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Alexander M. Stoner and Harry F. Dahms

Freedom and Heteronomy in the Anthropocene¹

The concept of the Anthropocene reflects a particular meaning of the “human” as it exists in society, and a specific understanding of freedom, which only became possible at the close of the twentieth century. Whereas Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, and Adam Smith attempted to grasp the potential for humanity to be changed through society in a self-conscious process of attaining freedom, the “Age of Man” today appears entirely disconnected from human agency. Indeed, the Anthropocene is associated not with the flourishing of life but with the sixth mass extinction. Drawing insight from classical and contemporary critical theory, this paper seeks to explicate the emancipatory potential within the concept of the Anthropocene, and the ways in which this potential is blocked by material circumstances that masquerade as “freedom.”

Introduction

The effort to recognize the Anthropocene as an official unit of geologic time is not simply a matter of cataloguing the extent, scale, scope, and nature of human impact on Earth system processes. Rather, Anthropocene discourse entails the potential of advancing a normative appeal for increasing urgent progressive social change directed at bringing about a less destructive and more sustainable relationship between humans and the biophysical world. In fact, whether reference to the Anthropocene does involve such a normative appeal or not has far-reaching implications and determines if it is a progressive or a regressive category. Yet, when a normative appeal is present, it presupposes “free autonomous individuals” capable of understanding the predictable ecological collapse they themselves have been contributing to, and acting in a manner that reflects this insight.² The persistent labor and commitment required to self-consciously transform systems of social relations toward a lasting reduction of environmental destruction further presupposes a degree of critical self-reflexivity sufficient for conceptualizing how rationality, freedom, and other standards are embedded in and fundamentally shaped by time and space

1 We thank Dr. Nicholas Zeller (Kennesaw State University) and Katrina Stoner for comments on the manuscript.

2 The presupposition of a direct, unmediated relationship between reason, logic, autonomous will, and related demands for action, such that widespread evidence of self-destruction induces corrective action, underlies green thought more generally. However, the dynamics of alienation and reification mediate the nexus of nature and society, such that global ecological degradation is compounded in relation to our awareness of these problems (cf. Stoner/Melathopoulos 2015, 21-23).

– a feat that Earth system science, and green thought more generally, have yet to fully appreciate. This lack of critical self-reflexivity is on display in the “official” historiography of the Anthropocene, as proposed by the Anthropocene Working Group, and expressed in the problem of how “humanity” might become “stewards of the Earth” after nearly five centuries of increasingly destructive ecological practices.³ Specifically, to date the category of Anthropocene cannot explain how individuals living in modern capitalist societies – those “humans” who, incidentally, bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility for our current ecological predicament – might self-consciously transition from capitalism into a future form of social organization that will result from a historical transformation as profound as the rupture with history that preceded it. Although Anthropocene discourse recognizes past and future human-environment relations as thoroughly intertwined, acknowledging the gravity of history appears entirely disconnected from human agency (cf. Stoner/Melathopoulos 2018, 106).

Among prevailing criticisms of Anthropocene discourse, those advanced from the perspectives of post-colonial theory and world-ecology are among the most significant, as each takes issue with the ontology and epistemology of the Anthropocene in distinctive fashion. The post-colonial critique disputes the concept of “humanity” central to Anthropocene discourse. According to this line of criticism, it is not humanity that has brought about our predictable ecological collapse but rather white European colonial practices of exploitation, extermination, and natural resource exhaustion (cf. Erickson 2020; Lewis/Maslin 2015; Simpson 2020). The purported universality of Anthropocene discourse is, in this respect, problematic because it privileges “whiteness” in our environmental future (cf. Erickson 2020, 112). Another prominent criticism comes from the perspective of world ecology associated with Jason Moore (2015; 2016) who also takes issue with the notion of “humanity” by arguing that Anthropocene discourse remains captive to the very thought structures that created the present crisis, but he situates colonial ecological despoliation within a broader descriptive history of capitalism, understood as a way of organizing human and non-human natures. On this basis, Moore advances a world-historical reconstruction not of the Anthropocene but of what he calls the “Capitalocene.” Although both world ecology and post-colonial criticisms direct focus on important dimensions ignored by conventional Anthropocene historiography,⁴ neither perspective applies an adequate degree of critical self-reflexivity, particularly with respect to the tension between freedom and heteronomy. As a result, neither the Anthropocene, nor its world ecology and post-colonial critics yield theoretical insight into the possibility of a further wholesale transformation of “humanity” (cf. Wallenhorst/Wulf 2023).

