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A philosophical situation: democratic capitalism, the ecological crisis, and the issue of choice

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Democracy is an open system, while capitalism is a gated one. Yet the dominant global political economy is democratic capitalism. The presence of a gated capitalist core within democracy results in the political prioritisation of capitalist business as usual, thereby resisting substantive changes to the political economy because economic growth is a prerequisite of capitalism. Responses to some of the challenges facing humankind – challenges such as the ecological crisis, which has arisen in part from unrestrained economic growth – cannot occur if economic growth dictates the democratic political agenda. Acknowledging this open-closed problem means acknowledging democratic capitalism's incapacity to deal with some of humanity's current challenges, such as the ecological crisis. A pressing question arises: what does one do? Arguably, if ecological decline is to be slowed or averted, choices must be made that result in ways of thinking and ways of living notably different from those systematised under democratic capitalism. The need for choices incommensurable with democratic capitalism is a sign that a philosophical situation has arisen, because, as explained by Alain Badiou, part of the role of philosophy

is to confront incommensurability. In positioning democratic capitalism (and its implications for ecology) against incommensurable alternatives, a full philosophical situation arises. Permaculture is an example of an arena offering such alternatives, and an outline of an implementation of permaculture principles is provided in order to illustrate what a potential remedial candidate entails.

Keywords: the ecological crisis; philosophy in the present; permaculture; economic growth; capitalism.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I collate views from several critical thinkers for the central claim that the political economy of democratic capitalism is problematised by the presence of a closed capitalist core of a presumably open democratic system. In the context of this paper, democratic capitalism denotes a political economy with economic growth being a central defining feature, the presence of which excludes the possibility of curbing economic growth. Capitalist economic growth is a restless dynamo (Kovel 2002: 39) – it is a form of growth based on the presumably endless expansion of human economic activity via the increase in the throughput of ‘natural resources’ extracted from nature¹. I will explore these and other focal areas in this paper, and it will be clear that when capitalism infiltrates democracy, an ecological disaster is bound to occur. This kind of disaster is already occurring; if there is any doubt about the reality of the “ecological crisis” (Kovel 2012), then Steffen et al. (2011) offer an eye-opening review of the history and details of the concept of the anthropocene that should eliminate such doubt. The anthropocene is the contemporary geological period in Earth’s history where human beings undeniably and problematically influence planetary systems to the extent that this influence is recorded in the geological record. Steffen et al. highlight numerous examples of human activity and its effects. The human population explosion and the accompanying mass extinction (occurring due to phenomena such as habitat loss in the wake of the expansion of the human species) is one example of many. The conclusion the researchers reach is unavoidable: “humankind, our

1 The questions of whether humankind is part of nature or ‘above’ nature (i.e. the issue of human/nature dualism), or of whether human actions (including destructive human actions) are ‘natural’, are avoided in this paper for a specific reason. This reason is that, under the dictates of capitalist democracy, humankind collectively is destroying the ecosystems on which many lifeforms depend for survival, which in turn destabilises the conditions necessary for the well-being of humankind. It is of paramount importance that this most pressing of ecological issues is addressed and resolved, regardless of how one answers the aforementioned questions.

own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system”².

I will argue that the problematic marriage of capitalism and democracy has resulted in a homogenisation of the globe, thereby systematising the ecologically problematic features of the political economy’s commitment to “grow or die” (McChesney 2013: 47). As a consequence of these problems, a need for choices that are not fully commensurable with the *modus operandi* of democratic capitalism arises. Based on some of Badiou’s observations about philosophical situations, I contend that the need for such choices is a sign that democratic capitalism is one ‘part’ of a philosophical situation. Badiou states that the role of philosophy is in part to “elucidate choice” (Badiou 2009: 5), and that a philosophical situation is one in which incommensurability is brought to light (2009: 11). Accordingly, I charge philosophers with the task of responding to the ecological situation and its causes, by considering ‘choices’, or ways of thinking and ways of living, that are not commensurable within the ‘logic’ of homogenised (and homogenising) democratic capitalism. These kinds of incommensurable ‘alternatives’ provide the other parts of a philosophical situation as described by Badiou. In positioning democratic capitalism (and its implications for ecology) against incommensurable alternatives, one is faced with both parts of a philosophical situation.

This philosophical situation, in which the ecological crisis and its causes are crucial components, stands out from other philosophical situations in importance because of the urgency to respond proactively to problems that affect the entire planetary system, and because “the biophysical underpinnings of human life are in jeopardy” (Princen 2005: 8). Philosophers therefore may play a particularly important role in helping resolve “the greatest challenge in all human history” (Kovel 2012) by conceptualising ways of thinking and ways of living that are incommensurable with the reigning logic of democratic capitalism. I employ conceptual aspects of Badiou’s description of philosophical situations to motivate philosophers to participate in this most important process of seeking alternatives.

Perhaps frustratingly for philosophers, the role of philosophy as described by Badiou does not prescribe what to choose – its role is in part to “elucidate choice” (Badiou 2009: 5), but not to dictate what to choose. This is not a limitation of philosophy, but instead presents to philosophers the opportunity to consider ‘choices’ or ‘alternatives’ that fall outside the limited scope of democratic capitalism. Accordingly, I will conclude by offering an example of an arena that gives rise to different ways of thinking and ways of living. This is

2 For a shorter summary of examples of human activity influencing the entire planetary system, see the article by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) called The “Anthropocene”.

the arena of permaculture, a design system guiding human action based not on the imperatives of a political economy addicted to endless growth, but on the imperatives accompanying a commitment to ecological sustainability.

From the outset, I wish to make clear what I am not arguing: I am not arguing that democracy and capitalism are inherently 'bad', undesirable, or in need of excision from the human socio-political and economic arenas. I am also not setting out to trace the historical development of the relationship between democracy and capitalism. I do argue that, due to the open-closed problem at the core of democratic capitalism, solutions to issues caused by the capitalist addiction to economic growth must be sought outside of the so-called democratic political sphere indistinguishable from capitalist business as usual. Democratic capitalism can be seen as one 'part' of a philosophical situation, as defined by Badiou; the other parts remain mostly hidden, and philosophers may be able to participate in the exploration (if, at least, conceptually) of other parts. It is to this end that permaculture is offered as an exemplary part of a philosophical situation.

