From democracy at others’ expense to externalization at democracy’s expense: Property-based personhood and citizenship struggles in organized and flexible capitalism

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Abstract
This contribution investigates the anthropological foundations of European democracies’ continuous entanglement with economic and military expansionism and a hierarchical separation between public and private spheres, both of which have enabled the appropriation of nature and others’ labour as property on which citizens’ abstract personhood could be founded. Drawing on an argument made by David Graeber, it is suggested that modern European history can be interpreted as a process of the ‘generalization of avoidance’, in which such abstract, property-based forms of personhood, which were initially what defined the superior party in relations of hierarchy, came to be a model for the figures of market participant and citizen within the spheres of formal equal exchange of economy and politics. From this perspective, and building on an account of different stages of capitalist history as ‘subjectivation regimes’, the article then analyses the transition from the ‘exclusive democracy’ of post-war organized capitalism in Western Europe, in which citizens’ entitlement, through the collective guarantees of ‘social
property’ (Castel), increasingly allowed individualized competitive practices of status attainment and gave rise to individualist movements for extended citizenship, to current-day flexible capitalism. This regime, seizing on those calls and instrumentalizing the desires for competitive status consumption, has effected a broad restructuring of the social as a unified field of competition in which new hierarchies and inequalities materialize in global chains of appropriation, causing a ‘dividual’ fragmentation of property-based personhood and generating calls for responsible citizenship as an inherent countermovement. In conclusion, it is suggested that anthropologists have much to contribute to investigating the possibility of democratic, post-capitalist ‘anthropologies of degrowth’.

Keywords
Personhood, subjectivation, growth regimes, capitalism, doxic anthropologies, dividualization, democracy, degrowth

Introduction

The history of European democracy is conventionally perceived as a tale of long, hard struggles for democratic participation and hard-won access to citizenship granted to gradually growing shares of the populace. As an integral part of European history, however, that story can hardly be separated from that of the military and economic expansionism originating from the same core countries during the same period. Indeed, the very emergence of democratic statehood in European history has been closely correlated to the existence of a sphere of exchange built on the appropriation of human labour and extra-human sources of energy to the advantage of the citizens of democratic polities. Paradigmatically, Athens in the fifth century BCE was not only the first democratic polity in history, but also a fiercely belligerent power that controlled much of the Eastern Mediterranean, and the first state on record to depend on grain imported from overseas. Furthermore, the full political citizenship of all free male Athenians was predicated on the appropriation of the labour of women and slaves within the private sphere of the household (oikos) (Cartledge, 2013; Childe, 1972: 214–247; Finley, 1978). Even in its earliest appearance in history, democracy as a form of government was thus intimately tied both to economic and military expansionism (Weber, 1972: 809) and to an internal division of ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms that also demarcated the border between those included in the public sphere as citizens and those excluded from citizenship by confinement to the private.

Likewise, modern European democracy—in its early forms of the Italian republics or in England beginning in the 17th century—arrived on the heels of expansive economic development (Moore, 1966) as the project of a bourgeois class that turned the spatial and social separation between public polis and private oikos into the principle of society (Arendt, 1958). Its subsequent development was
inseparable from the unprecedented global conquest and colonial expropriation. Modern democracy, based on the notion of universal rights equally enforceable for any person and on the allocation of political power through the circulation of free and equal votes, is itself an abstract domain of exchange that co-evolved with that of the capitalist market. And with each step of democratization in the core capitalist societies corresponded a broadening and deepening of the reach of capitalism’s expansionary imperative into all regions of the globe, domains of practice and ways of perceiving and acting on the world. Confronted with historically optimistic accounts of the ‘evolution of citizenship’, such as that offered by T.H. Marshall right after World War II—basically arguing that the 18th century had seen the establishment of universal civil rights, the 19th the struggle for suffrage and the 20th the inclusion of social rights in the concept of citizenship (Turner, 1986: 8)—one is led to ask whether democracy, conceived of as the expansion of citizenship, might be part of the problem presented by the much debated unsustainability and destructiveness of capitalist societies (Dörre et al., 2015; Klein, 2015; Moore, 2015; Salleh, 2017), rather than part of its solution. In this article I argue that the ‘waves of citizenship rights’ (Turner, 1986) of European democracy have been a catalyst of, rather than a counterforce to, the advance of capitalist relations, and that this is at least partly due to the abstract conception of citizenship as democratic personhood that European history has brought about, which is, in its very structure, based on relations of appropriation and the externalization of the costs of one’s living to others (Lessenich, 2019).

If this is true, the implications are profound for the understanding of the recent transformations of capitalist democratic societies as well as for the concepts of emancipation and citizenship that could inform a transformation to possible future democracies beyond the capitalist growth imperative. To explain these implications, two things are needed: An anthropological account of what constitutes modern capitalist and democratic personhood and how this relates to the expansionism of capitalist democracies, and a sociological understanding of the interplay of capitalist accumulation strategies and democratic citizenship struggles in recent history.