3 While the historiography of the Anthropocene is contested, the “official” version refers to that enumerated by members of the Anthropocene Working Group (cf. Head et al. 2021).

4 Both world ecology and post-colonial theory recognize the role of science in the development of modernity, emphasizing the dangers of replicating assumptions that help to legitimize structures of power and inequality.

This article endeavors to offer a remedy for this deficit. Our overarching thesis is that the boundless accumulation of capital has its subjective corollary in an ideological conception of freedom, which lives through identity thinking modeled on the commodity form. The first section draws from Marxian critical theory, particularly the works of Moishe Postone, to outline the general logic of capital as the single-most significant driver of contemporary ecological decline. Specifically, we discuss the immanent logic of the expanding value-regime as a dynamic that both generates the possibility of and obstructs the potential for freedom (understood as the self-conscious regulation of socioecological relations based on a recognition of humanity as a mediate part of nature). Gleaning insight from Theodor W. Adorno's critique of identity thinking, the second section discusses the nexus of contemporary political and economic transformations and subjectivity formation. Focus is directed on the neoliberal personality and a new subjective experience of "freedom," and the implications this has for how we understand freedom in the Anthropocene.

1. Accelerating Planetary Destruction: Heteronomy and the Logic of Capital

While the causes of planetary destruction are complex, the so-called "growth imperative" (i.e., the inherently limitless accumulation of capital) at the heart of global capitalism probably is the single-most significant driver of ecological despoliation in the modern era.⁵ Yet, despite mounting evidence and growing societal awareness of the conflict between capitalism and ecology, the dynamic underlying economic growth is seldom recognized and, as we shall endeavor to demonstrate below, far more insidious and sinister than that captured in terms of market-mediated categories, such as GDP. The same is true with respect to the various kinds of environmental impact of economic growth, which are distributed unevenly within and between nation-states (cf. Frey/Gellert/Dahms 2019). The driver of economic growth is a specific *logic of capital* that no one controls, and to which all are subject, even as an elite few benefit disproportionately from this process. This insight is in alignment with the tradition of Marxian critical theory, according to which capital is a historically specific form of heteronomy that both generates and obstructs the possibility of freedom (cf. Adorno 1973; Postone 1993; Devyver 2022).

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1988) considers labor in the general sense, as well as its *particular* form under modern capitalist

5 This claim contrasts with the strand of environmental research associated with ecological modernization theory, which emphasizes the potential of more energy efficient production methods, such that economic growth is compatible with environmental improvement. However, there is no evidence of an absolute decoupling of environmental impact from economic growth having occurred in the past five decades, and evidence suggesting relative decoupling is contradictory (cf. Adua et al. 2021; Jorgenson/Clark 2012; Ewing 2021). By espousing the progressive potential of neoliberalism in face of its ecological challenges, ecological modernization theory appears to reflect (as opposed to critically reflect on) the problematic and contradictory nature of accelerating processes of globalization since the 1970s.

society. Labor in general, as productive activity (which is always social), is “the fundamental ontological determination of ‘humanness’ (*‘menschliches Dasein’*, i.e. really *human* mode of existence)” (Mészáros 2005, 78); that is, the universal mediation between subject and object (human[s] and nature). Through productive activity, both subject and object are transformed *simultaneously* as labor is realized in its objectification (*Versachlichung*) (Marx 1988, 71). In the process, humans produce nature and themselves, and they thereby become conscious as a *species-being*. However, in capitalism labor takes a particular form, which Marx grasps in terms of alienation (*Entfremdung*): instead of creating mastery through laboring activity (objectification), humans create structures that in turn dominate them. Marx (1988, 87) indicates that such structures of self-generated domination refer to something specific, namely, “the production of the object of human activity as *capital*.”