2. Features of capitalism under scrutiny

Joel Kovel (2002: 39) reminds readers of his explicitly-titled book, *The Enemy of Nature: the End of Capitalism or the End of the World?*, of an inherent defining feature of capitalism, that capitalist production is for profit:

Those who do not know yet that capitalist production is for profit and not use can learn it right away from watching Wall Street discipline corporations that fail to measure up to standards of profitability. Capitalists celebrate the restless dynamism that these standards enforce, with its drive for innovation, efficiency and new markets.

Kovel continues his exposé by immediately outlining the difference between 'exchange-value' and 'use-value'. Exchange-value is of central importance in capitalism because exchange-value is the area in which capital (profit) is accumulated. Describing the difference between exchange-value and use-value, he points out (2002: 39) that "capital represents that regime in which exchange-value predominates over use-value in the production of commodities – and the problem with capital is that, once installed, this process becomes self-perpetuating and expanding."

Foster, Clark and York (2010: 40) agree on this point: "It is exchange value, which knows only quantitative increase – not use value, which relates to the qualitative aspects of production – which drives the system." In capitalism, the focus on exchange value is elevated to soaring heights by the exclusive

focus on 'quantifiable profit'. Foster (in Baer 2012: 300) puts it bluntly: private "corporations are institutions with one and only one purpose: the pursuit of profit". A private corporation is the epitome of a capitalist enterprise, and it is telling that most countries (according to the Ubuntu Party of South Africa in a website entry titled 'More Evidence of Countries Registered as Corporations', 2013) are listed as corporations on the stock exchange of the USA. Kovel (2002: 48) discusses this 'pursuit of profit' with reference to the benchmark of progress in industrial neoliberal 'free-market' democratic capitalist society – namely GDP. Capital, he says,

employs purely quantitative indices such as gross domestic product (GDP) because they are convenient indices of accumulation. Scarcely a critic of the ecological crisis has refrained from commenting upon the stupid brutality of this number, which reduces the living and the dead alike to the common denominator of what can be extracted from their commodification. It is necessary, though, to see thinking in terms of GDP as no mere error, *but the actual logic of the reigning power ...* (emphasis added).

Already, from the lattermost observation, an ecological consequence of the focus on GDP (and concomitantly, endless economic growth) is apparent, and this consequence will be brought into greater focus later in this article. To give a clearer picture of capitalism's prioritisation of such indices, consider the following from the online Library of Economics and Liberty. The focus is on the USA, the country heralded as the epitome of free-market capitalism, a system that has had global reach for generations. The self-effacing tone of the comment is clear: "Gross domestic product [GDP], the official measure of total output of goods and services in the U.S. economy, represents the capstone and grand summary of the world's best system of economic statistics." The prioritisation of GDP throughout the world has occurred via globalisation – countries are often listed and categorised according to their GDP statuses. A country might be more or less democratic depending on whichever criteria one uses to ascertain the level of democracy in a country; however, all countries, in being part of a global economy, participate in economic activity, which is measured in GDP. So all countries might not be democratic in the same way that the USA is, but all governments, democratic or otherwise, participate in the global economy, thereby creating a system-driven imperative to prioritise GDP. This is a capitalist commitment, and, as I will argue, it has been embedded at the core of the democratic political system.

3. Capitalism's presence in democracy

In a 2010 Newstatesman.com interview, Noam Chomsky once responded to the question, "Do you vote?" with a telling observation. Chomsky acknowledged that he often does vote, adding that he does so despondently because in the USA "there is basically one party – the business party". Chomsky's observation draws attention to the homogeneity of a supposedly heterogeneous democratic political sphere. His comment is explicitly aimed at politics in the USA, but as McChesney points out in the introduction to Chomsky's book, *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (1999: 10), the USA is "the spawning ground of liberal democracy", which is to say the USA's model of democracy is applicable when discussing democracy in general considering the extent to which the model has via globalisation been implemented in most countries. Speth agrees (2008: 31), emphasising the economic aspect of the model in question: "With increasingly few exceptions, modern capitalism ... is the operating system of the world economy." Speth (*ibid*) is very specific about the type of operating system he is denoting; it is clearly not exclusive to the USA, and it clearly does involve 'government', or what Speth refers to as the administrative state:

I use "modern capitalism" here in a broad sense as an actual, existing system of political economy, not as an idealized model. Capitalism as we know it today encompasses the core economic concept of private employers hiring workers to produce products and services that the employers own and then sell with the intention of making a profit. But it also includes competitive markets, the price mechanism, the modern corporation as its principal institution, the consumer society and the materialistic values that sustain it, and the administrative state actively promoting economic strength and growth for a variety of reasons.

The administrative state referred to by Speth is synonymous with the term 'government', and the main point I am emphasising from Speth's observations is that when capitalism is the economic base of a country, the administrative state must promote economic strength and growth by way of policy or other means. Chomsky and Speth draw attention to this kind of policy, namely business policy, in the political/governmental/administrative sphere, thereby revealing the USA's explicit capitalist attitudes and ideology at a political level. But McChesney makes it clear (1999: 9) that neoliberal capitalism is "the defining political economic paradigm of our time", which is certainly true if one considers that extensive capitalist activities occur in all countries, albeit to varying degrees.

With a focus on the USA, Steger (2009: 121), quoting Nadar, points out that there is a serious problem for democracy when capitalism is part of the socio-political and economic dispensation: a “‘massive avalanche of corporate money’ has buried the democratic system of the United States”. Keeping in mind the aforementioned point that the United States’ democracy is representative of the globalised neoliberal capitalist political sphere, it is useful to consider more information from Nadar (ibid):

Government has been hijacked to a degree beyond anything we have seen in the last 70 years. It’s been hijacked by corporate power, the multinationals mostly. They have their own people in government. They run [for elections] their own people, they appoint their own people, they get corporate lawyers to become judges. And when that happens you no longer have a countervailing force called government arrayed against excesses of what Jefferson called ‘the moneyed interest’. Instead, you have this convergence ... of business controlling government and turning it against its own people.

