remains a humanist to the end, as we will see, his views of the relation between humans and nature mark a shift away from a human-centered view of history and toward the more decentered view of the human promoted by the new materialist philosophers and historians I examine below. In his analysis of volume one of *Capital*, Harvey makes much of a footnote in the chapter on machinery. I, too, want to attend to this note, but for different reasons. In the footnote, Marx considers his relationship to Darwin and suggests that we might read his work as doing for the history of society what Darwin does for the history of nature. In making this comparison, he calls on the Italian philosopher of the Enlightenment Giambattista Vico, who separates human and natural history:

Darwin has directed attention to the history of natural technology, i.e. the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which serve as the instruments of production for sustaining their life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, of organs that are the material basis of every particular organization of society, deserve equal attention? And would not such a history be easier to compile, since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in that we have made the former, but not the latter? Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations. (Marx, 1990: 493n)

I quote this footnote at length (though not in its entirety) to demonstrate how Marx is at once completely situated in the human-centered view of Vico's philosophy and at the same time breaking with that tradition by insisting that humans play an active role in shaping nature.

Classical liberals would throw up their hands at the idea that humans could understand how they affect nature. They are concerned, instead, with all things human, with 'a history of human ideas ... To determine the times and places for

such a history—that is, when and where these human thoughts were born' (Vico, 1968: 104). In this theory of history, humans can understand human history because we have made it, but nature and natural history are the purviews of God. As Chakrabarty (2009: 202) remarks, 'This Viconian understanding was to become a part of the historian's common sense in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. Although Chakrabarty's assessment of human and natural history is essential to my own approach, I differ from him somewhat in my view of Marx. Chakrabarty cites Marx's famous claim that 'men make their own history' as evidence of the Viconian influence on his thought, but in the second part of the same sentence Marx seems to me to move away from the unpassable abyss between natural and human history: 'but they do not make it just as they please' (Chakrabarty, 2009: 202). I would argue that in this second phrase, and in his repeated references to the degradation and limits of nature as a means of production, Marx begins to move philosophy and history away from the Kantian divide between subject and object and away from the Viconian separation of human and natural history.

Marx shows that humans are inextricably bound up with nature. Alfred Schmidt has argued that Marx 'saw nature from the beginning in relation to human activity'. Although Marx was undoubtedly influenced by the version of humanism he inherited from Hegel and Feuerbach, he took a much more active view of 'man's socio-historically mediated unity with nature in industry' (Schmidt, 2014: 15, 27). Schmidt has in mind here the metabolic relation between nature and humans that is enacted through labor, but I see in this characterization the possibility of extra-human agency independent of human determination. While Marx does not fully shake off the human/nature binary, I would argue that his turn toward a 'socio-historically mediated unity with nature' sets the stage for the next wave of materialists to do so because, while he does insist that nature is always socially mediated, that relation is, itself, a part of natural history for Marx. The liberal humanist sees nature as extra-human, otherworldly, and believes that it will find its own way irrespective of human behavior, and Marx's critique is well-suited for this humanism. But the neoliberal sees the human and nature alike as economic entities, pieces of the market puzzle. This logic requires a critique built on a fundamentally different view of the human, a view that does not see the human and nature in binary terms.

If humans are not somehow ontologically separate from nature, then perhaps our understanding of freedom and its effects might benefit from deconstructing the line that has divided them at least since the Enlightenment. Ian Bogost summarizes this concept in *Alien Phenomenology* by saying that '*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*'. He continues, 'This ontology is not a Parmenidean monism; existence is not singular and unchangeable. Yet it is not a Democritean atomism; existence is not composed of fundamental elements of equal size and nature. ... Instead, things can *be* many and various, specific and concrete, while their *being* remains identical' (Bogost, 2012: 11–12, original emphasis). Bogost (2012: 17) borrows the term 'flat ontology' from Levi Bryant who borrows it from Manuel DeLanda: 'an ontology is flat if it makes no distinction between the types of things that exist but treats all equally'. The key here is to jettison our preoccupation with human access to the world which we have inherited especially from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Quentin Meillassoux (2008: 5) calls this inheritance 'correlationism': 'the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other'. As Graham Harman puts it in his introduction to *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, the analytic and continental traditions in philosophy both share a 'primary interest ... not in objects, but in human *access* to them. ... None of these philosophical schools tells us much of anything about objects themselves; indeed, they pride themselves on avoiding all naïve contact with nonhuman entities.' He distinguishes his own object-oriented philosophy by explaining that it 'holds that the relation of humans to pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills is no different in kind from the interaction of these objects with each other' (Harman, 2005: 1). Unlike the liberal humanist and unlike Marx, the new materialist does not imagine the human as ontologically distinct from nature.