What the early Marx called alienation (which he later specified at various levels of social mediation) is the basis of capital’s peculiar form of abstract social domination. Marx’s inception of critical theory first grasped this condition of *heteronomy*. Marx’s category of capital is an attempt to ground historically a form of necessity that is also a form of unfreedom at the heart of the directional dynamic of capital (cf. Postone 1993, 71-83). Capital as heteronomy is a distinguishing feature of the genus “modern society,” the distinctive features of which vary across societal context (cf. Dahms 2021, 2022).⁶

The general structure of modern capitalist society, according to Marx, is determined by the drive to produce surplus value and capitalize on labor (measured as socially necessary labor time). In fully developed capitalism, once the working day has been limited, relative surplus value is effected by increasing productivity (so as to yield a larger output per hour worked). As a primary means through which capitalists attempt to increase profit, however, this strategy produces value indirectly and is only effective temporarily (cf. Marx 1976, 530). Because the reference point for socially necessary labor time is society as a whole, once a given level of productivity becomes generalized, it becomes the basis against which a new socially-necessary labor hour is measured, redefining the basis against which further increases in productivity must be effected (cf. Postone 1993, 302). The production of value is enacted by way of this particular “treadmill effect,” which highlights the specific temporality and directional dynamic of capital. In this regard, the temporality of capital can be defined as the necessity to produce as many commodities as possible as rapidly as possible. Such “capital time” is antithetical to ecology because it necessarily accelerates more rapidly than the Earth’s biocapacity to reproduce resources used and to absorb our waste (cf. Stoner 2022, 101).

Marx’s mature critique of capital further demonstrates that the historical abolition of alienated, commodity-determined labor is “a determinate possibility that implies the social basis for freedom” (Postone 1993, 125). The retention of alienated labor in the production process, as that which underlies the value form, is dis-

⁶ An adequate analysis and assessment of capitalist heteronomy requires a rigorous comparative framework. Unfortunately, such an endeavor is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses primarily on the American societal context.

tinctly anachronistic in the face of the immense wealth-producing potential of industry (cf. Marx 1973, 704). Marx's critique of the contradiction between the category of wealth (measured in terms of the quantity and quality of products produced) and the category of value (measured in terms of socially necessary labor time) points toward the potential liberation from heteronomous work, which in turn creates the possibility for more constructive socio-ecological practices. The abolition of value suggests that a situation of historical freedom would be "based on a recognition of the boundedness of humanity as a mediate part of nature," which "would also allow for a consciously regulated process of interaction with nature" (Postone 1993, 383). However, *the potential for such self-conscious regulation of socioecological relations is diminished with the progression of modern society*. In other words, *the very society that depends on the concept of freedom, denies the possibility of freedom*.

Today, the exacerbation of the wealth-value contradiction is expressed in the manifold problems of "work" in global neoliberal capitalism (automation, deindustrialization, mass unemployment, and the concomitant explosion of mega-slums⁷). The rising organic composition of capital is facilitated by technological developments that continuously redefine the contemporary work regime in ways that accelerate environmental destruction while rendering the retention of human labor in the production process increasingly superfluous (cf. Arzuaga 2018; Devyver 2022; Postone 1993; Stoner 2022). The emancipatory moment of this movement involves the anachronistic nature of the value form and the related possibility of transforming the self-society-nature configuration. Yet, as capitalism develops, it is human life and nature as we know them, not the value form (alienated labor), that become superfluous (cf. Dahms 2021). The tension between what exists and what could be proves progressively more difficult to resolve, especially after nearly five decades of neoliberalism, which has resulted in unprecedented social inequality, a crisis of "liberal democracy," uncontrollable pandemics, a marked shift to the extreme Right, and further delaying action on climate change even as the situation continues to worsen.

2. The Self-Nature-Society Configuration: Cold, Dead, and Deadening

According to the Marxian critique outlined above, the logic of capital gives rise to the possibility of its own supersession, so that productive activity might become untethered from its alienated form. Theodor W. Adorno's critical theory of society provides a superb basis for illustrating why and how history offers, but cannot guarantee, the realization of this potential.