The state may have at several stages in the history of democracy included some regulatory functions, but since the ‘free-market’ economic neoliberal regimes, deregulation has been a priority for democratic capitalist government. This can be seen in video footage, recorded in 1987 during Reagan’s presidency, when then Vice-president George HW Bush visited a Monsanto laboratory (the youtube.com video is called ‘Bush tours Monsanto’³). The company was trying to circumvent what company people called “bureaucratic hurdles”, a reference to regulatory processes. Bush clearly states the following: “We’re in the dereg [deregulation] business. Call me.” This is an excellent testament to the relevance of an observation made by Speth (2008: 218): government has been “captured by the very corporations and concentration of wealth it should be seeking to regulate and revamp”. Speth explicitly problematises various aspects of democratic capitalism, sharing Chomsky’s lack of enthusiasm for the effectiveness of voting for a party that is invariably a business party that must prioritise GDP. This kind of capitalist business activity, as already demonstrated, is a trait shared by any country participating in a capitalist economy, and it is impossible to find examples of countries not participating in such activity.

A conceptual foundation has so far been laid to support a central part of the argument in this paper. Peter Barnes, quoted by Speth (2008: 218) puts it succinctly:

3 www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7Dw_aSbkDg, accessed 17 October 2018.

Democracy is an open system, and economic power can easily infect it. By contrast, capitalism is a gated system, its bastions aren't easily accessed by the masses; capitalism's primacy thus isn't an accident, nor the fault of George W. Bush. It's what happens when capitalism inhabits democracy.

Barnes's explanation goes some way in justifying Speth's following damning remarks about the state of democracy based on his research and observations thereof. He calls it "weak, shallow, dangerous and corrupted" (ibid), stating that it is "the best democracy money can buy", and that the "ascendency of market fundamentalism and antiregulation, antigovernment ideology makes the current moment particularly frightening". Barnes (in Speth 2008: 219) points out that the notion of the state promoting "'the common good' is sadly naive. [...] We face a disheartening quandary here. Profit-maximizing corporations dominate our economy. [...] The only obvious counter-weight is government, yet government is dominated by these same corporations."

This phenomenon, where the corporate sector powerfully exerts influence on the political sector, is a characteristic of market globalism – and as the name suggests, market globalism is global. Steger (2009: 7) identifies market globalism as the dominant political economy of contemporary times, a political economy that maintains hegemony by swaying public discussion towards the agenda of market globalism and excluding topics that are incompatible with its capitalist agenda. In other words, the market-driven political economy clearly prevents social change in the interests of 'the people' (which is often called for by 'the people' when they exercise their political contribution in the form of a democratic vote), whether market globalists know it or not. A 2017 Oxfam report contains a simplified illustration of how this phenomenon can occur:

[T]he rich [construct] 'reinforcing feedback loops' in which the winners of the game get yet more resources to win even bigger next time. For example, they use their wealth to back political candidates, to finance lobbying and – more indirectly – to bankroll think tanks and universities to shift political and economic narratives towards the false assumptions that favour the rich.

4. Capitalism is not synonymous with democracy

Changing focus now to a frequently encountered pro-market, pro-capitalist claim made by market globalists: 'globalisation furthers the spread of democracy in the world' – this is a claim that needs to be addressed. Steger (2009: 84) points out that this "market-globalist claim is anchored in the neoliberal assertion that

freedom, free-markets, free trade, and democracy are synonymous terms". This is an interesting point to consider in hindsight of something that JS Mill makes clear in *On Liberty* about the dangers of democracy. Mill notes that liberty (synonymous with freedom for the purposes of this paper) was originally conceived of as being in opposition to the power assumed by political entities. He says that in "old times" liberty meant "protection against the tyranny of the political rulers" (2002: 3). Clearly, then, liberty and freedom are not necessarily synonymous with the ideology of democratically elected political rulers, and in fact any consideration of the concepts of liberty and freedom (which are pivotal concepts in a democratic political system) needs to address the limitation of the power and extent of the state. In other words, liberty partly entails freedom from the power of the state. This is clearly not the case in democratic capitalism, where freedom is the freedom to develop as per the capitalist imperatives of the state. As Inge Konik (2015: 15-16), with a reference to Wolfgang Sachs, points out:

Truman promoted ever increasing production and technological advancement as key to the well-being of all nations, regardless of their economic, political, social and cultural differences, nuances, and dreams. Sachs holds that this was the first time that a "world view" was prescribed in which "all the peoples of the earth were to move along the same track and aspire to only one goal – development."

There are supporters of the notion that democracy and economic development go hand-in-hand. Francis Fukuyama (in Steger 2009: 85), for example, links economic development with democratic development, and he claims that the rise of an economic middle class is what fosters democracy. Steger's response (ibid) is that such a definition is a "'thin' definition of democracy" in use in the neoliberal 'free-market' capitalist, globalised world, a definition that "emphasises formal procedures such as voting at the expense of the direct participation of broad majorities in political and economic decision making". Steger points out the perhaps difficult-to-accept function of formal democratic voting procedures, specifically that these procedures legitimate a status quo in which elites rule. This legitimisation process, occurring in the form of elections, makes it more difficult to challenge the policies of a government because, in the context of a 'thin' democracy, citizens believe that a government has been 'freely' and fairly elected, regardless of how inept the elected entity proves to be at protecting the liberty of individuals from (for example) the consequences of a state "hijacked" (Nadar, in Steger 2009: 121) by capitalist imperatives. This explains why, in a previously encountered sentiment from Speth (2008: 218), neoliberal 'free-market' government was described as being "hobbled by an array of dysfunctional institutional arrangements, *beginning with the way presidents are elected*" (emphasis added).

The observations of several thinkers provided so far in this article have provided some strong grounds for scepticism about democracy. This concern is implicit in the already-encountered sentiments from Chomsky, where he comments that there is really only one party in the USA, the business party. McChesney (in Chomsky 1999: 11) puts it bluntly: "Democracy is permissible as long as the control of business is off-limits to popular deliberation or change, i.e. so long as it isn't democracy." Such ineffectiveness of the vote, and concomitantly of the 'thin democracy' pervading the global political sphere, is one of the reasons identified by McChesney (ibid) for neoliberalism being "the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory democracy, not just in the United States but across the planet".