The New Materialist Critique of Neoliberalism and Slow Violence

New materialism and neoliberalism thus share a common ground in that they both collapse the age-old humanist distinction between humans and nature, though in radically different ways. But before we acquiesce to critics such as Galloway and Nealon who fear this common ground equals complicity, I would point out

that it is the same kind of ideological common ground that makes Marx's critique of capital so effective. It is an immanent critique, one that accepts foundational assumptions—about humanism, for instance—in order to demonstrate the system's flaws. So, while I reject the assertion that Marx's critique of capital is outdated in the age of neoliberalism, I do argue that new materialism's deconstruction of the human/nature binary can extend a materialist critique of key philosophical assumptions underlying neoliberal capitalism. This new materialist critique has two basic dimensions. First, it addresses the human as part of what Morton (2010) would call the 'mesh' and what Moore (2015) calls the 'web of life'. Second, it addresses the fact that neoliberalism has emerged at a very different moment of the Anthropocene than that of classical liberalism. What I will show is that if we grant to neoliberalism its view of the human as *homo oeconomicus*, then not only does the neoliberal vision of individual freedom go unrealized, it also becomes intellectually and practically impossible.

Neoliberal freedom perpetuates and produces what Rob Nixon (2011: 2) calls slow violence, 'violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'. He has in mind specifically the ecological effects of

Petro-imperialism, the megadam industry, outsourced toxicity, neocolonial tourism, antihuman conservation practices, corporate and environmental deregulation, and the militarization of commerce, forces that disproportionately jeopardize the livelihoods, prospects, and memory banks of the global poor. (Nixon, 2011: 5)

Under the banners of economic growth and freedom,

During the rise of Reagan's and Thatcher's neoliberal orders, Chernobyl could be directly assimilated to the violent threat that communism posed to the West, a threat that increased calls for heightened militarization and, ironically, for further corporate and environmental deregulation in the name of free-market forces. (Nixon, 2011: 47)

Neoliberalism subverts the kind of individual liberty it claims to facilitate because its telos of economic growth ultimately curtails the freedom of millions, especially the poor, as Nixon demonstrates. Marx argued that trading the visible hand of regulation for the invisible hand of the market was, in fact, to exchange one kind of coercion for another. His vivid language throughout *Capital* illustrates how the laborer is held in the grip of the market and is not free to enter and exit as s/he wishes because there is no alternative outlet for labor power under capitalism. This coercion applies not only to the laborer but to the capitalist as well: 'Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him' (Marx, 1990: 381). Laborer and capitalist alike are subject to the coercive nature of the free market because it is competitive. The laborer who chooses not to participate or to be too selective about how s/he participates risks impoverishment and starvation. The capitalist who chooses not to compete risks being overrun by competitors and thrown out of the market. The market that masquerades as free is, beneath the mask, coercive because it is driven by competition.

