



ECONOMIES AND ECOLOGIES: FIGURES OF SPECTATING AND THE ENCLOSURE OF EMANCIPATION

ABSTRACT

Starting from the tropes of ‘economy’ and ‘ecology’ as framing discourses for theatre and performance studies, and touching on larger debates about humanism and posthumanism, modernity and postmodernism, this playful essay teases out how any of these idioms may inadvertently reproduce the logic of global capitalism. Reading the latter as an ever-widening project of ‘enclosure’ – the closing in of the commons, the theatres, the individual, and the very imagination of emancipation – the problem with it is located in its reduction of human agents to mere spectators of the world’s unfolding. If modern or humanist economies risk the reduction of nature to mere scenery for human exploits, some postmodern and posthuman ecologies may run the converse risk of divesting human politics of both agency and accountability. Drawing on Kate Soper’s and Ellen Meiksins Wood’s defences of humanism and modernity, Andreas Malm’s and Alf Hornborg’s critiques of posthumanism, and David Graeber’s and David Wengrow’s paean to political imagination, the essay enters the theatre only occasionally, but addresses all its themes through a performative lens.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Artikkeli käsittelee leikillisellä otteella laajoja aihepiirejä: yhtäältä ekonomiaa ja ekologiaa teatterin- ja esitystutkimuksen kattokäsitteinä, toisaalta vielä laveampia keskusteluita humanismista ja posthumanismista, modernista ja postmodernista. Väitteenä on, että kaikilla näillä diskursseilla on mahdollista tulla toisintaneeksi – vaikka vahingossakin – globaalin kapitalismin logiikkaa, joka sulkeistaa sisäänsä niin yhteismaat, teatterit, yksilöt kuin mielikuvituksenkin, redusoiden ihmistoimijat pelkiksi tämän luonnonvoimana näyttäytyvän speaktaakkelin katsojiksi. Missä modernit tai humanistiset ’ekonomiat’ alistavat ei-inhimillisen luonnon vain hyötytalouden lavasteiksi, postmodernit ja posthumanistiset ’ekologiat’ voivat vastaavasti häivyttää ihmisten tekemästä politiikasta sekä vastuun että toimijuuden ulottuvuudet. Teksti etenee humanismin ja modernin puolustuspuheenvuoroista (Kate Soper, Ellen Meiksins Wood) posthumanismin kritiikkiin (Andreas Malm, Alf Hornborg) ja poliittisen mielikuvituksen mahdollisuuksiin (David Graeber, David Wengrow); teatterissa poiketaan vain toisinaan, mutta tutkitut ilmiöt ymmärretään pohjimmiltaan performatiivisiksi.

The innocent starting point for this essay is a perceived shift in the framing discourses that define larger theoretical trends in the study of theatre and performance. While much research in the 1980s and 1990s abounded in metaphors of ‘economy’ – *dramatic, theatrical, or moral; symbolic, discursive, or mimetic* – in the new millennium, we like to speak of theatre and performance ‘ecologies,’ preferably in the plural.¹ Admittedly, the two trends do not quite scale together. Where the former was largely inspired by new historicist and cultural materialist studies of early modern theatre, the ecological names a more recent yearning for relationality and interconnection, in the age runaway climate change and an impending Anthropocene epoch.² As Lisa Woynarski puts it, “thinking ecologically requires a shift in perspective to decentre the human [- -] exploring alternatives to [the] capitalist logic of extractivism.”³ I have made some minor contributions to this trend myself and remain a proponent, but in this essay, I wish to tease out how *both* of these discourses may inadvertently reproduce the logic and dynamics of global capitalism. To exaggerate, if ‘economy’ may work as if nature doesn’t count, then ‘ecology’ may suggest that human beings no longer do: if we only relate to our habitat (*oikos*) through a perhaps spectatorial study (*logos*), what we risk occluding is the very politics of its management (*nomos*).⁴

Hence the still wider tensions behind this essay would be those between the discourses of humanism and posthumanism, modernity and postmodernism: surely the very idea of planetary management can only spell hubris and human exceptionalism? When it comes to theatre’s implication in current socioecological crises, at any rate, the default suspects tend to be modernity and humanism, perhaps the Enlightenment. Citing only two early theorists of performance and ecology, Baz Kershaw, for example, would challenge the standard “dualisms of modernism” along the lines of “body and mind, [- -] thought and action, spectator and participant, culture and nature,” whereas Una Chaudhuri, more specifically, singles out “[t]he theater’s complicity with the anti-ecological humanist tradition” of the nineteenth century (hence the realist and naturalist inheritance with its “wholly social account of human life”).⁵ Widening the purview, Chaudhuri also points to Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism and the long-term disregard of nature from Greek philosophy to Renaissance science; for his part, Kershaw suggests that the theatre’s very “*creation of spectatorship*” makes it perhaps the quintessential social institution in “separat[ing] ‘us’ from ‘our’ environment,” turning nature “into spectacle and then, too often, commodity.”⁶ While little to do with actual practices of spectating, this is the long-worn trope that I wish to take under scrutiny. Based as it is on separation and passivity, I argue, this spectatorial dynamic is much more specific to capitalism than either modernity or humanism.

Some caveats are in order. I am not proposing that any of the above authors are oblivious to capitalism, nor that the study of performance and ecology were not infinitely richer than that. Still, I argue that the critique of capitalism has often been upstaged and even disabled by more abstract suspects – such as humanism or modernity – and that it is newly necessary now, if we are ever to become more than spectators to its unfolding violences fast and slow (take war, border walls, global

1 Italics cited from Haynes 1984: 645, 666; Greenblatt 2005: 15, 94, 251. The topic of the IFTR 2021 conference, some prime proponents of performance (and) ecology include Wendy Arons, Una Chaudhuri, Baz Kershaw, Theresa J. May, and Lisa Woynarski.