With regards to the former, the first section of this paper draws on David Graeber’s (2007a) account of how the kind of personhood typical of modern relations of exchange historically developed. Building on the distinction between ‘joking’ and ‘avoidance’ as ‘two ways of defining the human person, either as a collection of substances continuous with the world and with others, or as a collection of abstract properties set apart from it’ (2007a: 45), Graeber suggests that modern history can be described as a secular process of ‘generalization of avoidance’, in which the dominant ways of constructing personhood have become increasingly abstract, disembodied and tied to property. He further suggests that this has enabled both the progress of democratization and the ever deeper embedding of capitalist rationality into the inner core of modern subjectivity. To illustrate what this means for the interpretation of contemporary citizenship struggles, the second section of this article will briefly outline my understanding of capitalist history as a sequence of phases of appropriation and accumulation, in each of
which a specific doxic anthropology, or naturalized common-sense conception of the human being as a property-based person, is institutionalized in an ideal-typical ‘subjectivation regime’—that is, a complex of infrastructures, institutions and discourses ‘producing’ human beings in line with the demands of contemporary accumulation. These regimes dialectically evolve out of each other as an effect of their inherent countertendencies and struggles. I go on in the third and fourth sections of the article to present a broad account of how the two most recent phases of capitalism in Western Europe—the organized capitalism of the mid-20th century and current-day flexible capitalism—mark subsequent steps in the ‘generalization of avoidance’. My ultimate contention is that the abstract expansionism of capitalist societies is incompatible with a genuinely egalitarian democracy because it is built on a property-based concept of personhood that rests on hierarchical social and socio-natural relations needed to provide the care, labour and energy subsidies essential for maintaining such an escalatory relationship with the world. As I argue in the conclusion, building a genuinely egalitarian society would require challenging that very construction of personhood and exploring alternative democratic, and necessarily post-capitalist, anthropologies of degrowth.

Abstract bourgeois personhood and the ‘generalization of avoidance’

Any attempt to understand the expansionary and appropriative dynamism inherent to modern democracy as well as to capitalism should depart from the apparent common social origin of both: the rise of the bourgeois class. Sombart (1988) depicted the bourgeois social character as characterized by two elements: a rational, calculating use of money as abstract power to be strategically invested, and an inclination to restless activity aimed at accumulating more abstract power, or, in Franklin’s formula: ‘industry and frugality’ (cited in Sombart, 1988: 121). The rational ordering of means and unceasing pursuit of their enhancement—these virtues obviously prefigured the abstractness and endless expansionism of capitalist societalization. But their deployment in market exchange required the previous provision of great amounts of labour from a hierarchically subordinate ‘outside’ of society. As an example for how this occurred, Michel Foucault described ‘sexuality’ as a field of bourgeois technologies of the self: The bourgeoisie was different from previous ruling classes in that it could not legitimate its rule transcendentally. Rather, its members needed to assert their power in and through market competition. To reproduce their dominance as a class, they had to actively cultivate their mental and physical superiority, or competitiveness, through a set of worldly practices (Foucault, 1978: 124–125). This required personal training, but also many different kinds of advice and support from medical experts, family members and servants. Furthermore, the more fields of public performance (sports, education, fashion, culture) one had to compete in, the more such assisted mental and physical self-fashioning was needed. Being part of the bourgeois public, that is,
required the private appropriation of others’ labour. To those who couldn’t approp-
riate that labour, ‘sexuality’, like all other competitive pursuits—including, most
notably, wage labour (Eversberg, 2014b)—appeared as an instrument of class rule
that was repressively forced upon them (Foucault, 1978: 127). Bourgeois society
was one in which some people actively fashioned themselves as legitimately pow-
erful public persons, while others bore the brunt in confinement to the private
realm.

My argument in this article is that, in this respect, contemporary capitalist
societies are still ‘bourgeois’ in that they allocate social status within a ‘democratic’
realm of formally equal exchange based on one’s capacity to externalize costs and
privately appropriate others’ labour, creating inequalities and exclusions. This,
however, is extremely hard for people in these societies to understand because
the doxic anthropology of a society integrated by exchange inscribes the hierarchy
and dominance that exchange is based on into the most deeply held beliefs about
human nature, ‘so much so that even our instincts for rebellion often seem to
reinforce them’ (Graeber, 2007a: 16).

To explain what is happening here, David Graeber has presented an argument
drawing on two somewhat dated concepts from anthropological theory, namely
‘joking’ and ‘avoidance’—two basic forms of social relations that early anthropol-
ogists encountered time and again in the most diverse social settings all over the
world. ‘Joking’ stands for social relations of extreme informality and mutual play-
ful aggression, including the license for shameless reciprocal ‘taking of goods and
giving of bads’—from insults and hurling bodily excretions to licensed theft. It
typically occurs between male equals (cross cousins, fraternity students), creating a
bond while affirming equality and keeping competition at bay. ‘Joking’ constitutes
the person as a profane being consisting of substances in direct continuity with the
physical world.