5. Profit over people and the environment

Another reason identified by McChesney (in Chomsky 1999: 10) for neoliberal democracy being the enemy of participatory democracy has to do with the pernicious social (and as will be seen, ecological) impact of the former 'thin' version of democracy. He explains that for democracy to be effective, people need to feel connected to each other, and that these connections arise and are maintained through

a variety of nonmarket organisations and institution groups, libraries, public schools, neighbourhood organisations, cooperatives, public meeting places, voluntary associations, and trade unions to provide ways for citizens to meet, communicate, and interact with their fellow citizens. Neoliberal democracy, with its notion of the market *über alles*, takes dead aim at this sector. Instead of citizens, it produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomised society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralised and socially powerless.

It is clear from the above explanation from McChesney that he views people as socially malleable: put them in an environment suited to participation between people, and such interaction is likely to occur. On the other hand, the neoliberal capitalist environment is one where the capitalist 'free-market' motive of profit-making turns physical environments into ones where individuals are forced to perpetuate corporate profit-making, i.e. people are turned into consumers.

'Good' consumers are ones whose attitudes have been shaped by the capitalist assumption that economic growth is good, that freedom is the freedom to consume and 'develop' in tune with a growing GDP, that political 'participation' is the marking of a piece of paper in an election in order to elect leaders who

will ensure that the economy keeps growing, and so on – these are aspects of what Steger (2009: 7) refers to as the “hegemonic system” of market globalism. Scrutiny of capitalist assumptions in a democracy, specifically the assumption that endless growth is desirable or inherently good or logical, and that the role of politics is to ensure the growth of the economy, therefore goes a considerable distance in answering the question, ‘what perpetuates the attitudinal factors causing the ecological crisis?’. In a nutshell, part of the answer is the presence of a ‘gated’ capitalistic growth-demanding core in a shallow ‘democratic’ arena.

McChesney (1999: 10) has drawn clear attention to the social consequences of the prioritisation of the market in a neoliberal democracy, but the ecological implications should be clear: consumers and shopping malls are symbols of the kinds of activities associated with capitalist growth, which requires a constant increase in the processing of nature’s ‘resources’ to increase GDP, which comes with obvious deleterious effects on the health of ecologies. The democratic capitalist political agenda where priority is given to the growth of GDP is not the same as the political agenda that would prioritise people meeting their physical, emotional, educational, and aspirational needs, phenomena that have nothing necessarily to do with growing GDP. The political prioritisation of GDP growth is capitalism’s doing: GDP growth is an economic measure of profit.

The issue McChesney has highlighted (in Chomsky 1999: 10) of the market reigning can be restated as the issue of ‘profit over people’, a concept that can be broadened to include ‘profit over the environment’. As already seen, the idea of ‘profit over people’ is the title of Chomsky’s 1999 book. In it, he writes (1999: 132) that

the most effective way to restrict democracy is to transfer decision making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions: kings and princes, priestly castes, military juntas, party dictatorships, or modern corporations. The decisions made by GE affect the general society substantially, but citizens play no role in them, as a matter of principle.

It is fitting that Chomsky uses as an example GE (General Electric), one of the world’s most influential and powerful players in the fossil-fuel industry, an industry notorious for systematising massive ecological damage. GE is one of a large number of corporations with more economic power, and therefore political power too, considering what has been revealed so far about the problematic union of the economic and political arenas, than most countries in the world. This phenomenon, where corporations become more economically powerful than individual countries, is confirmed in a 2017 Oxfam report, where it is pointed out that “[b]ig businesses did well in 2015/16: profits are high and the world’s 10 biggest corporations together have revenue greater than that of the government

revenue of 180 countries combined”. Nadar (in Steger 2009: 120) concurs, and adds emphasis on the consequence that is a “widening ‘democracy gap’ between ordinary people and their political institutions”. Here is Nadar’s explanation of how the widening of the “democracy gap” occurs:

The global corporatists preach a model of economic growth that rests on the flows of trade and finance between nations dominated by the giant multinationals – drugs, tobacco, oil, banking, and other services. The global corporate model is premised on the concentration of power over markets, governments, mass media, patent monopolies over critical drugs and seeds, the workplace and corporate culture. All these and other power concentrates, homogenize the globe and undermine democratic processes and their benefits.

6. Homogenisation of the globe

‘Homogenisation of the globe’ (ibid) is a useful term when considering not only the social and political impact of the domination of the ‘free-market’ neoliberal capitalist economic system, but also its ecological impact. Democracy in its idealised form is undermined, as has been shown in this article already, but so is the ecology of the planet due to the restless dynamism of capitalism that demands of the societies it infiltrates the processing of ever-increasing amounts of ‘resources’ or services for economic growth. Steffen et al. (2011) explicitly identify what they refer to as the “growth imperative” as “a core societal value that drove both the socio-economic and the political spheres” towards a “great acceleration” of the factors that have caused the ecological crisis. So when Chomsky (1999: 132) says that the “‘corporatization of America’ during the past century has been an attack on democracy”, one can legitimately add that it has been an attack on the ecologies of the planet as well. This is an attack on the ecosystems of the planet, the preservation of which is in the interests of ‘the people’ considering the all too obvious, yet often overlooked, fact that people need these ecosystems to remain intact, healthy and diverse if human life is to be sustained. Acknowledging again that the democratic system of the USA is a symbol for the thin version of democracy that has swept the planet, what is said about the USA is relevant the world over to varying degrees depending on the level of shallow democracy occurring, and wherever capitalist activity is taking place. Chomsky (ibid) continues with relevant information regarding the issue of what prevents social change in the interests of ‘the people’, and (I will add) in the interests of the ecologies that constitute life on the planet as well: the “so-called ‘free-trade agreements’ are one such device of undermining democracy. They are designed to transfer decision making about people’s lives and aspirations into the

hands of private tyrannies that operate in secret and without public supervision and control”.