For Adorno, society is integrated not positively à la Hegel, but negatively through social domination (cf. Frumer 2019). Adorno's attempt to address this situation theoretically by advancing a specifically negative dialectics is the result of

7 Regarding the latter, see Davis 2006.

changed historical circumstances: the waning of revolutionary practice, the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, the integration of the working class into the social order of capitalist society, and a world devoid of historical subject. Adorno viewed the reconfiguration of society and power relations, expressed in both state-regulated capitalism and the welfare state system, as part of the organization of social life he termed the “administered world” in which social domination becomes increasingly visible, yet less and less recognizable (cf. Schiller 2018). Adorno’s concept of the administered world is prescient, for it exposes the apparent stabilization of capitalist society following WWII as the illusory means through which humans became masters of the Earth on a scale never before seen.

The central, defining feature of the administered world, according to Adorno, is the pervasiveness of exchange relations and, because of exchange, *identity-thinking* (cf. Cook 2008), which refers to the reified relationship between concepts and the concrete referents in sociohistorical context that they denote. Concepts cover objects, but in doing so, aspects not considered in and represented by the concept are necessarily repressed. Identity thinking has its analogue in Marx’s category of the commodity, which renders both use-value and value identical, thereby concretizing two distinct, yet related, dimensions into a single form. Identity-thinking renders unequal things equal, yet in capitalism it is impossible for the concept to identify its true object. Adorno (2008, 23f.) explains that in capitalist society, “concepts are no longer measured against their contents, but instead are taken in isolation, so that people take up attitudes toward them without bothering to inquire further into the truth content of what they refer to.” Once the purported identity between concept and object is established and becomes widely accepted, the subject misapprehends concepts to be corresponding with the truth of what they identify. For example, the concept of “humanity” as a global subject is non-identical to existing social-historical human beings, insofar as “difference” (e.g., race, class, gender) continues to inhibit the sort of international cooperation necessary to confront our ecological predicament in a more effective and meaningful way (cf. Feenberg 1979); and the idea of freedom contrasts starkly with a condition of objective unfreedom, insofar as the capacity for self-determination (both individually and collectively) has become fused to logics and norms that direct the flow of social action into preformed channels of mass production and consumption (cf. Thompson 2022, 32-37).

The theoretical task facing Adorno is how to confront a situation in which concepts are stamped by capitalist totality, on the one hand, and the objectively antagonistic society to which these concepts refer, on the other hand. Adorno (2008, 13; 1973, 147) addresses this problem through *negative* dialectics as it is critical of 1) the claim that thing and concept are one; 2) the ideational universe hypostasized through such identity thinking; and 3) objectively antagonistic reality with its potential for (self-) annihilation. Adorno’s critique of identity-thinking employs conceptual thinking to break out of the stranglehold of the concepts themselves. He emphasizes contradiction at the heart of the concept, as opposed to contradiction between concepts, to demonstrate that concepts do not exhaust the thing conceived.

Approaching the problem of freedom from the perspective of negative dialectics, Adorno (2008, 187) maintains a commitment to continually thinking through freedom while refusing to define the concept as a positive determination. Such an immanently critical approach must be coupled with a degree of self-reflexivity sufficiently attuned to the burden of time and space and the force of knowledge production and ideology. In this regard, Adorno (2008, 194) notes how the doctrine of freedom in early modern philosophy was an attempt to justify the eighteenth-century bourgeois revolution, particularly the political will of the bourgeoisie to emancipate itself, by rooting freedom in the “nature of man.” Yet as Jütten (2012, 8) points out, once philosophy justifies freedom by grounding it in a metaphysical property of the human being, the dynamic of liberation (i.e., liberation from something specific) is lost, and *freedom becomes a reified concept abstracted from the empirical world to which it refers*. Indeed, it is impossible to consider seriously the question of freedom in abstraction and separately from the practical, social, and political dimensions of life. For will to be free it must contain *both* rational and spontaneous moments. Yet, historically, rationalization leads to profound disenchantment, which endangers spontaneity, and by extension, the very possibility of freedom (cf. Adorno 2008, 190-199). Freedom survives as a subjective ideological concept, even though the existing political sphere “no longer constitutes anything at all substantial” (Adorno 2019, 66).