In contrast, relations of ‘avoidance’ are extremely formal and ultimately hier-
archical, obliging one side to deference, submission and shame in the face of the
other, who is constituted as distant, ‘sacred’, set apart from the world. This, to
Graeber, is the very definition of ‘hierarchy’: By closing off the body from the
world and others, hiding all signs of its physicality, the superior person becomes an
abstract entity, a ‘logical’ subject irreducible to its physical representation. What
defines them is not bodily substances, but the codified or generally accepted right
to control things and other people—in effect, their personhood is ‘constructed of
property’ (Graeber, 2007a: 21). It rests on an act of simultaneous in- and exclusion:
The person comes to represent more than their profane self because all of their
(physical, legal and ascribed) properties, and all those other people that depend on
making, maintaining or using them, are symbolically included within the person,
and excluded from the higher (‘exclusive’) level of existence this operation elevates
them to. From their vantage point, these subordinates are relegated to a ‘residual
category which is more or less merged with the world’ (Graeber, 2007a: 22), mean-
ing reduced to their raw, concrete physicality. The person’s property, symbolically
included in her as it is, is covered by her own ‘untouchability’—Graeber’s example
is the logic of *tapu* in Fiji or among the Maori, which essentially declares certain things or species off-limits due to their ‘belonging to’ a certain powerful individual or group. *Tapu*—much like ‘private’ in capitalist societies—refers to what cannot legitimately be *challenged*. This is how hierarchies generally operate: things and deeds are withdrawn from common access, ‘fenced off’ and integrated—as *properties*—into the abstract personality of their owner or receiver to shield that personality against any material challenge and allow them to interact with others on a higher, more abstract level.

Following Graeber’s argument, modern societies are based on precisely this logic of abstract personhood—not only according to their capitalist, but also their democratic properties. Just as free male Athenians acquired personhood as citizens through the exclusion and exploitation of women and slaves, as well as the collective capacity to appropriate the agricultural products of foreign lands, the same basic mechanisms of expansionist appropriation (Brand and Wissen, 2018) and the hierarchical separation of public and private realms (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010) have formed the bedrock of both capitalism and democracy in those countries in which they emerged in modernity. In other words, modern relations of *exchange* are a transformation of hierarchy in much the same way as wage labour, according to Graeber (2006), is a transformation of slavery: Unlike slaves, who were excluded from personhood because they did not own their bodies (Turner, 1986: 4), wage labourers are full members of society by virtue of ‘owning’ at least themselves, but find themselves periodically forced to sell that property and surrender their citizenship rights in order to sustain themselves. Formal equality again transforms into hierarchies between those most dependent on doing this, and those having sufficient control over others to freely choose. Both democracy and the market as forms of societalization thus constitute ‘higher, more abstract levels’ of existence, integration into which, as a holder of rights (citizen) or money (customer), rests on forms of appropriation and exploitation. The history of bourgeois personhood can therefore be understood as a ‘generalization of avoidance’: The abstract modes of interaction originally reserved for hierarchical superiors ‘came to set the terms for all social relations, until they became so thoroughly internalized they ended up transforming people’s most basic relations with the world around them’ (Graeber, 2007a: 31).

But it seems necessary to think a bit more about what avoidance abstracts *from*. Perhaps due to the patriarchal heritage of the anthropologists who coined these terms, the language of ‘joking’ and ‘avoidance’ appears strangely oblivious of relations of *care*. Care, after all, is the real, material inversion and indispensable foundation of avoidance, to which ‘joking’ seems to be mostly a symbolic counterpoint. Insofar as caring consists in the *giving of goods* (feeding, warming, giving birth, comforting, giving moral support) and the *taking of bads* (cleaning, healing, removing bodily excretions, hearing out someone’s fear and anger)—joking itself is a logical inversion and ‘unconscious’ complement to care. The inversion is gendered: Joking relations are typically relations among males, while the giving of care tends to be delegated to women. Yet, both relate to the person as a physical, bodily
being in continuity with the material world. Such raw physicality is, of course, not a specialty of all those boys’ clubs, carnivals and feasts where joking is observed—it is the daily, inescapable reality of all human existence. Whatever performances of immateriality and abstractness societies may come up with, ultimately no one can exist without being cared for. Humans existentially, inescapably depend on each other (Rendueles, 2017). Patriarchal societies go to great lengths to cover this up, and both joking and avoidance are part of these efforts.

As a practical relation, care is the direct opposite of avoidance: While the latter is an abstract, deliberately de-materialized performance based on appropriating the powers of the inferior party, care, although beginning as the ultimate hierarchical relation—one body fully included within the other—is, from the moment of birth, a series of concrete, material acts directed at enhancing the powers of the other. Like joking, care is (initially) directed at equality, but it doesn’t necessarily stop there. Graeber’s (2014) observation that people at the bottom of social hierarchies generally care more about those at the top than the other way around attests to the fact that the performance of abstract, a-physical existence depends on an invisibilized but vital flow of care going ‘upward’ for the powerful to appropriate. This private appropriation and public denial of care reflect another characteristic of capitalism, namely its gendered hierarchical separations between homes and workplaces, public and private realms (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010). While joking is the symbolic negation of abstract hierarchy using concrete means, care is part of the material creation of concrete properties that hierarchy appropriates. In this sense, it’s not only care that empowers (i.e. creates properties): Property is the result of many different kinds of work done by those symbolically ‘included’ in the abstract person, consisting of substances and energies appropriated from extra-human nature. All these things ‘flow upward’ in relations of hierarchy, as their denied foundation. Abstract personhood is thus not just ‘constructed of property’, but inherently appropriative—it cannot exist without permanent inputs of external energy, care and other labour, and the ‘gifts’ of nature. Without these inputs, the bourgeois personhood’s turn to the infinite would not have been possible. And, as Andreas Malm (2016) has shown, it was most crucially the appropriation of the energy content of fossil fuels by the bourgeois class as a weapon in the struggle to dominate workers in the early 19th century that powered the escalatory dynamics of the centuries to come. This appropriative nature of bourgeois personhood—further amplified by the invention of the corporation as a purely abstract person, having no body and knowing no physical and temporal constraints to its expansion (Blanco and Grear, 2019)—is an important driving force behind the inherent tendency of bourgeois societies toward an imperial order (Brand and Wissen, 2018), pulling labour and resources toward its centres while externalizing all negative effects (Lessenich, 2019). The ‘generalization of avoidance’, the ‘bourgeoisification’ of society and its ‘marketization’ are thus one and the same thing—and democratization, it seems, is itself part of this process of naturalizing abstraction and expansionism. If the formal equality of
bourgeois exchange is based on the hierarchical logic of abstract, property-based personhood, this presents a serious problem for democratic egalitarianism.