2 Cf. Paavola 2020.

3 Woynarski 2020: 10, 22.

4 For a more philosophical take on the two etymologies, see Bjerg 2016.

5 Kershaw 2007: 316; Chaudhuri 1994: 28, 23–4.

6 Chaudhuri 1994: 28; Kershaw 2007: 306, 303 (his italics).

warming). Second, given my own limitations and the enormity of my themes, the tone of this essay remains that of the caricaturist rather than the respectable historian. If it manages to make some habits of thought conscious of other habits, it will have made its opening.

That said, there are two more E-words, central to this essay and its understanding of economy and ecology, that need to be introduced in a general outline. The first is *enclosure*: the violent separation of an inside from an outside, surely akin to the dualisms of modernity (body and mind, nature and culture) but understood, here, as the defining dynamic of global capitalism in the long term. Indeed, the Marxist feminist critic Nancy Fraser suggests that the very development of capitalist societies – “mercantile capitalism, liberal-colonial capitalism, state-managed monopoly capitalism, and globalizing neoliberal capitalism” – can be derived from where precisely they draw the line between their foreground functions and the enclosed backstage areas that these crucially both depend on and disavow: “production and reproduction, economy and polity, human and nonhuman nature, exploitation and expropriation.”⁷

Some of these dynamics are addressed in the short preamble that follows, and especially in the third section, tracing *economies of enclosure* in and out of the theatre. There, the historical enclosure of ‘the commons’ – the common lands and customs of both European peasants and Indigenous peoples – is related to the parallel enclosure (separation, civilization, passivization) of the ‘individual’ as spectator, in a carnival survey of cultural practices from early modern theatre to globalized consumption.

The second orienting concept is the utopian idea of emancipation, human or more, which, it will be argued, has itself been largely enclosed over the long backlash against the political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s – the “veritable obsession,” as anthropologist David Graeber put it, “with ensuring [- -] that those who challenge existing power arrangements can never, under any circumstances, be perceived to win.”⁸ Among the tactics of this enclosure, a bold list would include not only precarization and privatization, but also aspects of both postmodernism and posthumanism. Where the former’s cynical fragmentation would reject any totalizing and emancipatory projects other than the most local or particular, the latter may, perhaps inadvertently, displace the ills of capitalism on a generic ‘humanity’ it also declares defunct – making it easier, adapting the adage, to imagine the end of humanity than the end of capitalism.⁹

Hence the final section, on *ecologies of emancipation*, begins by questioning the normativity of posthuman and new materialist approaches in ecologically conscious theatre and performance studies as they stand. While this critique will surely be unfair, it should at least be asked if such work, in its de-centring of the human, might make them twice the spectators to suffering that they were: no longer at the centre of the world, but disabled from helping it much either? The alternative is sought with David Graeber and David Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything*, which resists the enclosure of human history to the maturation of capitalism, and celebrates the political and theatrical imagination they find abundant in human societies prior to its onset. In conclusion, the contours of a more humanistic ecology of performance are sketched.

Before entering the theatre, however, we need to briefly sketch some other approaches to humanism, modernity, and the Enlightenment; define capitalism; and suggest why, in the theatre or

7 Fraser 2022: 20.

8 Graeber 2011: 382.

9 Cf. Wood 2002: 191. The slogan, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” has been attributed to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek.

out, these can all be considered utterly performative phenomena. The theatre-hungry reader may well jump directly to the next section.

PREAMBLE: PERFORMING HUMANITY, PERFORMING CAPITALISM?

For a recent, erudite critique of “the ideology of humanism” in the theatre, the place to go is Hana Worthen’s *Humanism, Drama, and Performance* (2020).¹⁰ Without taking quite a posthuman position either, the book “unwrites” “humanism’s strategic unwriting of theatre” in its literary, dramatic, and theatrical varieties, defined by a “binary grammar” – of drama/spectacle, character/actor, aesthetics/politics, ensemble/assembly – and heralding “a universalizing ‘man’” who knows by reading and writing; the theatre, here, is at best derivative if not downright dehumanizing.¹¹ This humanist bias, Worthen submits, is also echoed in landmark studies such as Oscar Brockett’s *History of the Theatre*, tracing as it does the realization of “theatre’s evolutionary ambitions” in the decidedly Western climaxes of its “dramatic maturity.”¹²

For a rather different take on the theme, the already classic survey to go to would be philosopher Kate Soper’s *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (1986), in which humanism rather connotes “categories of ‘consciousness’, ‘agency’, ‘choice’, ‘responsibility’, ‘moral value’, etc.” as opposed to those of alienation or reification.¹³ Insofar as such Marxist humanism would culminate in the events of May 1968 – “assert[ing] the fertility of the imagination” against capitalist alienation – Soper traces the theoretical backlash to the 1970s, when the structuralist movement, after Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, announced the ‘death’ or ‘dissolution’ of ‘Man.’¹⁴ With synthesis or generalization thus “replaced by the assertion of difference,” human subjects by their subjection, Soper renames this trend “The Death of Marxist Man.”¹⁵

In this essay, I suggest that this sort of emancipatory humanism is worth reconsidering. Of the features that Soper finds central to it, two especially stand out. One is the distinction “between the actions we choose to take and the processes we are subject to,” between “‘made’ and ‘unmade’ eventuation,” or, unpopular as it sounds today, “between the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’”: omit this, and we soon naturalize both ecocide and the idea that there’s nothing to be done about it.¹⁶ Second, though rather specific to the more Marxist strands, is the idea of a ‘totality’ cutting across such distinctions. If there is an anthropocentrism to humanist thought, it may also be understood as dialectical, anti-essentialist, and ecological.¹⁷ In such a view, human communities and their environments affect and transform each other reciprocally not deterministically – involved in the world rather than observing it from the outside, clearly this is a more *performative* sense of humanity that exceeds mere spectatorship.¹⁸

Perhaps, then, a better lineage for the passively spectatorial sensibility would be that proposed by Nicholas Ridout in *Scenes from Bourgeois Life* (2020), where he defines the “disposition to

¹⁰ Worthen 2020: 1.