A political system, in which ‘secret operations’ affect the lives of millions, is not openly democratic – instead, it is operating in a ‘gated’ manner – and this is exactly the character of democratic capitalism as described by Barnes via the open-closed distinction. Within the gates – within what I have referred to as the core of the democratic capitalist system – lies the capitalist commitment to grow the economy, which in turn entails increasing the throughput of natural resources for profit. In a quote from Kovel (2002: 48) featured earlier in this paper, the link between economic growth (measured in GDP) and deleterious ecological impact is clearly made: “Scarcely a critic of the ecological crisis has refrained from commenting upon the stupid brutality of this number [i.e. GDP], which reduces the living and the dead alike to the common denominator of what can be extracted from their commodification.” But reducing the living and dead in such a manner must occur if an industrial-technological capitalist economy is to survive. This is why Kovel (*ibid*) refers to ‘GDP thinking’ as “the actual logic of the reigning power”. This kind of economy (an anti-economy really, considering that ‘to economise’ implies thrift) survives at the expense of what is considered in GDP thinking to be a ‘standing reserve’ (Heidegger 1977) of natural resources. However, natural resources partly constitute the ecologies of the planet on which the political economy depends for its survival, so its *modus operandi* ironically jeopardises its own long-term survival (Princen 2010: 32).

One could reasonably expect that, if my emphasis on the open-closed problem of democratic capitalism has any merit, then as democracy (an open system) spreads, so does capitalism (a closed system), and vice versa, and alongside their spread and growth there is an increase in the rate of ecological destruction as citizens are transformed into consumers, and as natural resources are processed according to the capitalist imperative to grow the economy. This is indeed observable: the spread of democratic capitalism has been accompanied by the accelerated decline of natural ecologies (Clapp and Dauvergne 2005).

7. The pressing matter of choice

Based on the issues explored and themes developed so far in this article, it should be clear that the belief that solutions to issues such as the large-scale destruction of natural ecologies are to be arrived at from within the ‘logic’ of democratic capitalism is naïve. A thin, shallow democracy is unable to achieve fundamental system changes when a deep-seated, closed capitalist kernel gives impetus to continue increasing economic growth. This would explain why, after a long history of inter-governmental meetings convened to form a response to

an issue like climate change, few (if any) actionable constraints on one of the primary causes of climate change, namely economic growth, are discernible in reality. Perhaps there is something of an explanation to be seen in an observation Robert Chambers makes (in Princen 2010: 55) about 'lack of political will'. In the following, Chambers equates politicians (the representatives of democratic capitalism) with 'the rich and powerful' (the capitalist elite): "lack of political will means that the rich and powerful have failed to act against their own interests".

It could be suggested that a different form of democracy would be needed for a more sustainable dispensation to be actualised – and here one can consider the 'direct democratic' process put into practice during the height of the Occupy Movement. Also referred to as the 'participatory democratic' process, it requires that 90% or more of participants support a proposal before it can be ratified (Buchanan 2015: 193). The attempt by 'Occupiers' to experiment with an alternative form of democracy was born partly from an awareness of what Kovel (2012) refers to as "economic and political injustice: Vicious indebtedness, precarious employment or unemployment, a nightmarish rise in inequality of wealth. In short, the workings of a system that is corrupt, manifestly broken and, it seems, in terminal crisis." Kovel states clearly that the system to which he is referring is "capitalism" (ibid). Crucial for my argument in this paper is the link that Kovel makes between capitalism and the ecological crisis. He identifies the aforementioned economic and political injustices as "the lesser side" of the problem, and comments on the "brutal fact" of the matter:

The brutal fact of the other side is that our planetary ecology is breaking down: Climate change, species loss, widening circles of pollution are some of its marks. All this, and more, testifies to an ecological crisis of unprecedented proportion that threatens the future of civilization, and even the extinction of our species along with many others. It is the greatest challenge in all human history.

Having been a part-time member of the London chapter of the Occupy Movement in 2011-12, I was involved in the direct democratic process – arguably an attempt to engage in a transition from a shallow democracy to something deeper. At no point was the process unimpeded by the presence of the 'henchmen' of democratic capitalism: police continuously played a 'cat-and-mouse game' with us, disturbing meetings by arriving with ever new-and-urgent conditions and often with portable barriers which were placed around us in an attempt to minimise activists' discussions. This is illustrative of the manner in which change is prevented in a democratic capitalist dispensation, and it also raises a problem regarding the effectiveness of large-scale dissent. Large-scale dissent is conspicuous, thus making it easy for the henchmen (for example, the police) of

democratic capitalism to identify 'threats' and prevent the kinds of activities that would undermine the reigning power of the growth-based economic system.

Whether a different form of democracy, such as the one experimented with by Occupiers, would be one that curbs growth-based economic activity in a manner that responds effectively to issues like the destruction of natural ecologies is up for debate. What is perhaps less debatable (based on the links already established in this paper) is that the closed capitalist core of a supposedly open democracy has given rise to a dispensation, often referred to as 'business as usual' (for example, by Foster, Clark and York 2010: 155), in which ecologically destructive processes and practices have resulted in an unprecedented ecological crisis. Foster, Clark and York (*ibid*) refer to catastrophic climate change as one of the consequences of continued democratic capitalist business as usual, which may entice one to raise the 'climate change debate' and question the extent to which human activity has an impact on climate. However, as Jared Diamond demonstrates (2005), climate change is only one of a dozen or more ecological indicators that all point to an interconnected ecological platform in a concerning state of decline, with human activities being the direct causes of the decline. Examples of these ecological indicators are loss of natural habitats, loss of biodiversity, loss of topsoils, and loss of fresh water supplies. Diamond's conclusion (2005: 498) is telling:

Thus, because we are rapidly advancing along this non-sustainable course, the world's environmental problems will get resolved, in one way or another, within the lifetimes of the children and young adults alive today. The only question is whether they will become resolved in pleasant ways of our own choice, or in unpleasant ways not of our choice, such as warfare, genocide, starvation, disease epidemics, and collapses of societies.