**Doxic anthropologies of growth: Capitalist growth regimes as subjectivation regimes**

Structurally speaking, *capitalism* is a mode of organizing the societal metabolism with nature based on an abstract and universal measure of value (Harvey, 1991: 102–3, Hornborg, 2001: 170–3), in light of which ‘the economy’ appears as a theoretically boundless entity capable of growing forever (Mitchell, 2013). Through the logic of competition, it also renders such expansion a mandatory imperative for market participants (Harvey, 1991: 180): Ever increasing amounts of abstract exchange value must be generated—productivity must increase—and the commodities produced must actually be sold to realize the values embodied in them—consumptivity must also rise (Pineault, 2016). Capitalist history has proceeded in successive waves, each centred on specific strategies or processes of ongoing primitive accumulation or *Landnahme* (Dörre, 2015), of incorporating and/or subjecting previously non-capitalist ‘territory’ into the circuits of accumulation—from colonial expansionism and the slave trade (Moore, 2015) through coal- and oil-powered industrialization (Malm, 2016) to the integration of large parts of people’s everyday activities into global virtual networks of value extraction (Marazzi, 2010).

The history of capitalism in its core countries has therefore been interpreted as a series of phases, each characterized by its own ideal-typical way of organizing capitalist accumulation, theorized by the economists of the regulation school as ‘accumulation regimes’ (Aglietta, 2000; Boyer, 2004; Harvey, 1990). With each phase also corresponds an equally ideal-typical ‘subjectivation regime’ (Eversberg, 2018a)—a set of infrastructures, institutions, practices and discourses geared toward ‘producing’ kinds of people that would conform to the demands of contemporary accumulation: producers willing and able to contribute to productivity growth in the prevailing industries, consumers who desire the products and are capable of paying for them, and citizens sufficiently contented to at least refrain from revolt. Each subjectivation regime brings about its own *doxic anthropology*—a shared, prereflexive understanding of what it means to be human that is inscribed into common sense [doxa] not primarily through discourses, but through the *practical* operation of the infrastructures of everyday life. It effects the ‘doxic submission of the dominated to the objective structures of a social order of which their cognitive structures are the product’, shaping personhood ‘at the deepest level of bodily dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 2000b: 177) and bringing about the elementary structure of the ‘economic habitus’ required of all members of modern society (Bourdieu, 2000a). These doxic anthropologies naturalize the imperatives of capitalist accumulation as well as democratic participation as expressions of a universal human essence. If Graeber’s hypothesis about the generalization of avoidance is
correct, it should thus be possible to show how the material, institutional, social and mental infrastructures of both the organized and flexible capitalist regimes of subjectivation have brought about such naturalized conceptions of personhood that are more abstract and more thoroughly rooted in property than previously. This will be demonstrated in detail in the following sections.

Contrary to what the notion of ‘regime’ may suggest, these arrangements are never stable, but highly dynamic and contradictory, and doxic internalization itself can be a transformative force. The constant innovation attempts capitalist firms and states must launch to make people ‘function’ better as workers, consumers or citizens can spark discontent, and catering to that discontent in one dimension may provoke anguish in another. On the whole, each ideal-typical mode of expansion breeds equally typical ‘countermovements’ (Dale, 2012; Fraser, 2011; Polanyi, 1944). Polanyi’s classical case was defensive struggles of downwardly mobile groups against the background of the loss of social protection, which eventually led to fascism and war. But what was more common in the capitalist centres over the past centuries were emancipatory struggles that eventually achieved greater civil, political and/or social citizenship rights (Fraser, 2011). Seen this way, a very rough chronology would read as follows: 19th century liberal capitalism, established through the bourgeoisie’s struggle for civic and political rights, was challenged by the demands for political equality and social participation advanced by labour movements, yielding the transition to the ‘Fordist’ or organized capitalist era (1900–ca. 1970). Fordism ended following the citizenship struggles waged by diverse movements of the subordinated and marginalized, resulting in another shift toward a ‘post-Fordist’ or flexible capitalism (Eversberg, 2018a). Capitalism has proved extraordinarily deft at integrating its counter-movements’ emancipatory intentions, turning key demands into cornerstones of new, revitalized growth regimes (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Offe, 1983). Struggles for democratic citizenship, it seems, have historically been conducive to extending, rather than countering, capital’s capacity to appropriate and exploit. To understand this in more detail, let us move on to reconstructing the subjective logics of the two most recent ‘growth regimes’ in Western Europe—organized capitalism and flexible capitalism.