When applied to nature, Marx's critique of liberalism can show how the destruction of nature might necessitate state regulation to protect or inhibit degradation and/or scarcity that may ultimately thwart human flourishing. Because liberalism and Marx's critique are both built on the idea of liberal humanism, this approach can be effective. However, neoliberalism does not share this view of the human. In fact, when faced with threats to the environment posed by industry, neoliberalism looks to industry to solve its own problems, since everything is governed by an economic rationale. Take so-called 'cap-and-trade' measures, for instance, which allow government to set a limit on emissions and then sell or offer permits to businesses that add up to that total limit. Businesses may then buy, sell, or trade their permits depending on their level of pollution. Rather than imagining humans or nature as independent, autonomous entities intended to be protected from the inevitable effects of the market, such as pollution, neoliberalism subjects them to market rationality by using government to enforce a system of buying-and-selling pollution permits. The primary goal of cap-and-trade is not to reduce emissions, though that may happen. The primary goal is to minimize the costs

for businesses. In other words, the goal is not to hinder economic growth. When humans and nature are subject to the same ontological logic as the market, Marx's critique falls somewhat flat because it presumes the liberal view of the human and strives to protect the human *from* the market via the state. Under neoliberalism, state, market, human, and nature have all been subsumed under the logic of capital. Marx might help us take government to task for failing to protect the environment from the market, but a government in the grips of neoliberalism will acknowledge the problem and cultivate creative ways for the market to solve it. The critique and its object pass like ships in the night.

Because it does not view the human as ontologically distinct from non-humans—whether spoons, icebergs, or markets—and because it can see the geological effects of our presence in the world, new materialism reveals that the problem for neoliberalism is not one of degradation or scarcity. Despite all claims to the contrary, there is no more 'externality' for neoliberalism. Neoliberalism cannot conceive of 'nature' or 'human' as non-economic entities that exist 'outside' market rationality. It's not that neoliberals do not claim this liberal lineage. Mirowski (2014: 39–40) points out that even neoliberal heroes, such as Hayek, believed their ideas 'could be traced in a direct line back to classical liberals such as David Hume and Adam Smith'. These same neoliberals also lay claim to a liberal humanism that views humans and nature as ontologically distinct. The human/nature divide surfaces every time environmental disasters occur. Recalling the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, Rob Nixon recounts how Representative Don Young of Arkansas, along with BP oil executives, repeatedly adopted a 'nature-and-time-will-heal' argument to relegate the natural world to its own separate sphere and to justify their disregard for the environment. Young proclaimed that the spill was 'not an environmental disaster ... because it is a natural phenomenon. Oil has seeped into this ocean for centuries' (Nixon, 2011: 21). Representative Young relies here on the distinction between nature and culture, but what he argues, in effect, is that the market's relation to the ocean is identical to the ocean's relation to itself. What Nixon calls 'neoliberal assaults on inhabited environments' cannot truly be conceived of as assaults under neoliberalism, because there is no distinction between market and nature.

Arguments built on degradation and scarcity are now ineffective because nature has been swallowed whole by the market and cannot be separated from it. The critique of neoliberalism requires that we abandon the concept of nature altogether. Among the most influential new materialists, Bruno Latour (2004: 9) claims that 'nature is the chief obstacle that has always hampered the development of public discourse'. What we need instead is a robust critique of violence on the order of Nixon's 'slow violence', but a critique not predicated upon 'humankind' or 'nature' as externalities. When we connect Nixon's idea of slow violence, not to humans or the environment exclusively as externalities, but to the planet as a whole, we can see, as Morton (2017: 36) argues, that "environmental racism" isn't just a tactic of distributing harm via slow violence against the poor'. We need a politics bent not on saving humans or nature, but one bent on saving the planet.

In contrast to the received wisdom that humans cannot affect nature or that nature is its own separate, self-contained system, we can now see that we are not only biological agents, in the sense Marx clearly understood, but geological agents as well: 'There was no point in human history when humans were not biological agents', Chakrabarty argues. 'But we can become geological agents only historically and collectively', he continues, 'when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself'. More than two centuries after Watt invented the steam engine, we have only very recently been able to see:

That the distinction between human and natural histories ... has begun to collapse. ... Now it is being claimed that humans are a force of nature in the geological sense. A fundamental assumption of Western (and now universal) political thought has come undone in this crisis. (Chakrabarty, 2009: 206–7)

He goes on to argue outright that our geological agency, our altering of the ecosystem is, in some ways, the price we pay for freedom (Chakrabarty, 2009: 208, 210). The key emphasis here that Chakrabarty does not bring out, but which resonates with his argument, is that this notion of freedom is, as we have seen, distinctly individual, and thus implicitly human, but that human is now *homo oeconomicus* not *homo sapiens*. So, what does freedom mean after neoliberalism and how might we rethink it for the planet?