¹¹ Worthen 2020: ix–x, 1–2, 40.

¹² Worthen 2020: 13, 18.

¹³ Soper 1986: 11–12.

¹⁴ Soper 1986: 88, 12.

¹⁵ Soper 1986: 90, 98.

¹⁶ Soper 1986: 153, 98; I return to this argument briefly in the concluding section.

¹⁷ Soper 1986: 24–5.

¹⁸ ‘Performative’ in the Austinian/Butlerian sense of doing things or creating realities.

observe, to comment, and to sit (in judgment)” as a characteristically “bourgeois relation to the (rest of the) world.”¹⁹ As much as scientific enquiry and colonialism, he argues, the theatre partakes in a “production of distance,” and then “offers itself as an alibi” for passivity: “defined by its spectatorial relation to a world of its own making,” the bourgeois spectator “know[s] they are responsible for the plight of others but will do nothing to take responsibility for that responsibility.”²⁰

Then again, a bourgeois perspective need not yet entail capitalism. To get at the precise dynamic that I seek to trace, I draw on the Marxist historian Ellen Meiksins Wood’s incisive critique, in *The Origin of Capitalism* (2002) and elsewhere, of “the conventional identification of bourgeois with capitalist and both with modernity.”²¹ In short, she argues that in conflating such terms – like economic ‘rationality’ with Enlightenment ‘reason’ – we all too easily disguise the historicity and specificity not only of capitalism, but also, of the “non-capitalist modernity” or the “alternative route out of feudalism” she identifies with the French intellectual bourgeoisie.²² For all its limitations, Wood hails their “commitment to a universal human emancipation,” and fears that default dismissals of “the Enlightenment project” make us mistakenly blame its worthy values for the “destructive effects we should be ascribing to capitalism.”²³

A related trend that she attacks is historicizing capitalism not as a “qualitative break” but as the merely “quantitative increase” of commerce and technologies. “Assuming the very thing that need[s] to be explained,” such non-histories present capitalism as the “natural realization” of perennial tendencies (perhaps human nature) that “only needs to be released from its chains” – be they “the fetters of feudalism” or just politics in general (cf. Brockett’s teleology of theatre, in Hana Worthen’s telling).²⁴ Quite apart from thus naturalizing capitalism, Wood’s own project is to remember the vast social upheavals it has always entailed: its utter specificity as a social form, “very late in human history,” hence with a specific “beginning and, potentially, an end.”²⁵

To cut a complex argument to its cartoonlike core, then, what distinguishes the capitalist economy, in Wood’s sense, are not the clichés of “opportunity or choice but, on the contrary, compulsion”: “the imperatives of competition, accumulation, and profit-maximization” through which all parties come to *depend* on the market in “unprecedented ways just to secure [- -] their own self-reproduction,” their “means of life.”²⁶ In short, “the market became capitalist when it became compulsory,” and it became such with the sweeping transformation of social property relations in the English countryside that Karl Marx later considered the real story of ‘primitive accumulation.’²⁷ The two key terms here are enclosure – “not simply [as] a physical fencing of land but [as] the extinction of common and customary use rights” from which, once again, the land had to be “liberated” – and the ethic of *improvement*: “not the Enlightenment idea of the improvement of humanity but the [capitalist] improvement of property.”²⁸ Derived from the old French *en*, ‘into,’ and *pros*, ‘profit,’ this was

19 Ridout 2020: 40; he adds that this bourgeois relation “may also variously be understood as objectivity, reason, science, or even just common sense” (ibid.).

20 Ridout 2020: 11, 50, 178.

21 Wood 2002: 182, italics omitted.

22 Wood 2002: 182–3.

23 Wood 2002: 190.

24 Wood 2002: 12, 2–4.

25 Wood 2002: 193, cited 95, 74.

26 Wood 2002: 7, 97, 53.

27 Wood 2002: 12, 37. Marx discusses “the so-called primitive accumulation” in *Capital I*, in polemics with the ‘previous accumulation’ theorized by Adam Smith.

28 Wood 2002: 108, 189; italics omitted.

the ‘scientific’ discourse by which the improving landlords and later imperialists could argue that their “productive use of property for private profit” had actually “given something to humanity, not taken it away” from those now dispossessed into ‘free’ workers or slaves.²⁹ In Wood’s big picture, capitalism “was born at the very core of human life, in the interaction with nature on which life itself depends,” and to this day, true to its agrarian origin, it must “constantly impose its imperatives on new territories and new spheres of life, on all human beings and the natural environment.”³⁰

On this conceptual basis, it could be argued that while a central line of humanism has been to ‘unwrite’ both other species and the performance aspect of theatre, other, more emancipatory lines also exist, in which ‘humanity’ is no pre-given norm or essence, but something only ever aspired to in the performance of better worlds – this is what the final section of this essay will at least gesture toward. Likewise, capitalism is neither an agent nor a natural order, but a *way of doing things* that seeks to enclose all other ways, and to compel its order on every conceivable sphere of life – an utterly performative achievement that depends on people performing accordingly.³¹ What comes next is a carnivalesque run-through of its effects on theatre and spectatorship, followed by some rudimentary ruminations on the prospect of doing things otherwise.