Domination of Nature

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno critique the domination of inner and outer nature and its relation to the formation of rational, bourgeois subjectivity. They argue that throughout history humans have renounced and repressed their instincts “for the sake of mastery over nonhuman nature and over other human beings” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 18). Self-preservation is enacted via instrumental reason, and in the process, “nature” is severed from “humanity” and posited as an external object to be quantified, manipulated, and controlled. Domination of nature entails the repression of inner nature, as human emotions increasingly become the object of rational control.⁸

Elsewhere Adorno indicates a particular hardening of mimetic behavior in late capitalism, which he describes as insulated coldness or a particular hardening within the individual. As he explains,

8 Just as Marx was able to explain (and not merely dismiss out-of-hand) why political economy operates with an undifferentiated concept of labor, conflating the historical specificity of capital (alienated labor objectified in the value form) with labor as a transhistorical phenomenon, Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrate how, with the denial of nature, instincts or drives are severed from society to preserve society, and therefore, appear solely biological and ahistorical. Like external nature, instincts appear opposed to and separate from the ego that dominates them. Yet, the denial of humanity’s nature and the repression of instincts comes at a price in the form of historical regression.

The mechanism of adaptation to hardening realities simultaneously engenders a hardening within the individual: the more realistic [they] become, the more [they] feel reduced to a thing, the more deadened [they] become, and the more senseless [their] whole 'realism': it destroys everything, including, as an ultimate consequence, naked existence itself, [which] it was the function of [their] self-preserving rationality to preserve. (Adorno 1967, 80).

The renunciation and repression of instincts that accompany the domination of nature produce a sort of "ego-rigidity"⁹ that allows the individual to function in the world (cf. Fong 2016). The "coldness," which Adorno describes as characteristic of bourgeois subjectivity, allows the individual to adapt to a world in which rationality itself has become increasingly irrational. Such "coldness" and rigid adherence to the status quo is functional as a psychological orientation, for it allows individuals to disassociate themselves from the harshness of social reality in capitalism, where being employed via heteronomous work is necessary to acquire the means of self-preservation.¹⁰

Amy Allen and Brian O'Connor (2019, 2-3) discuss such insulated coldness as "the absence of a capacity for love [and] a tendency to conceive of others as remote and somehow not subject to the same human needs as our own." What is encouraged instead is an attitude of what Adorno describes as "'looking straight ahead' without looking about to orient oneself to one's surroundings" (Fong 2016, 98f.). In his brief notes on philosophical anthropology, Adorno (2016) directs focus on this myopic orientation, which he contends distinguishes a "new anthropological type" specific to late capitalism (cf. Fong 2016, 98-101).

Ego-rigidity, as manifest in the indifference toward the non-identical, including other humans and nature, contrasts with the possibility of a mature ego capable of facilitating radical self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, and individual autonomy – preconditions for any attempt to move society toward a less destructive relationship with the planet. According to Deborah Cook,

Reconciliation with nature requires that individuals reflect on themselves as part of nature – in particular, on their compulsive attempts to dominate nature – both to acquire a better understanding of their dependence on nature, and to achieve a greater degree of autonomy with respect to it. The ego will become more autonomous only when it recognizes that it is not omnipotent, not completely master in its own house, but driven by impulses that it can neither dispense with nor eradicate. (Cook 2011, 55)

Whereas the appropriation of developmental psychology characteristic of the communicative turn in contemporary critical theory emphasizes more rationalistic awareness as necessary for progressive social change, Adorno's critical engage-

9 "Ego-rigidity" is not Adorno's term, but that of psychoanalyst Hans Leowald, to whom Fong's (2016) interpretation is indebted.

10 According to Fong (2016, 97), such rigid adherence is what primes individuals' desire to lose themselves in the culture industry: "that the historically specific individuals 'hardened' by economic rationalism and dissatisfying work are especially desirous of [the culture industry's] gratifications, and willing to accept them even while admitting to themselves that they are being manipulated, because they are desperate for relief from the stifling rigidity of their own egos."

ment with psychoanalysis aims to highlight damaged subjectivity and forms of human experience that elude rational categories of developmental psychology (cf. Allen 2020, 176-178).¹¹ Contrary to the rationalistic approach, the works of Adorno suggest the potential for a fundamentally different, “freer” relation between the components of the psyche – in accordance with his negative dialectics, without issuing a positive prescription for change.