Rethorizing Freedom After Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has, ironically, made us painfully aware of a truth that should be universally acknowledged: there is nowhere on this planet that humans can afford to imagine as out of sight, out of mind. As Morton asks, 'Where on earth is "away" when we have planetary awareness? One's garbage doesn't go "away"—it just goes somewhere else.' He then observes that 'capitalism has tended to create an "away" that is (fortunately) no longer thinkable' (Morton, 2017: 24). There are two key principles at work here for a new materialist critique of neoliberalism. The first is that neoliberalism has collapsed all the classical liberal distinctions into the singularity of the market, and this is unquestionably bad in that the market is an equal opportunity destroyer. However, in Morton's 'fortunately' I see, as he does, a glimmer of hope. Now that the market has absorbed everything into itself, it is apparent that the age-old distinctions that allowed us to put our problems 'away', to shrug them off onto 'nature', are no longer viable. So, if we can rescue this new outlook from the market, then perhaps there is some hope for the planet.

My own ontology and politics are not as flat and radical as Morton's. I follow Jane Bennett in acknowledging that 'I also identify with members of my species, insofar as they are bodies most similar to mine'. She goes on to argue that her brand of vital materialism has as its political goal 'not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members' (Bennett, 2010: 104). Where Morton wants to collapse all actants into a broader category of 'humankind', I confess what seems to me an intellectual impossibility of thinking about species-being in this way. Politically, I find it equally difficult to imagine the kind of utopian convergence of flat ontological solidarity and communism that Morton theorizes. Personally, this may be a failure of imagination. And so, I also acknowledge my continuing commitment to democracy, despite its intrinsic affinity for the kind of private property that necessarily creates many of the problems I have discussed here. But the need to flatten our ontology, at least to some extent, is necessary in light of the kind of problem we face in neoliberalism, which seeks to subject all actants (I use Latour's term here to denote human and non-human beings) to its market rationale. How can we rethink our politics on this oddly-leveled playing field?

Despite its rhetoric to the contrary, as we have seen, neoliberalism collapses the human/nature binary. However, there are two ways to collapse a binary. Neoliberalism collapses the human/nature binary by absorbing all of nature into human economic ends, threatening the viability of the planet as a whole. One solution to this problem would be to reinstate the binary and return to a classical liberal/Marxist humanism that sees nature as something distinct from humans and sees both as deserving protection from the market. But as Nixon, Chakrabarty, and Morton demonstrate, such a view necessarily figures nature, and some humans, as 'away' and thus always subject to exploitation. This approach will not work. In fact, we might posit that it gave us the Anthropocene. What if we collapse the binary in the other direction? What if we naturalize rather than humanize? Rather than mapping politics onto ecosystems, what if we imagine the political as an ecosystem? Perhaps what we need, as Bennett (2010: 100) explains, is to imagine 'politics as an ecology'. Such a reimagining would necessarily revise the idea of freedom as well. Freedom would no longer be freedom from coercion or freedom to act economically. Freedom would be freedom to function as part of a demos, or, to move away from a people-centered concept, as part of a public.