ECONOMIES OF ENCLOSURE: A REVIEW/REVUE OF CULTURAL INDUSTRIES, CA 1600–2022

As Helen C. Scott argues in her political history of *The Tempest* (2020), the prolonged dispossession of the English peasantry and the Indigenous populations would have created new understandings of both class and subjectivity, as well as “new forms of oppression around race, gender, and disability,” from Shakespeare’s time onward.³² While the enclosures proper are usually extended to the mid-nineteenth century, some regard the dynamic an ongoing rather than just preliminary constituent of world capitalism. “Slow rather than spectacular,” as Carolyn Lesjak adapts Rob Nixon’s concept, it is a “form of violence [that] constitutes the world as we now know it; [- -] the seemingly natural hedgerow, the [sense] of ourselves as individuals, the weather.”³³ In this section, I suggest an impressionistic outline of how the dynamics of enclosure could be seen as creating precisely the kinds of dualisms and subject positions that have been found destructive in critical accounts of modernity or humanism – not necessarily undermining these, but contouring the capitalist undercurrent where it goes. While the brief examples concern practices of spectatorship and culture consumption, the logic of enclosure itself is addressed through three intertwined aspects: *containment* (of identity, space, psychology), *separation* (through space and representation), and what the anthropologist Tim Ingold dubs the uniquely modern logic of *inversion*. Beyond his poetic sense of its “turning the world in on itself”³⁴ – lines of life to set boundaries – I trace the reversals whereby the commons come to appear as market commodities, participants as spectators, psychology as economy, passivity as activity.

29 Wood 2002: 106, 164, 111; italics omitted.

30 Wood 2002: 194, 97.

31 On this sense of ‘performativity,’ see Paavolainen 2020 and 2022.

32 Scott 2020: i.

33 Lesjak 2021: 8; cf. Nixon 2011; Federici 2004: 70.

34 Ingold 2015: 74–5; his example here concerns early modern theatre specifically.

While the core theatrical representative of this logic might be the inversion of ‘character,’ in the capitalist storyline the key concept has been *possessive individualism*: the depoliticizing enclosure of “collective bodies, ideas, affects, and sensations,” as the result of which the inner individual, with his now competitive ‘human nature,’ stands disconnected from both the ‘society’ and the ‘nature’ of which s/he used to be part.³⁵ In an intriguing reading again by David Graeber, this relates to the emergence, in sixteenth-century Europe, of two distinct and logically inverse “ways of defining the human person, either as a collection of substances intrinsically continuous with the world and with others, or as a collection of abstract properties set apart from it.”³⁶ For all its bourgeois trappings, in short, he argues that the ideology of modern individualism “emerged first and foremost through metaphors of property,” giving rise to the radically new and newly *economical* assumption that “humans are bounded, autonomous beings whose identity is determined by what they possess, and whose mutual intercourse is assumed to consist primarily of exchanging such possessions.”³⁷

Now if this sounds reductive, as a dramaturgical principle, it remains crucial to early modern theatre, to the extent that one’s possessions can be both displayed and hidden. In a witty historicization of theatrical ‘interiority,’ Renaissance scholar Richard Preiss derives the phenomenon precisely from the physical enclosure of the theatres, arguing it enabled not only a newly commercial business model centred on profit, but also a sense of character and dramaturgy that relied on an implied yet undisclosed depth.³⁸ Beyond the erection of fixed venues, enclosure, here too, signals the capitalist logic of *denying access*, other than by payment, to what used to be common experience. Like their adjacent bear-gardens and cockpits, the London theatres would now charge “not for tangible goods or services but for contingent, future experience” – so much so that Preiss traces much antitheatrical anxiety around *the gathering box*, figuring the playhouse as a “space of mystery” into which “one’s money is sucked.”³⁹

The solution, he suggests, was to invert the “interiority effects” of the edifice and its entrance on the play and the characters, so as to redouble and retain the mystery of both house and box. “To justify paying for what they could not see, playgoers had to believe that they could never see it: that ‘theatre’ [- -] now inhered in the invisible.”⁴⁰ This stands out as a complete inversion of the distinctively humanist tradition that informed the popular allegories and morality plays of the late sixteenth century. Where these propagated knowing as seeing and theatre as a mode of revealing, “now theatricality required secrets, unfathomable motives and unrepresentable desires.”⁴¹

In this psychological enclosure, too, as Jean-Christophe Agnew has argued at length, the commercializing theatre paralleled the increasingly ‘placeless’ market.⁴² As the latter became more of a process or a principle – that of the commons now replaced by their assumed commensurability – both the market and the theatre would reflect the diminishing transparency of a nascent market society, whether they traded in credit or credibility, belief or accountability, financial liquidity or

35 The concept is Macpherson’s (1962); the quote is from Dean 2016, Chapter 2 “Enclosing the Subject” (Verso ebook, no consistent pagination). On ‘character,’ see Fuchs 1996.

36 Graeber 2007: 45; he draws on the work of Norbert Elias and Mikhail Bakhtin.

37 Graeber 2007: 36.

38 Preiss 2013.

39 Preiss 2013: 51, 54.

40 Preiss 2013: 60–3, 69.

41 Preiss 2013: 56, 61.

42 Agnew 1986; his erudite book-length study addresses “the market and the theater in Anglo-American thought” in the two centuries from 1550 to 1750.

psychological fluidity.⁴³ In the auditorium, this initiated a shift from a theatre of participation to one of separation and spectatorship: the creation of Ridout's bourgeois subjects, who, in this new economy of attention, would *stand apart* from the scenes of their own making, on the model of the impartial, disinterested, politically 'neutral' observer.⁴⁴

Conversely, the very notions of performance and theatricality began to acquire new, intriguing if also incriminating connotations of concealment and *misrepresentation*, as dramatists thematized the precarity of social identity in countless episodes of intrigue and eavesdropping, "mistaken identity, misplaced trust, and misdirected suspicion."⁴⁵ While another storyline would derive the early appeal of capitalism from new theories of human nature whereby the 'passions' of old could be held back by 'the interests' – thus turning the long-despised pursuit of money into the one ethical thing to do! – both intrigue and interest index the advent of a new social contract.⁴⁶ Given some moderation in direct state violence, people would increasingly close in on themselves and effectively discipline each other by keeping an eye on the surfaces.