The Neoliberal Personality

Although Adorno did not live to see the reincarnation of capital in neoliberal form, his focus on the nexus of social structure and personality structure seems prescient with respect to the formation of neoliberal subjectivity (cf. Dahms 2023). Not only has neoliberalism failed to ameliorate social inequality, authoritarianism, and environmental destruction, it has also produced a personality structure that is self-defeating.¹² The upswing in social inequality associated with neoliberalism, accompanied by related increases in the precarity of work, in addition to the combined political-economic and social impacts of climate change, have meant a general increase in existential anxieties and material insecurities for a growing number of people worldwide. Samir Gandesha (2018) argues that under such conditions, we are witnessing an emerging identity structure that he calls the “neoliberal personality.”

The concept underlying both the authoritarian and neoliberal personality is the notion of “identification with the aggressor”; such identification is “a typical response to conditions of pervasive social and emotional insecurity” (Gandesha 2018, 157, 156), and as such, it is particularly apt in describing authoritarian responses to the destruction of social security and the natural environment under neoliberalism. According to Gandesha, the psycho-social dynamic at the core of the neoliberal personality involves an introjection of external forces in the interest of self-preservation, which in turn diminishes the capacity of the self to experience and act. Along similar lines, psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe (2021, 1-3) directs focus on a rigid psychological mindset that she calls “exceptionalism,” in which people see themselves in idealized terms, falsely believe they can have whatever they want (because they are ideal), and therefore, dispense with moral and practical limits by falling prey to the delusion that they omnipotently can rearrange reality. Weintrobe charts the progressive deregulation of mind away from care (for self, nature, and others) and toward *uncare* that has accompanied the triumph of

11 Adorno was also aware of the shortcomings of psychoanalysis, which must be joined with a critique of political economy to address the nature of social power in capitalism. Understanding the persistence of destructiveness expressed through capitalist heteronomy, mediated by society and manifest at the level of individual personality structure, is far more constructive, analytically, than bemoaning the loss of “individual autonomy” and “freedom” (understood as essentially static categories). Doing so helps explain and relativize related Enlightenment ideals in a critical, self-reflexive manner without dismissing out of hand their emancipatory potential. Cf. Bock 2018.

12 The self-defeating nature of the neoliberal personality parallels Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002) interpretation of Odysseus, who must continually sacrifice himself in order to save himself.

exceptionalism globally in the last forty years of neoliberalism. With neoliberalism's "rollback" of welfare provisions, individuals are left to fend for themselves in an increasingly precarious world.

The domination of inner and outer nature discussed above in general terms is associated with a cold, hardened outer layer of the self, which many individuals employ to simply "do their job." This "coldness" is functional because it allows people to disassociate themselves from the hardened reality reflected at them – a reality whose hardening was made possible by the very rationality they wish to escape.¹³ The crisis of neoliberalism has been associated with a crisis of subjectivity formation (cf. Allen 2020; Brown 2019; Crombez 2021; Thompson 2022). Yet, freedom is only meaningful within the historically specific nexus of individual, society, and nature (cf. Kozlarek 2021). It seems plausible that the neoliberal personality, as outlined above, is linked to what appears to be a now-dominant subjective experience of freedom as doing whatever one wants, regardless of the impact on others and/or the environment. Illustrative examples include authoritarian responses to public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Maher et. al. 2022; Manson 2020; Rothgerber et al. 2020); the impact of "neoliberal jurisprudence" on interpreting freedom of speech in U.S. law (cf. Brown 2019, ch. 4); and the emergence of "climate barbarism" – a pathological form of climate change adaptation beyond denialism, in which individuals acknowledge the reality of climate change but respond to it by withdrawing from any obligations to others (cf. Blumenfeld 2022; Klein 2019). Most of these actions are facilitated by social media platforms whose algorithms rewire the human brain in ways that bring out particularly aggressive and asocial behavior (cf. Fisher 2022).¹⁴