I have provided a conceptual framework in this article to explain some aspects of the advancement along the "non-sustainable course" referred to by Diamond. This conceptual framework is built around the concept of the closed capitalist nexus at the heart of an open democratic political realm. The framework problematises Diamond's remarks about 'us' having a choice, because, "the problem with capital is that, once installed, this process becomes self-perpetuating and expanding (Kovel 2002: 39). The Occupy Movement was possibly the largest grouping together of people to voice a shared desire to choose something more "pleasant" (Diamond 2005: 498) than that which is systemically perpetuated by democratic capitalism, but 'Occupy' did not achieve a tangible outcome or alternative. The conceptual framework offered in this paper shows that this is not a failing of the Occupy Movement, but rather the expected outcome of a homogenising political economy that usurps all that threatens its perpetuation.

The question of what to do, or of what to choose, in light of the various issues arising from the union between capitalism and democracy, is therefore an extremely difficult topic to address. Regardless of the good intentions that one may have, the choice to be involved in political matters for the purpose of achieving an ecologically sustainable socio-political and economic dispensation should, in consequence of the framework presented in this paper so far, be problematised. So should the choice to participate in the formal voting procedure that has done little but transfer capitalist agendas from one political party to another. A precedent has been set by the Occupy Movement to support the view that such large-scale, conspicuous endeavours do not result in tangible system outcomes or system changes. Smaller-scale, community focused endeavours might break free from the democratic capitalist commitment to grow GDP, as might actions that an individual may take to diminish consumption habits, but these routes are almost entirely ineffectual at responding to the urgent need for system-wide changes in light of the ecological crisis and its causes.

The question of what to do in the context of the ecological crisis, a crisis propelled by an unstoppable political economy addicted to economic growth, presents individuals and groups of people with a real dilemma of choice: substantial alternative choices, ones that are incommensurable with the logic of the reigning economic and political powers, must be made if the ecological crisis and its causes are to be addressed, yet the democratic capitalist system renders such choices futile.

8. Signs of a philosophical situation

The dilemma of choice and the question of what to do in response to the issues focused on in this paper are indications that a real philosophical situation is at play. In order to see why this is the case, one can turn to Alain Badiou's three illustrations of philosophical situations offered in *Philosophy in the Present* (Badiou and Žižek 2009). I will outline the three situations, and summarise Badiou's commentary on them, beginning first with his focus on Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*.

Badiou (2009: 3) points out that in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* "the thought of Socrates and the thought of Callicles share no common measure, they are totally foreign to one another". This is because in the dialogue, Socrates advocates justice (in the philosophical sense) as the basis for happiness, while Callicles advocates personal tyranny (via might, cunningness, and violence) as the basis for happiness. Elaborating on these two extremes, Badiou (2009: 4) comments that between these two mutually exclusive positions – "justice as violence" versus "justice as thought" – "there is no simple opposition, of the kind that could be dealt with by means of arguments covered by a common norm". In light of this

example, Badiou (2009: 5) explains further that the “sole task of philosophy is to show that we must choose”. He continues:

In this example, philosophy confronts thinking as a choice, thinking as a decision. Its proper task is to elucidate choice. So that we can say the following: a philosophical situation consists in the moment when a choice is elucidated.

Badiou’s second illustration of a philosophical situation (2009: 6) highlights the circumstances of the death of the mathematician Archimedes. A Roman soldier (under orders from General Marcellus to escort the mathematician to the General) strikes Archimedes down for refusing to be distracted from a mathematical calculation he is conducting. The actions of the soldier show that he is of the view that one must obey authority and follow orders without question or delay, and when Archimedes first ignores the soldier, and then says, “Let me finish my demonstration”, the soldier kills Archimedes. Keeping in mind that General Marcellus and his orders, as well as the soldier conveying the message, can be said to represent ‘the State’, while Archimedes can be said to represent ‘creative thought’, Badiou (2009: 9) comments on this situation as follows: it shows that “between the right of the state and creative thought, especially the pure ontological thought embodied in mathematics, there is no common measure, no real discussion”. Furthermore, Badiou (2009: 8) states that “between power and truths there is a distance: the distance between Marcellus and Archimedes. A distance which the courier [i.e. the soldier] ... does not manage to cross. Philosophy’s mission here is to shed light on this distance.”

The third example is the Japanese film, *The Crucified Lovers*, a film primarily about two lovers – a man and a woman – fleeing persecution due to the ‘adulterous’ woman being married and adultery being illegal and punishable by death in the context of the film. The lovers get caught by the authorities, and at the end of the film they are depicted as being led to their execution. Badiou’s interest here is this final scene – the philosophical situation as he identifies it – where the lovers, tied back-to-back on a mule, “seem enraptured, but devoid of pathos: on their faces is simply the hint of a smile, a kind of withdrawal into the smile” (Badiou 2009: 10). Badiou (2009: 11) concentrates on the look on the lovers’ faces – the ‘smile’, a word Badiou admits he uses for lack of a better one – and comments that in the ‘smile’

we once again encounter something incommensurable, a relation without a relation. Between the event of love (the turning upside down of existence) and the ordinary rules of life (the laws of the city, the laws of marriage) there is no common measure. What will philosophy tell us then? It will tell us that ‘we

must think the event'. We must think the exception. We must know what we have to say about what is not ordinary. We must think the transformation of life.

The following from Badiou (2009: 23) is a succinct summary of the philosophical aspects of his three philosophical situations, and it demarcates what he calls genuine philosophical commitment:

Genuine philosophical commitment – the kind which is immersed in the incommensurable and summons the choice of thought, staging the exceptions, creating distances and, especially, distancing from forms of power – is often a strange commitment.

In applying these aspects of philosophical situations to the outline of democratic capitalism and its implications for ecology, the following will be argued. A mutual exclusivity exists between, on the one hand, the prioritisation of economic growth in democratic capitalism, and on the other hand, the awareness that endless capitalist economic growth is the restless dynamo propelling the human activity that causes ecological degradation. Attempts at creating sustainable solutions to ecological problems have invariably been fully commensurable within the reigning logic of the democratic capitalist system. For example, the 'greening' of businesses is ultimately so that businesses can continue to grow profits. Just as there is no common norm in the logic used by Socrates and Callicles respectively, there is no common norm that can be shared between the democratic capitalist imperatives to develop and to grow GDP and the ecological awareness that such growth is a major cause of the ecological crisis. Accordingly, the need to choose to pursue action that is not dominated by the logic of democratic capitalism arises – i.e. choice is elucidated.