And here, the *closing in* of enclosure begins to entail a concurrent *closing out*: a division of the commons and its participants into distinct parties with diverse interests. Where Marxian accounts of 'primitive accumulation' tend to outline multiple *separations* – that of labour and capital, divorcing peasants from their very means of survival; the abstraction of exploitation from a direct personal relationship to one mediated by a faceless market; and ultimately a 'metabolic rift' between humans and nature – what the capitalist ethos presents is a cluster of deals to breach all such separations. As Angela Mitropoulos argues, "the contract is capitalism's most cherished axiom," crucial to private property and also deeply performative, in that its claims are neither strictly true nor false but rather seek to install the future being imagined.⁴⁷ Unlike Jon McKenzie, then, she would derive the ubiquitous injunction to 'perform – or else' not from WW2 United States, but "as the very stuff of contractualism": whatever else they accomplish, in Mitropoulos's view "contracts are preoccupied with the transformation of contingency into necessity as a specifically capitalist problem."⁴⁸ By contract, what is agreed upon soon becomes naturalized. For production, one takes 'resources' and returns waste; at work, one performs labour to receive a wage; as a spectator or a citizen, one agrees to participate via representations and representatives. While physical audience contracts are rare, even the default unspoken variety exerts real power. "In return for performers' labour," as Kirsty Sedgman puts it, theatregoers implicitly agree to play their part, usually by "sitting down and watching quietly."⁴⁹

Hence the longer story here is that of 'civilizing' those who had first been closed out – not only by social institutions imposing manners and restraint,⁵⁰ but also by strong states, enabling the enclosures by suppressing popular resistance. In Silvia Federici's view, the "first capitalist crisis" came about when many expelled peasants preferred begging or crime over wages; in return, a regime of 'bloody laws' was installed to ban vagrancy and to bind them to work as they once had been

43 Agnew 1986: x–xi, 11–12, 52, 98, 202.

44 Ridout 2020: 90, 94; cf. Agnew 1986: 161–2, 180–2.

45 Agnew 1986: 40, 82, 111–12.

46 Hirschman 1997; on the social contract, see p. 31 and cf. Agnew 1986: 11, 111.

47 Mitropoulos 2012: 19–20, 33, 35.

48 Mitropoulos 2012: 40, 29; italics omitted. The reference to McKenzie 2001 is hers.

49 Sedgman 2018: 11; for the physical variety, she cites the UK Theatre Charter's 2014 "list of defined dos and don'ts" for theatregoers to actually sign (2–3).

50 As most famously argued by Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault.

to the land.⁵¹ As social conduct was strictly legislated as well – eradicating any form not conducive to work-discipline (games, taverns, drinking, swearing) – she argues the very notions of ‘reason’ and ‘identity’ were formed in deep antagonism not only with the biological body, but with a riotous circum-Atlantic proletariat of *Calibans* and *witches*.⁵²

Studying theatre etiquette, Sedgman too considers civilization a key tool in enabling European nations “to commit atrocities while [- -] asserting benevolence,” hence imbricating nineteenth-century ideals of “great art” and its quiet reception also “in a history of white supremacism and anti-working-class prejudice.”⁵³ Apart from naturalizing bourgeois society, finally – religious providence now replaced by the invisible hands of the market or the stage direction – the utterly material rhetoric of realistic theatre, in Bill Worthen’s terms, invested its explanatory power in the twin interiorities thus separated: “the dramatic ‘character’ and the interpreting ‘spectator.’”⁵⁴

And here, the circle is complete. If the enclosures initiated the separation of something like ‘the economy,’ from ‘society’ or ‘politics,’ the full inversion comes with the nineteenth-century notion of ‘psychic economy’ – arguably the precursor to all the symbolic, moral, or dramatic varieties alluded to at the beginning of this essay. In a key study of Victorian psychology, financial journalism, and realist novels, Anna Kornbluh argues this construct effectively worked to “naturaliz[e] the economy precisely at the moment when the economy was coming to seem most artificial”: evidently “speculative and ungrounded,” capital became “the manifestation of our nature.”⁵⁵ Just as early psychologists were positing an inner economy of “affective investments, energetic gains and losses, and a tendency to equilibrium of pleasure and pain,” so a burgeoning critique of “fictitious capital,” from the 1860s onward, was being inverted to one of “fickle subjects” as “financial journalists began to perceive the outsize psychological *effects* of the unstable financial system as *causes* of its very instability.”⁵⁶ Indeed, such psychologizing inversions seem operational in the longer term as well. As Agnew argues, “the very concepts of selves and their interests” are only “end points of protracted historical struggles,” hence to posit ‘the market’ as a solution for ‘self-interest’ is already to perform a “logical inversion of historical sequence.”⁵⁷

So, what began with the separation of the spectating individual from ‘the economy’ would eventually civilize her very psyche into an internalized guarantee of the same. In a final, ironic inversion, the resulting sense of detached passivity is now marketed as the highest form of social agency – while related to concepts like ‘the experience economy’ (extending the early modern innovation of *charging admission* across our lives⁵⁸), I end this section, with Graeber, on two still more general ones. The first is consumption: as he reminds us, what apologists of ‘creative consumption’ frame as the outbound expression of the inner individual has its etymological basis in the eating of food (the Latin *consumere*, meaning e.g. *to seize, eat up, or devour*).⁵⁹ A key part of capitalist identity performance, this sense of consumption ties it directly to both possessive individualism and

51 Federici 2004: 136.

52 Federici 2004: 136–7, 151–5. Her book’s title is *Caliban and the Witch*.

53 Sedgman 2018: 32.

54 Worthen 1992: 6, 55.

55 Kornbluh 2014: 10, 3.

56 Kornbluh 2014: 40, 23, 34. She refers to psychologists such as Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain, and also argues that the issue was more complex with Sigmund Freud.