Conclusion

The concept of the Anthropocene reflects a particular meaning of the human as it exists in society, and a specific understanding of freedom, which only became possible at the close of the twentieth century. This article began with the normative appeal for progressive social change that underlies the effort to establish the Anthropocene as a new unit of geologic time. Avoiding our predictable ecological collapse requires a critical and reflexive understanding of humanity as a mediate part of nature and acting in accordance with this perspicuous insight. Whereas eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, such as Kant, Rousseau, and Adam Smith, attempted to grasp the potential for humanity to be changed through society in a

13 As Benjamin Fong (2016, 93) explains, "the subject mimics the deadening imposed on the world by its own struggle for survival. Since, however, it is imitating its own projection [i.e., second nature], this 'mimesis of death' is an anti-mimetic mimesis, an expression of mimesis that generates narcissism, insulating the subject further and further from any real encounter with the object."

14 The medium and message of which are shaped by the economic imperative of capital, as the algorithms employed by companies like *Facebook* and *YouTube* (owned by *Google*) are designed to maximize screen time to increase ad revenue (Fisher 2022).

self-conscious process of freedom, the “Age of Man” today appears entirely disconnected from human agency, and is associated with the sixth mass extinction. While appeals for “system change, not climate change” express the desire for meaningful action on environmental issues, the opportunities for such action are inhibited severely in a world where one’s value is contingent upon participating in a system of objective unfreedom. There truly is no alternative if capital continues to prove remarkably skilled in its ability to remake the world in its image.

The neoliberal personality highlights a new subjective experience of freedom under neoliberalism – namely, freedom to do whatever one wants regardless of its impact on others and/or the environment. This subjective experience of freedom affirms the logic of capital (see § 1 above) by mirroring the boundlessness of the accumulation process, the domination of space, a fundamental disconnect between the human and nature, and a self that is not an agent of its own life but rather an extension of social domination (cf. Thompson 2022, 129). Today, the principle of freedom serves an ideological purpose in an unfree world, operating much like a zombie as individuals deaden themselves in order to withstand the destructive costs associated with their own self-generated domination.

Are normative principles, such as enlightened reason, autonomy and freedom, simply myths that justify colonial domination and capitalist exploitation, as post-colonial and world ecology perspectives seem to suggest? While post-colonial and world ecology critics are correct to question the normative claims of the Anthropocene, the situation discernibly is more complex. Because freedom and humanity, as normative principles, are formed within capitalist reality, they are stamped by that reality. This also means that a non-identity remains in the concepts of *freedom* and *humanity*. What Anthropocene scientists ignore, and post-colonial and world-ecology critics miss, is how normative ideals such as freedom and humanity can be rendered critical by highlighting the non-identical moment at which these concepts point beyond themselves (cf. Chibber 2020). The non-identity of freedom and humanity intimates a new form of socio-biophysical mediation, based on a recognition of biophysical boundaries and social relations, in which people can be different without fear. If successful, this alternative mediation would shatter the current opposition between freedom and heteronomy; and more fundamentally, it would involve a new category of “human.” However, just because the totalizing nature of capital is a contingent historical development does not mean that the future is entirely open. Indeed, in terms of the immanent logic of capital’s still expanding value-regime, there is not much, if any, room for an “outside.” The categories “human” and “freedom” have correspondingly become functions of how society is changing under the logic of capital, and as such, can only be defined negatively, in terms of what they are not.

The acceleration of economic activity following WWII and the associated spike in environmental degradation have set in motion positive climate feedback loops that increase the probability of irreversible tipping points in the climate system (Pörtner et al. 2022). Within the framework of the prevailing value regime, it had to be this way, and could not have been any other way. For things to be different

would have required an intensity of human will to be free and autonomous, which is something humans have been fantasizing about for centuries. However, if this moment would have stood any chance of becoming a real and reliable possibility, it would have manifested in the past, when the future was still open; that is to say, when there were fewer humans, less competition for space and resources, more respect for nature, and when the prospect of freedom being actualized still had real meaning and substance. The situation today is entirely different. At the current juncture, the empirically objective circumstances of human existence are far too limiting for anything approaching real freedom to be a tangible possibility, except in very limited, specific, and contingent circumstances. For the most part, to the extent that freedom in this sense is still being held up as a possibility, it is most likely nostalgia about a lost past.

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