Organized capitalism: The exclusive democratization of property-based personhood

Organized capitalism, or ‘Fordism’, rested on a class compromise trading the expansion of output and profits under a standardized production norm for the integration of broad swathes of the working population into an equally expansive standardized consumption norm, with the state acting as the guarantor of growth by intervening to counter market imbalances and ensuring stable demand through social protection schemes. The details of this story have been told time and again (Aglietta, 2000; Harvey, 1991). What is important to the present argument is that the formal status of wage earner was generalized to practically all social strata, in
effect transforming hierarchical class antagonism into a continuous field of gradual inequalities between occupational groups competing for status and shares of the generated wealth. This was achieved by institutionalizing ‘social property’ (Castel, 2003): a set of entitlements to social benefits and securities that were tied to wages and provided protection against the risks of life. At least now wage earners had their social property to define themselves by and claim deference for. Indeed, ‘social property’ proves to be an exceedingly apt notion, as it amounted to a broad standardization of positions of petty ‘self-sufficient’, closed-off, property-defined individuals. In contrast to the rigid exclusion of the working classes in 19th-century liberal capitalism, formally equal personhood now accrued to all adult nationals as political citizens, and to most of those in formal paid employment as social citizens. And with formal equality came individualized competition: labour markets, education, status consumption and democratic participation to varying degrees became abstract spaces of exchange in which citizens found themselves forced to engage in strategies of individual status attainment and distinction to keep up with, or gain advantages over, other formal equals (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1977).

Yet, these full citizens did not, and could not, include everyone. The democratic inclusion of the working classes through social property necessarily implied a parallel ‘democratization’ of externalization. Distributing citizenship more broadly required ongoing economic growth, which in turn required increasing inputs of cheap external resources as well as un- or underpaid care labour to maintain citizens’ productive and consumptive capacities. The mediation of class conflict through the distribution of the fruits of economic growth not only turned such growth into a political end in itself (Harvey, 1991; Offe, 1983), but it also required hierarchical and appropriative relations between the citizens that were included and others onto whom the resulting burdens could be shifted.

Social property remained limited to those with secure employment within the core sectors of the economy and in public service—typically autochthonous males. It granted them a share of a societal wealth accumulated not only through their work, but also through the symbolic and practical appropriation of materials and energy from nature, and of the life and labour of the excluded (women, marginalized migrant workers, ‘the rest of the world’). As these were included in their persons as property, it allowed for their collective social elevation. Both caring responsibilities and the ‘giving of goods and taking of bads’ that was required for maintaining any avoidant relation were confined to the private sphere of the home and overwhelmingly delegated to women. Furthermore, economic growth did not result from social citizens’ hard work alone. It depended on increasing amounts of fossil energy and natural resources that were cheaply provided by dependent peripheral countries, as well as on the superexploitation and social exclusion of migrant labourers who did the menial, dirty jobs. Only such dominant societal relationships with nature and the rest of the world could ensure the continuous supply of matter, energy and work required for this model of democracy (Brand and Wissen, 2018; Lessenich, 2019; Mies et al., 1988).
Organized capitalist democracy thus remained fundamentally exclusive: While adult nationals were formally equal as political citizens, women and others excluded from ‘social property’ remained heavily underrepresented in public offices and political debates. Other contributors to growth (migrant labourers, workers and caregivers abroad) remained wholly excluded. The whole arrangement reflected the hierarchical relationships between (social) property-defined ‘full citizens’ and those they could claim to symbolically ‘include’ in their public person.

Yet outside the domains of abstract exchange, within the everyday relations of the Habermasian ‘lifeworld’, ‘social property’ had opened up new spaces for individuality. Growing numbers of people could afford more than the basic necessities, shorter working hours and technical innovations in household work freed up time for pastimes like sports, tourism, and ‘hobbies’. Freed from the need to contribute to subsistence, but systemically functional in contributing to demand for consumer goods, these activities enabled an increasing differentiation of tastes, furthering an appreciation for personal uniqueness and serving as arenas for performing status. And this promise of ‘self-actualization’, formally open to all and actively promoted by advertising and the media, fed the growing discontent among the marginalized with regard to the standardization of social positions for the integrated, and their complete exclusion from the ability to self-actualize.

As a doxic anthropology, what the social order forged by the institutions of social property established as seemingly universal ‘human’, ‘natural’ traits of any citizen were two things. Firstly, a sense of social right was broadly perceived as an entitlement: Being a citizen in the full sense meant having the right to social property, a right to participate and be acknowledged as a participant in society’s abstract spheres of economic and political exchange, and thus implicitly a right to appropriate nature and others’ labour to be able to do so. Secondly, participating in abstract exchange meant becoming entangled in an unceasing competition for status: Formal equality of citizenship as a right meant that it had to be asserted by each individual—entitlement had to materialize in personal success, increasing affluence and experiences of personal efficacy, and people developed a number of individual strategies to make the most of it. Standardization of social positions was what organized capitalist societalization was built on. The result was a subjectively entitled and competitively-minded individuality seeking emancipation from alienating uniformity.