57 Agnew 1986, 5–6.

58 Pine and Gilmore 1999; the current extension might be called the ‘metaverse.’

59 Graeber 2007: 57–9.

environmental destruction. If “the ultimate proof of possession [- -] is one’s ability to destroy it,” then consumption is precisely about “destroying things or using them up” – affirming both the individual and the economy.⁶⁰

That the more immaterial labour of postindustrial society – with performance as a prime example – cannot be quite so destroyed in the act of its consumption does not affect the contract that it is both produced and accessed as a vendible commodity. With the mainstream show apparently driven by ‘characters’ rather than plot; with the performing artist now “paradigmatic of the precarious experience of working in a neoliberal society”⁶¹; with the very act of spectatorship often perceived as a performance of cultural ‘capital’: on all levels, the individual reigns supreme, but nowhere will s/he feel that s/he suffices, hence the constant imperative to do and be more, better.

The other concept, all but substituting consumption for any alleged human ‘essence,’ is postmodernity, which Graeber aligns with “the age of the Global Market.” In his caricatures of the two narratives, “[n]o one is responsible” for their onset, nor can anything be done about it, and yet “one need not despair” if the two conditions “might seem to leave little room” for democracy or human agency. In postmodernity, political action *is* about creative consumption and the performance of subversive identities, in globalization, market behavior is “all the democracy we’ll ever really need.” The difference is that where one denies grand narratives, the other must be the grandest ever created, seeking to enclose the planet itself in “a single standard of value.”⁶²

Again, this also applies in the field of performing arts. Even though they might often deviate from capitalist production, as Michael Shane Boyles notes, the tiniest community or nonprofit companies are thoroughly affected by its forms.⁶³ Perhaps, as a reviewer incisively noted, an exclusive focus on subverting the grand narratives of modernity or humanity may blind us to those of capitalist competition, silently articulating the structures, dynamics, and hierarchies we live and work within. Perhaps, as Nancy Fraser has strongly argued, capitalism should not be viewed as a type of economy but as a type of *society* in which the economy “makes a meal of our creative capacities and of the earth that sustains us” – feeding on the spheres of society, polity, nature, and expropriable periphery that it has historically developed with. From the earliest enclosures to globalized consumption, she argues, this is a system that will consume its own conditions of possibility unless we figure out how to starve it first.⁶⁴

ECOLOGIES OF EMANCIPATION, OR, ON SPECTATORS AND PLAYERS IN THE THEATRE OF HISTORY

After this breathless run-through of caricatured history, another caveat is in place to frame what follows: I agree that both postmodern and posthuman thought have done much indeed to undo the more troubled baggage of their dualist precursors, often figured as male, white, Western, and able-bodied. In more specifically ecological work, an equally emancipatory thrust has been toward a destabilization of big dualisms – human/nonhuman, subject/object – and away from reductive

60 Graeber 2007: 73–4, 60–1.

61 Boyle 2017: 6.

62 Graeber 2007: 325–6.

63 Boyle 2017: 19.

64 Fraser 2022; cited p. xv.

simplifications, let alone ‘essences,’ toward ‘complexity’ and ‘entanglement.’⁶⁵ Certainly, such a focus is aesthetically appropriate to the messy ecologies of theatre and performance, and certainly it helps us “imagin[e] other ways of living together,” in a more ecological world.⁶⁶

However, I am not so sure if it always helps us in getting there, fast enough, in a world where such potential is often thoroughly enclosed. Returning to my framing idioms, it might be argued that where modern or humanist economies risk the reduction of nature to mere scenery for human exploits, postmodern and posthuman ecologies sometimes run the converse risk of divesting human politics of agency and accountability. With due respect to this important range of work, such a mere possibility merits some critical attention. That is where this final section begins, proceeding then toward a more ‘humanistic’ framing of ecology, emancipation, and performance.

The critique I propose comes from recent work in political economy and social ecology, rather than arts research, and suggests that distributing ‘agency’ from society to its environments *now*, even theoretically, equals giving it away for real. If the attendant sense of responsibility – say, for the climate crisis – is externalized to the carbon cycle itself, so is politics too reduced to mere passive adaptation. In refusing human agency, as the Swedish critics Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg might argue, posthuman theory risks *defusing* political performativity altogether – and as Kate Soper paraphrases Marx, “the power of capitalist society” relies on systematically misrepresenting “the role of human agency in the processes that maintain it.”⁶⁷ On the one hand, repurposing Sartre, there is a sense in which capitalism is itself a posthumanism; distributed as its very performance is across vast networks of money, oil, and barbed wire, there is no bourgeois bogeyman to be blamed for its evils (even though the choosing, enterprising ‘individual’ ought to carry the structural responsibility).⁶⁸ The other way around, in theorizing this distribution of power and agency, necessary as it is, we risk only validating the neoliberal common sense that ‘there is no alternative,’ and becoming complicit in the decades-long effort at making people think they don’t count⁶⁹ – what might be dubbed the enclosure or dispossession of human imagination and social possibility, in the hip guise of postmodernism and posthumanism. The general thrust of this critique was well phrased by Ellen Meiksins Wood already:

What better escape, in theory, from a confrontation with capitalism, the most totalizing system the world has ever known, than a rejection of totalizing knowledge? What greater obstacle, in practice, to anything more than the most local and particularistic resistances to the global, totalizing power of capitalism than the de-centred and fragmented subject?⁷⁰

In other words, such ecologies often leave ‘the human’ as mere spectators to history, if this metaphorical usage is allowed – not in the sense of the imperial surveyor, but affirming Ridout’s analysis of bourgeois passivity as the only model of spectatorship ever available (knowing one’s responsibility but disabled from actually taking any).⁷¹ With ‘history’ as the linear progress of forces beyond social control, nonhuman nature is emancipated, in theory, but any more practical aspirations remain strictly enclosed. To be sure, this is an unfair, straw-figure travesty of *some* posthuman theorizing,

65 See e.g. Soper 2012: 368; Woynarski 2020: 7, 11.

66 Woynarski 2020: 22.

67 Malm 2018; Hornborg 2019: 193–207 (“defused” p. 200); Soper 1986: 104 (as she concludes, we would better beware, “lest by focusing on the philosophical ‘end of man’ we encourage a passivity that may hasten the actual demise of humanity,” 153).