I have already pointed out that the possibility and impact of substantially 'alternative' choices are problematised in the context of the democratic capitalist political economy in which the dynamo of capital perpetually homogenises the discursive playing fields (or, better put, the discursive battlegrounds). It is telling, and also to be expected considering the homogenisation process just referred to, that in the cases of Archimedes and the crucified lovers, their choices are ones that result in their deaths. There seems to be no opportunity for Archimedes to flee from the young soldier representing the state, or for the lovers to escape from the representatives of the state, and perhaps it is nearly impossible to escape the hold of democratic capitalism.

If there is "a distance between power and truth" in the democratic capitalist dispensation, where power rests with the state, then there is truth to be seen in the various phenomena constituting the ecological crisis. If the "sole task

of philosophy is to show that we must choose”, then the ecological crisis presents humanity with one ‘part’ of an extremely urgent philosophical situation considering that something different to ecologically deleterious democratic capitalism must be chosen if widespread collapse of the ecologies that support human and non-human life is to be addressed in a substantive manner. If ‘we’ must “think the transformation of life”, and a transformation of humanity’s dominant political economy is required in order to address the ecological crisis, then all human beings are indeed squarely facing part of a philosophical situation of staggering proportions.

Philosophers should be interested in this specific philosophical situation because of the important role they may play in examining it, and in responding to it via the exploration (conceptually and, perhaps, practically as well) of eligible remedial focal areas that are incommensurable with democratic capitalist business as usual. In this light, Badiou’s outline of the role of philosophy can be employed to motivate philosophers to rise to the challenge of seeking such incommensurable ‘candidates’. It is with this challenge in mind that I turn to the topic of permaculture.

9. Beyond philosophical commitment: the example of permaculture

Badiou (2009: 24) says the following about philosophy: genuine philosophical commitment creates a foreignness.

In a general sense, it is foreign. And when it is simply commonplace, when it does not possess this foreignness, when it is not immersed in this paradox [of incommensurability], then it is a political commitment, an ideological commitment, the commitment of a citizen, but it is not necessarily a philosophical commitment. Philosophical commitment is marked by its internal foreignness.

There is clearly an internal foreignness between the dominant logic of the reigning power that is democratic capitalism and the awareness of the need for transformation of this political economy, hence the emphasis on the philosophical nature of such incommensurability. However, at this critical point in the history of humankind, namely the anthropocene, which, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, is characterised in part by a mass extinction event being brought about by human activity, it seems appropriate that one does more than simply point out the philosophical situation presented by the ecological plight facing humankind. I will go further and step into the role of someone who does not wish to give up

and simply watch the degradation of ecologies accelerate as capitalist democracy continues to satisfy its addiction to growth. Not yet being willing to succumb to the fate of Archimedes and the crucified lovers, I will not be suggesting anything revolutionary in a sense that involves the ultimate sacrifice of a person's life, or, figuratively speaking, anything involving 'throwing oneself on the gears of the machine' that is democratic capitalism, which would unlikely do much in the way of slowing down the political economy's addiction to growth.

Instead, I will draw on my experience as a permaculture practitioner and suggest briefly that permaculture does offer possibilities for transformation at small scales. This is worth mentioning because one can otherwise be left lacking hope that anything can be done in response to the issues discussed in this article. Furthermore, permaculture can be seen as an example of a 'candidate' worthy of consideration for its qualities that are incommensurable with the reigning logic of the political economy that has been problematised in this paper. By bringing the example of permaculture into the discussion, a philosophical situation is properly presented because two incommensurable arenas can be considered against each other. This, in light of Badiou's take on the role of philosophy, is a philosophical process, one that might reveal characteristics that can be explored further in an attempt to respond to the ecological crisis and its causes.

The word 'permaculture' is a neologism associated with Bill Mollison (1979: ix), formed by parts of the words permanent and agriculture. The Permaculture Association of the United Kingdom (permaculture.org.uk) explains that permaculture "is about living lightly on the planet, and making sure that we can sustain human activities for many generations to come, in harmony with nature". The association immediately adds a comment to allay any scepticism about the link to the word 'permanent' created by the use of 'perma' in the word 'permaculture', seeing as one might rightly be suspicious of any claim to permanence: "Permanence is not about everything staying the same. It's about stability, about deepening soils and cleaner water, thriving communities in self-reliant regions, biodiverse agriculture and social justice, peace and abundance."

One of the main goals in permaculture is to design and maintain diverse ecosystems in which non-human life can thrive, while at the same time ensuring that these ecosystems produce some of the food, energy, and materials necessary for human beings to sustain themselves (Mollison 1979: ix). Permaculture practitioners are conscious of the need to design systems wherein non-human life is incorporated for its inherent value, while at the same time realising the advantages, and positive implications for sustainability, that diverse, stable, and resilient ecosystems have for human beings. Examples of advantages can be seen

in the following description of a designed home garden system in which different varieties of fruiting trees serve as food sources for human beings. A variety of fruit trees, as well as indigenous trees and plants, would provide food (i.e. fruit, nuts, and leaves) for human beings, but these trees and plants would also be incorporated for the various beneficial features they bring to the entire system. An example of a feature would be the characteristic of attracting pollinating insects to the system, which in turn attracts birds and wildlife that feed on the insects. The presence of several species of fruiting trees (instead of just one species) decreases the likelihood of an over-abundance of one particular insect that may be attracted by a 'mono-crop' of one particular food source. In the event that one species of insect does become too abundant, it will only have an impact on one species of fruiting tree, thus ensuring that the system does produce some food for human consumption in the event of some losses. There is no need for artificial pesticides in this example system, and compost is made on site from the carbon and nitrogen produced by the trees, people and animals inhabiting the site, thus eliminating the need for artificial fertilisers. The ground in this kind of system would be 'mulched' with carbon materials in order to minimise water evaporation, thereby reducing water usage. Mulched ground encourages complex beneficial micro-bacterial interactions that in turn strengthen the resilience of the system. Overall, this example system has no need for external inputs; and it has no outputs that cannot be beneficially reincorporated into the system. This kind of designed system would be an outcome of a decision-making process informed by ecological principles. It is also an example of what McDonough and Braungart (2002) refer to as a 'cradle to cradle' system, as opposed to a 'cradle to grave' system.