The individualist revolt against organized capitalism

In the late 1960s, this escalating tension fed into a broad insurgency against the alienating tendencies as well as the marginalizations and exclusions imposed by organized capitalism. On an individual level, seeking higher education or a professional career offered escape routes from a seemingly prescribed future. On a collective level, excluded and discontented groups started to organize, express their demands and experiment with alternative lifestyles in the context of numerous social movements. Wildcat strikes, often led by migrant workers, exposed similar
discontent among the lower ranks of the Fordist workforce. And even core workers’ unions embarked on debates about 'humanizing' a labour process that often reduced people to mere automatons. All this amounted to a challenging of organized capitalist exclusive democracy, exposing its lack of legitimacy because its mechanisms of interest representation proved inadequate and unable to address the demands and de-standardized forms of political action of the new social movements (Habermas, 1975) and their calls for direct participation, ‘first-person’ politics, and adequate representation of different social groups.

For the transformations of the following decades, the anti-conformist individualism of these movements played a profoundly ambivalent role: While self-consciously anti-capitalist in attacking the uniformization, alienation and exclusion of organized capitalism, it was no less a product of the promises of individual fulfilment made by that same regime (Frank, 1997), and the aspirations and desires for self-actualization, consumptive or otherwise, that motivated the activism, which eventually proved a key resource for the next wave of capitalist accumulation.

Flexible capitalism: The dividuating power of desire

The subjective exhaustion of the class compromise was but one dimension of the multiple crises that organized capitalism faced by the early 1970s. Giving anything close to a comprehensive account of the transformations that followed is patently impossible. Therefore, let me focus very narrowly, and at the cost of undue simplifications, on some of the processes that transformed property-based personhood in the course of what I consider best described as the flexible capitalist restructuring (Harvey, 1991; Sennett, 1998) of economy and society in the core countries of Western Europe.

To restore profits and growth under conditions of saturated markets, high wages, rising unemployment and mounting external pressures, in the 1970s, firms and states turned their backs on standardization and social property. To both managers and governments, a competitive reorganization of social relations based on technologies of flexibilization appeared to be the path to success. The real feat of turning the abstract academic theory of neoliberalism into a guideline of actual policy, as the governments of Thatcher, Reagan, Kohl and others did in the 1980s, was that it seized on the competitive desires that organized capitalist standardization had bred as its contradictory outcome, and mobilized them against the institutional safeguards of social rights that had given rise to them. Its utopian push was to restructure economic and political relations all around the globe as one unified field of competition (Harvey, 2005; Slobodian, 2018). Universal competition among market participants was to replace the hierarchy and exclusion of the preceding decades, and this required reshaping everything according to a ‘flexible’, i.e. piecemeal, short-term and noncommittal, logic. It was to incite those hitherto entitled by social property to make greater efforts, while ‘liberating’ the formerly excluded to become equal competitors for jobs, income, social status and
opportunities for self-actualization. To global capital, this broad-based mobilization promised access to reservoirs not so much of productivity, but mainly of *consumptivity* desperately needed for a recovery from the symptoms of severe overaccumulation (Harvey, 1991: 180–197).

**Flexible capitalist restructuring: Liberating desire**

To overcome the impasse of saturated markets, a strategy was needed to further raise the consumptivity of everyday life, in other words, to produce desiring subjects. Organized capitalist corporations had developed sophisticated techniques of stoking mass desires for their standardized products through advertising and other aspects of their ‘sales effort’ (Baran and Sweezy, 1966). Marketing appealed to consumers wishing to demonstrate their respectability and keep up with a rising ‘standard of living’. But by the late 1960s, markets for standard goods had neared saturation. For sales to further expand, people were needed to constantly want new and different things. Dovetailing with the individualist intentions of organized capitalism’s counter-movements, innovative firms and entrepreneurs came up with all sorts of new products and marketing practices designed to seize on, commodify and actively engineer desires for individuality and authentic experience (Frank, 1997). Consumers were incited to actively create and fashion nonstandard, ‘singular’ identities, and use commodities to demonstrate their uniqueness and non-conformity (Reckwitz, 2020). Increasingly advanced technologies were found to create and market ‘personalized’ products, with the emerging digital platforms of exchange offered by the internet later becoming key catalysts of this process.

Consumers were now offered access to an ever-broadening, potentially unlimited range of *properties* to furnish themselves with and integrate into their public person. People were no longer addressed as a coherent individual with stable and typical preferences, but as a *dividual* bundle of fleeting, constantly changing, often wildly varying desires, they were exhorted to permanently reinvent themselves by accumulating and constantly updating a range of ‘special’ personal belongings, relationships and experiences to carefully curate and publicly perform their social status with. Such *dividual* status consumption is all about ‘constructing oneself out of property’—partly in acquiring actual, material goods (clothing, technical gadgets, food), partly through experiences (tourism, partying) that are enabled by energy use and others’ labour. This in turn enhances one’s reputation. Actual qualities of each thing or experience are not what counts, but their abstract value as representations (‘pics or it didn’t happen’). Fluidity and change are crucial: In order to expand commodity demand, it is most functional if people covet not continuity or coherence of selfhood—which would exclude a broad range of possibilities (Blühdorn, 2013: 133)—but the unconditional pursuit of *any* desire as a ‘categorical imperative’ (Blühdorn, 2013: 243).