Here we return to the new materialist idea of the 'web of life' or 'mesh'. The political ecosystem includes all actants: 'If human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans', Bennett (2010: 100) argues, 'then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) "public" coalescing around a problem'. The public must replace the economic. Under the neoliberal rationality of the economic, all things are permissible that result in economic growth and everything, literally all actants, are subject to this logic. Under the rationality of the public, conversely, all things are permissible that result in public prosperity. But wouldn't such a theory essentially do away with value judgements? Wouldn't all actants become neutral, equally good and equally bad? In *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, Bonnie Honig (2017: 24) offers a theory of democracy that accounts for such a public while making political distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' things:

Pipelines do not just transfer oil or gas. They also underwrite a form of life and give it traction in a world of flux. That is to say, not all public things are “good” from every political angle. Nor can they be all bad, surely. At their best, in their public thingness, they may bring peoples together to act in concert. And even when they are divisive, they provide a basis around which to organize, contest, mobilize, defend, or reimagine various modes of collective being together in a democracy.

While Honig does not go as far as the new materialists in decentering the human, her vision of a public that relies on the existence of non-human actants for its vitality helps us understand that we can repurpose neoliberalism’s collapse of the human/nature binary. Rather than centering all actants around economic growth, we need a politics that centers the public. We need a politics that can account for the freedom of things, from rivers, to pipelines, to waste-water treatment plants.

In an attempt to explain what I mean by the freedom of things, I want to conclude by returning to the example of Bears Ears National Monument with which I began. Ryan Zinke became the Secretary of the Interior Department of the United States on March 1, 2017. Mr. Zinke is the embodiment of neoliberal rationality insofar as he espouses a liberal view of nature as something ‘outside’, something to be conserved, but supports and promotes policies that make no distinctions between nature and the market. ‘I’m a Teddy Roosevelt guy! ... No one loves public lands more than I do’, Zinke said following Trump’s announcement that national parks would be reviewed (Davenport and Fandos, July 25, 2017). A month after this announcement, Zinke proposed reopening lands in Bears Ears National Monument for mining or drilling by shrinking the size of the park, according to *The New York Times*. Utah state representative Mike Noel argued that federal management of Utah’s lands under the auspices of the Antiquities Act had ‘constrained drilling, mining and grazing’ (Turkewitz and Friedman, August 24, 2017). Here we see the neoliberal idea of freedom: freedom is always only freedom for economic action. Never mind that these lands were free for hikers to access, or for Native American tribes to preserve sacred sites; ‘constraining’ economic activity is tantamount to an assault on freedom. By December 2017, on the recommendation of Mr. Zinke, President Trump had used

his authority under the Antiquities Act to reduce the size of Bears Ears by eighty-five percent (Popovich, December 8, 2017).

The Antiquities Act, in this case, is a liberal instrument being put to neoliberal use. It was signed into law in 1906 to protect land judged by the federal government to be of historic or scientific interest from 'any person who shall appropriate, excavate, injure, or destroy' it (American Antiquities Act of 1906, 16 USC 431–3). But in the hands of neoliberalism, it has been used to subject such lands to the so-called freedom of the market. How might we think of Bears Ears not in terms of human freedom or economic freedom but in terms of public freedom? Such an approach would require that all political decisions regarding the monument construe it in a planetary context. In other words, the land cannot be assessed exclusively with regard to its human use or economic potential; both of these approaches allow the site to be imagined as 'away'. Instead, Bears Ears, or whatever question is at issue, must be considered in relation to the planet as made up of so many publics. This argument is not an environmentalism that imagines the 'environment' as something 'out there' or 'away'; it is a materialism that knows the fate of all actants is entangled in the same mesh. What the US government decides to do with Bears Ears matters for the Mariana Trench, the Scale-Crested Pygmy Tyrant, steel production, and, yes, Ryan Zinke. I am calling for a politics that, since it must necessarily be implemented in the age of capital and the aftermath of neoliberalism, should be governed by a self-interest in which the self is no longer *homo sapiens* or *homo oeconomicus* but rather what Bennett calls 'vibrant matter'. Vibrant matter is nature, not nature in the classical sense but in the sense of *natura naturata*, or the notion of a generative creativity to which all matter belongs (Bennett, 2010: 117–18). Only this perspective can enable us to ask how political decisions might impact all actants. Such a view imagines freedom after neoliberalism as a characteristic not of humans or economy, but of publics.

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