Mollison (*ibid*) suggests that permaculture practitioners adhere to a hierarchy of priorities: permaculture "seeks first to stabilise and care for land, then to serve household regional and local needs, and only thereafter to produce surplus for sale or exchange". The use of the word 'land' must be seen as inclusive of the fauna and flora that naturally inhabit the land. The ideal outcome of the implementation of permaculture design is the "harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way" (*ibid*). Permaculture is based on what Mollison (1979: ix) calls the "philosophy behind permaculture":

The philosophy behind permaculture is one of working with, rather than against, nature; of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless action; of looking at systems in all their functions, rather than asking only one yield of them; and of allowing systems to demonstrate their own evolutions.

The 'philosophy' behind permaculture gives rise to a permaculture ethic that Mollison (1988: 2) summarises with the following slogan: "Earth care, people care, fair shares." The following 12 principles are used when designing and implementing a permaculture project: 1) observe and interact; 2) catch and store energy; 3) obtain a yield; 4) apply self-regulation and accept feedback; 5) use and value renewable resources and services; 6) produce no waste; 7) design from patterns to details; 8) integrate rather than segregate; 9) use small and slow solutions; 10) use and value diversity; 11) use edges and value the marginal; 12) creatively use and respond to change.

One can use the 12 principles to transform aspects of one's life, be it at small or large scales. One can redesign a bedroom, a garden, an entire home, a school, a farm, a business, or even a community. Indeed, as Princen (2005: 5) points out, similar ecologically respectful principles (for example, the principle of sufficiency) have been instrumental in motivating some encouraging responses to problematic ecological phenomena:

An urban neighbourhood eschews the car, a timber company holds back on its harvests, two industrial countries find that treated sewage is enough, persistent toxics too much, and [an] international society bans ozone-depleting substances. ... A similar story can be told about lobster fishing in Maine and, no doubt, about countless other practices in countless other places [...].

It is in the spirit of such practical applications of ecologically respectful principles that I now turn to my own application of permaculture principles. In my PhD study (Pittaway 2017), I dedicated a chapter to permaculture, and in it I described how my partner and I implemented permaculture principles to start a small rustic homestead⁴ 'from scratch'. Some features of the homestead are: a tiny one-bedroom cabin; a waterless compost toilet; water-tanks connected to the roof of the cabin; a parabolic solar cooker; a wood-fired 'rocket stove'; wood-chip floors (and a complete lack of cement); reclaimed wood for building purposes; a small fruit orchard; indigenous trees and shrubs; small food gardens; very few appliances; and a minimal use of electricity.

The point of the personal addition to this paper is to show that my partner and I took matters into our own hands, at least to some extent. We did not need much money to do so, and nothing about our skill-sets put us apart from the

4 A short video (called 'No Somewhere Else') of the rustic homestead was made in 2017 by a production company called Green Renaissance. It is available for viewing at www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ4enZTWznc accessed 22 October 2018.

average person. All it took was a commitment to 1) choose something that is not entirely commensurable within the democratic capitalist paradigm, and 2) force a transformation in our own lives. These are resonant with some aspects of the role of philosophy as described by Badiou. Our particular choices were not ones that instigated large systemic changes towards sustainability, but as has been seen, large-scale movements like the Occupy Movement also did not result in such changes. Instead, our rustic permaculture project, as well as the projects of other permaculturalists, offer (to anybody wishing to look) glimpses of systems designed not according to the imperatives of a political economy addicted to growth, but on the imperatives accompanying a commitment to ecological sustainability. Such glimpses will surely become increasingly important as the political economy that is democratic capitalism pushes us closer and closer to the point of ecological collapse.

10. Conclusion

The progression of the argument offered in this paper has led to an emphasis on certain ideas, one of which has been the necessity of exploring ways of thinking and ways of living that are incommensurable with specific defining features of democratic capitalism. This idea resonates with a sentiment widely attributed to Albert Einstein. To paraphrase the sentiment loosely: one cannot solve a problem with the same logic, assumptions, attitudes, approaches and actions that are responsible for creating the problem in the first place. Democratic capitalism has, via globalisation, systematised its own growth-addicted 'logic', with the ecological crisis being an unavoidable outcome. In this homogenised context, it will surely not be easy to pioneer in the kinds of conceptual and physical endeavours necessary to counteract the effects of the political economy in question. Philosophy in the format discussed in this paper does offer some guidance in this regard, in that it indirectly motivates one to search for alternatives incommensurable with the logic, assumptions, attitudes, approaches and actions that constitute and accompany democratic capitalism. Permaculture is one example of an alternative, but many more alternatives need to be explored and implemented in order to begin rising to the ecological challenges facing humankind and many of our fellow lifeforms whose future survival has been placed in jeopardy.

Philosophers may, by virtue of being philosophers, have responded to an invitation to philosophise. The ecological crisis and its causes, contextualised as they have been in this paper, motivate philosophers to respond to a different call: a call to action. This paper has argued for action in the direction of alternatives incommensurable with the 'norms' of democratic capitalism. Whether philosophers respond to the call to action is ultimately up to them. However,

politicians and business-people (the executives of democratic capitalism) have not adequately risen to the challenges presented by the ecological crisis. Based on parts of the argument presented in this paper, politicians and business-people cannot rise to these challenges because of the defining features of the political economy that politicians and business-people perpetuate by default. Philosophers may be among the few groups of people up to the challenge of responding to the “greatest challenge in all human history” (Kovel 2012) considering what has been emphasised in this paper about the role of philosophy as described by Badiou. We may rise to the challenge by exploring arenas incommensurable with the reigning logic of the democratic capitalist empire.

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