Lacanian psychoanalysts have suggested an interpretation of the intra-personal dynamics at work here. They observe that, due to processes including women’s
generalized labour market participation and the increasing prevalence of childcare facilities, many children in advanced capitalist societies grow up in ‘fatherless’ environments not characterized by the kind of unchallenged patriarchal authority assumed by Freud. Under these conditions, the formation of the psyche takes place in a ‘post-oedipal’ constellation, in which the societal imperative internalized as a ‘super-ego’ is no longer that of prohibitive paternal authority but that of enjoyment, of ‘living up to one’s potentials’, of seeking fulfilment by realizing one’s desires (Soiland, 2013: 103–104; Žižek, 2000: 360). Instead of dictating humility and restraint in relation to abstract society, the post-oedipal super-ego commands unceasing efforts to transgress boundaries and accumulate rewarding experiences. By advancing to the status of super-ego, these desires, and thus the self-constructed, self-defined ‘identity’ of the subject, effectively become ‘tapu’ and are exempt from any legitimate challenge.

This way, it is as the subject of desire that the person is now ‘constructed of property’ and elevated to a higher, more abstract level. Avoidance has now been generalized to such a degree that everyone is to treat everybody’s—including their own—‘consumptive side’ as a hierarchical superior—and expects to be treated that way herself when acting in that capacity. Think of the power of online rating and feedback systems to enforce superficial friendliness from all kinds of service providers, or the impossibility for politicians to tell their constituents the truth about the long-term viability of their everyday mobility patterns. Within the purportedly equal relation between the partners in avoidance rests enshrined a constitutively unequal, hierarchical relation within the dividual, between the abstract desiring subject, on the one hand, and all the concrete subjective capacities involved—her own and those of others, on the other hand. The alleged equality of the relations of exchange that come to prevail in the course of flexible capitalism’s competitive social reordering has nothing to do with ‘democracy’ in any meaningful sense, as it is made of inequality in its very substance.

The reign of competition and the authority of the desiring subject imply that as workers—having to cater to others’ desires and needs—flexible capitalist subjects are increasingly disempowered and deprived of citizenship. The flexible capitalist restructuring of the world of work reflects this. Since standardized mass production could no longer cater to all the diversified preferences and demands, leading industries turned to ‘flexible’ production models. These presented a challenge to all ‘entitlements’, in constant efforts to enforce permanent adaptation to market conditions (Harvey, 1991: 150–6), relying on a continuous downscaling of the units of account for all inputs to production and enabling firms to avoid long-term commitments wherever possible (Eversberg, 2018a; Holst, 2018). Digital technology has afforded firms almost total control over labour (Staab and Nachtwey, 2016), allowing them to eliminate any kind of deadweight and to allocate labour, like all other inputs to production, in precisely defined amounts and qualities to neatly defined locations that are seamlessly integrated into a globally coordinated matrix of productive processes organized according to ‘lean’ and ‘just-in-time’ principles. Long-term contractual relations have increasingly been replaced by ‘project-based’
forms of cooperation limited in duration and trimmed for efficiency using ‘agile’ management techniques. In short, relations become increasingly piecemeal, short-term, and noncommittal.

Such environments can increasingly forego the kind of static, predefined skill sets that organized capitalist vocational education had provided. In extreme cases, such as so-called ‘crowdworking’ platforms, only a certain, very specific ‘competence’ is needed for a defined period—sometimes a mere few minutes, and contractual relations extending for longer or remunerating somebody for any additional skills would appear to be a waste. This holds true for the burgeoning service sector as well. Technology-based flexibilization has rendered service jobs increasingly contingent and dependent on fluctuating demand. Such regimes expose workers to another dynamic of *dividualization*: Remaining ‘employable’ requires a carefully curated ‘portfolio’ of sub-individual ‘competences’, which can be acquired, assessed, improved and sold one by one and for varying, ‘flexible’ periods (Eversberg, 2014b). The dividual worker-subject is also ‘constructed of property’ insofar as her personhood is reflected in that ‘portfolio’ of marketable personal properties. Knowledge and skills are not sought for their concrete, material usefulness, but for their abstract market value. Accordingly, labour markets turn into sites of active competition between ‘dividuals’ mobilizing their ‘assets’ to gain access to better positions—or in order to stay in the game at all. Here, dividuality is not a promise so much as a necessary condition for maintaining one’s personal competitiveness, and policies of ‘workfare’ and ‘activation’ have been designed to enforce it as a personal responsibility, demanding constant activity while imposing stricter conditionality of lower benefits for shorter periods (Eversberg, 2015; Lessenich, 2011).