68 Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre 1946, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*.

69 Cf. Graeber 2011: 382; the ‘no alternative’ slogan comes from Margaret Thatcher.

70 Wood 1995: 2; see also 2002: 191.

71 Ridout 2020.

but the point, rather, is how easy it is for the noblest emancipatory aims to be inverted without notice. One must beware the proven capacity of *carpe diem* capitalism to seize its opposition: to colonize critique and then sell the mere feeling of resistance. Hence, the ‘ecologies of emancipation’ that I suggest to complement the posthuman project will be thoroughly social, and place considerable faith in human agency and potential. Indeed, as Kate Soper argues, posthumanism too is “better seen as a re-imagining of what it means to be human,” and has “more in common with the Enlightenment project for self-realization” than its proponents usually admit.⁷² (What if not human exceptionalism is its claim to validly represent the nonhuman world too?)

For surely it is to the Enlightenment that we owe our modern, Western understanding of both emancipation and the kinds of injustice that make emancipation a worthy ideal. Earlier, I have already hinted at Wood’s rather rosy appraisal of the French Enlightenment – its “resistance to all arbitrary power, [its] commitment to universal human emancipation, and [its] critical stance toward all kinds of authority” – in comparison to English capitalism, whose tendencies toward rationalism, technocentrism, and standardization she argues have shaded the former project as well.⁷³ In conclusion, however, I wish to draw on David Graeber and David Wengrow’s ambitious *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), in which the Enlightenment figures precisely at the origin, not of social inequality, but of the question about such origins.⁷⁴ While the two default answers – by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes – have been seen to ground much of Left and Right politics (in the innocence or corruption of humanity), the authors point out that neither offers much in terms of emancipation. For Rousseau, equality is a paradise long lost to civilization, for Hobbes, forced civilization is the only redemption from the looming apocalypse of human violence.⁷⁵

The well-established part of Graeber and Wengrow’s argument is that, before its individualistic enclosure if you will, the ‘Age of Reason’ was an age of debate and dialogue, and that many of its key ideals for individual liberty and political equality originate from Europe’s seventeenth-century exposure to American Indigenous thought.⁷⁶ Rather than a “shadow-play projection” on an incomprehensible universe of “noble savages,” such encounters were widely reported by French philosophers, governors, and missionaries, and spawned a popular genre of literary dialogues critiquing European society “from the perspective of some imagined outsider” (e.g. the 1721 Parisian play, *L’Arlequin sauvage*, was constantly revived for two decades).⁷⁷ In the authors’ view, what “came to be known as the ‘Enlightenment’” was largely based on this “indigenous critique” of European society, especially its limitations on personal freedom and its coupling of money and power. A flood of “previously unimagined social, scientific and political ideas,” this came as “a shock to the system, revealing possibilities for human emancipation that, once disclosed, could hardly be ignored.”⁷⁸

The second and distinctive part of their argument is that theories of ‘social evolution’ – a “standard historical meta-narrative” arising by the eighteenth century and still broadly intact – began as a European backlash to the Indigenous critique, with the precise aim of neutralizing, containing,

72 Soper 2012: 374–5.

73 Wood 2002: 183, 191.

74 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 30.

75 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 11–13, 17, 68–9, 493.

76 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 37ff.

77 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 30–1, 58.

78 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 29, 31.

or enclosing its threat to established order.⁷⁹ Hence the noble savage of yore gave over to “the myth of the stupid savage”: once we assume that history progresses from simple societies like ‘theirs’ to complex ones like ‘ours’ (the natural maturation of capitalism that Wood critiqued earlier), any freedom or equality in Indigenous societies will signal their inferiority, not their superiority.⁸⁰ Moreover, the relative complexity of civilizations begins to connote not just greater social differentiation but also the necessity of hierarchies and dispossession: “that tiny elites take charge of key resources, and begin to trample everyone else underfoot.”⁸¹ While the latter formulation suggests an ingrained habit of thought that we might remember when naturalizing posthuman varieties of ‘complexity’ or ‘entanglement’ (as in entrapment?), from Graeber and Wengrow’s perspective the whole edifice led to “an odd insistence that for many tens of thousands of years, nothing happened.”⁸²

It is against this background, then, that the anthropologist and the archaeologist seek to “change the course of human history (at least, the part that’s already happened),”⁸³ by populating it not with savages but thinking, imaginative adults, who somehow managed not to get all entangled in the emerging complexity of their societies. Closer to the theatre than “the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory,” their sweeping history of human societies unfolds as “a carnival parade of political forms,” not in the modern sense of the festive exception, but in the sense that people would regularly change these forms, ensuring that “social differences remained largely theatrical.”⁸⁴ Whether they would engage in ‘play farming’ or even observe ‘play kings,’ I read these as *ecologies of emancipation*: as social arrangements that resist enclosure, even as they remain thoroughly entangled with their varying environments. This is also Graeber and Wengrow’s key argument: while “most of us [today] find it increasingly difficult even to picture what an alternative economic or social order would be like,” our distant ancestors seem “to have moved regularly back and forth between them.”⁸⁵ Or, as they frame their argument with regard to the Rousseau–Hobbes controversy:

Is human nature innocent or corrupt? Are we, as a species, inherently co-operative or competitive, kind or selfish, good or evil? Perhaps all these questions blind us to what really makes us human in the first place, which is our capacity – as moral and social beings – to negotiate between such alternatives.⁸⁶

So we return to the issue of humanism. Wrapping up, *The Dawn of Everything* makes two specific points that also shed new light on the very orienting themes of this essay. First is their framing question, shifting from the assumed ‘origins of inequality’ to how and why we “got stuck” with it: “If we started out just playing games” – be it at farming or sundry hierarchies – “at what point did we forget that we were playing?”⁸⁷ While Graeber and Wengrow’s outlook is openly anarchistic, the question is very apt for a moment in history that seems no less suspended between a ‘no longer’ and a ‘not yet’ than was the early modern break between the feudal world and a capitalist one.⁸⁸ In the third section, I caricatured the project of enclosures that began just then as a crucial aspect of ‘getting stuck,’ not to the simplifications of modernity or humanism as much as to the complexities of capitalism: the separation of the spectating individual from the common economy and her eventual

79 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 31–2, 441.

80 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 73, 60.

81 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 441–2; the quote is from Graeber and Wengrow 2018: 14.

82 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 87.

83 This is the title of Graeber and Wengrow 2018.

84 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 4, 461; on festivals, see 502.

85 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 502.

86 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 118, paragraph break omitted.

87 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 115.

88 Cf. Scott 2020: 176–7.

civilization into bourgeois passivity.

The other point is a definition of humanity, not from some pre-given essence, but as the movement of negotiation they argue has become so stuck or enclosed as well. If complexity equals violence, this allows for a newly future-oriented ‘essentialism’ that sounds refreshing after the long postmodern enclosure of any variety. In his more ‘pre-humanist’ provocations, Graeber would define humanity as something we only “aspire to achieve,” adding that an imaginary essence is all an ‘aspiration’ can have.⁸⁹ If the “institutional flexibility” that he and Wengrow highlight allows one to “step outside” any enclosure and reflect – “to both make and unmake the political worlds we live in”⁹⁰ – this, for sure, is often at issue with the commons of performance, too: preparing ecologies of emancipation, in case the economies of enclosure ever give in.

So what would an ecologically responsible performance practice look like, if it were conceived as humanistic in the emancipatory ways this essay has been only hinting at? While it is neither in my expertise nor in the nature of this piece to go into detailed examples, here, the hopeful presupposition is that such practices are common and abundant, and not extremely complex to comprehend, on an ideal level anyway. Not to enclose but to suggest the range of possibilities, in the terms introduced earlier, the potential of such performance encompasses both of the two key levels discussed:

1. Common economy: Rather than an enclosed commodity, such work would *ideally* be open for all to experience and participate in – common, perhaps a commons. A commonplace of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, in their attempts to undo the kinds of containment and separation outlined in the third section of this essay, this would not necessarily mean physical audience participation (as if agreed by contract, turning contingency into necessity) but rather, a more imaginative admission to the games being played, as opposed to such access being denied by price or obscurity.

To the extent that most participants will still rely on capitalist structures for their very participation and livelihood – in one sense, commercial ‘theatre’ names “the set of social relations that organizes performance into a capitalist commodity”⁹¹ – there is, however, more to these structures than market exchange and labour exploitation. Hence, even if they might not appear explicitly ecological let alone anti-capitalist, many pressing *themes* in contemporary performance are already addressing precisely such ‘ecologies’ as the capitalist ‘economy’ simultaneously depends on and disavows. Rather than being romantically lost to history, *gender*, *race*, *democracy*, and *nature* name the living, non-economic supports that it continuously attempts to enclose – or, in Nancy Frazer’s striking metaphor, to cannibalize – but which, also, always overflow their marketization and may all be celebrated for their emancipatory potential, once returned to the foreground of common contestation and experimentation.⁹²

2. Human ecology: In short, performance is one of the most embodied media through which the apparently posthuman workings of capital – ‘the economy’ as something beyond control and comprehension – can be brought back to the mundane ways that human communities function in their various environments – in this specific sense, performance is ‘ecological’ whether or

89 David Graeber on Twitter, 12 Dec 2012: begins, “I am bored of post-humanists.”

90 Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 111.

91 Boyle 2017: 11.

92 Frazer 2022. Beyond such easy catchwords, she argues that ‘the economy’ simply could not function without the ‘background conditions of possibility’ that it always seeks to enclose: that economic production depends on social reproduction; labour exploitation on racialized, imperial expropriation; ‘economy’ on polity, ‘humanity’ on ecology.

not it addresses ecological thematics. Rather than blame disaster on an abstract humanity or its anthropocentrism, performance can directly suggest both causes and cures in perceptibly social dynamics, albeit in so doing it may need to go against the grain of traditional theatre and drama: very similarly in-grained, capital too would much rather reduce its ill effects to the ‘choices’ of autonomous ‘individuals’ or their specifically ‘psychological’ relations. To borrow a reviewer’s helpful phrasing, performance is well disposed to modelling human (and more-than-human) agency as collective rather than individual, and articulating it by other principles than psychologizing concepts of choice or responsibility.

If anything, the ecologies of performance are thoroughly human – humanly made, curated, and reflected on – and in performance, if anywhere, everything is possible; property of none, its properties still lend themselves to common play and negotiation. Perhaps, as David Graeber once suggested, what keeps drawing “artistic avant gardes and social revolutionaries” together, against the ever-shifting violences of enclosure, is simply their shared commitment to “the ultimate, hidden truth of the world [- -] that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”⁹³

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⁹³ Graeber 2009: 514. Based on an anarchist view of state power and the more romantic lineage of the Left, Graeber would go as far as to identify violence and imagination as the driving ‘ontologies’ of Right and Left politics (e.g. 2009: 509–23). In any case, the pairing does suggest graphically conflicting views as to social reality and how it is performed.

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