In sum, these changes have eroded the organized capitalist hierarchy between citizens integrated by social property and those forced to help maintain them from ‘outside’. Yet this has not eroded property-based personhood itself, but rather broadened it by turning everybody into minor ‘entrepreneurs’ forced to strategically invest and expand whatever marketable properties they might master. Blurring the boundaries between employment and unemployment and between firms’ internal and external domains has constructed a continuous competitive field in which each firm is an abstract person that appropriates others’ labour just like its employees. Except firms, as purely abstract, bodiless entities, can actually aspire to *endless* accumulation, being free from any of the limitations imposed on humans by their mortality and dependence on care. This uniformization of competitive personhood has enabled the now-dominant mode of externalizing the cost of economic flexibility: Social and ecological costs are handed down to other people and world regions, and labour and nature are appropriated upward along *commodity chains* through the increasing competitive pressure on the providers of inputs to production. These providers are forced to cut costs and lower environmental and labour standards. In effect, there is a continuous yet uncodified *hierarchy*, from the most powerful corporation down to the most marginalized and exploited of workers. While the higher rungs allow their occupants, to varying
degrees, to appropriate the labour of others to enhance their properties and broaden their opportunities, being confined to the lower rungs means having to work for others under dire conditions, expending the substance of one’s own existence for the benefit of social superiors in exchange for a bare minimum.

And the chains forming along that hierarchy branch off into other directions as well: Restrictions on workers’ private lives and families that are imposed by flexibility requirements are compensated in a commodified form and externalized to others that possess even fewer means of abstraction through global service and care chains (Flecker et al., 2013; Yeates, 2012). The result is a crisis of social reproduction that extends to the global scale (Dowling, 2016; Kofman, 2014). This crisis is partly due to the fact that care, in its inabstractable corporeality, is intrinsically inimical to flexible rationalization. Care consists in concrete interpersonal and socio-natural dependencies that are normally spatiotemporally fixed and ineluctably physical. Therefore, it cannot be subjected to flexible capitalism’s imperatives of spatial and temporal abstraction (Madörin, 2010; Soiland, 2016). As a result, caring labour inevitably becomes more expensive compared to ‘productive’ labour that can be technologically rationalized. This has prompted cutbacks in public care institutions and a re-privatization of care work that, with women’s labour market participation now being the norm, has created mounting pressures and multiple burdens that disproportionately affect women. Those that can afford it often seek relief by externalizing the work to underpaid marginal women and passing on burdens to people in faraway countries. Along the chain, the upward appropriation of labour extends precarity downward, until nobody is left to externalize to and basic human needs remain unmet.

More generally, the ‘exclusivity’ of being fully integrated into flexible capitalist society is based on the partial, selective symbolic inclusion, and factual exclusion, of the producers and providers (human and non-human) of the goods and services at one’s disposal: caregivers, workers in the new, digitally mediated servant economies, overexploited labourers in the Global South, plants and animals—all those people and entities at the far, giving end of the commodity, service and care chains that channel materials, amenities and opportunities toward that one focal point, the desiring subject, to keep accumulation going by serving its desires. If such subjects today emphatically consider themselves ‘global’, they are indeed just that by virtue of appropriating living labour and productive capacities from all over the world (Hornborg, 2001: 205–208), practically excluding the givers of all those capacities from the amenities they furnish, and, in the age of anthropogenic climate change, even progressively depriving them of the means to subsist.

Responsibilization as inherent counter-tendency

Of course, the unfettered pursuit of desire is wholly unsustainable as an organizing principle for society. Left unchecked, it rapidly leads to social disintegration and ecological destruction because in its inherent limitlessness it not only erodes the work ethic, but also disregards humans’ concrete bodily needs for care and the
boundedness of ecosystems. Since the 1990s, social democratic and ‘progressive neoliberal’ governments have responded to these problems by integrating an ethic of responsibility into their social policies (Clarke, 2005). In contrast to earlier welfare schemes, this meant that such workfare policies addressed their subjects as citizens (i.e. as abstract persons), as only those thought of as holding ‘properties’ can be held responsible in the first place (Turner, 1986: 7). Many different kinds of programs of formal and informal education have since been redesigned to foster personal responsibility in students, clients and seekers of assistance—a responsibility that was first and foremost for maintaining and improving one’s portfolio of marketable properties (Eversberg, 2015), but now tended to include an ethic of restraint, of accepting the need to internalize to varying degrees parts of the social cost of others’ practices of externalization as a limit to one’s ambitions. Responsibilization as social policy addressed the ‘internalizing classes’ and the losers of omnipresent competition, using an array of social technologies to impose a moral imperative for flexible productive effort and moderation of consumptive aspirations on these classes (Lessenich, 2011).

Although mostly strictly rejecting these pedagogical and often punitive practices, activists and advocacy groups for those forced to internalize have more recently begun to make logically similar, but practically opposed arguments around the nexus of citizenship and responsibility. Highlighting the differences and inequalities in actual, concrete possibilities and opportunities available to different social groups despite their formal equality as citizens, they have begun to advance calls for non-discrimination as a right that is binding for other citizens. Democratic citizenship is associated with a responsibility for granting equal rights to everyone—an ambition perfectly in line with the ostensible equality of the market—and combating discrimination and environmental destruction appears to be a moral obligation for responsible citizens as well as for the state itself (Clarke et al., 2007; Massey, 2004; Young, 2004).

This, it seems, is the inherent dialectical counter-tendency of this subjectivation regime: As organized capitalism bred competition because entitlement could not pacify capitalism’s escalatory imperatives, flexible capitalism breeds responsibilization because the unfettered pursuit of abstract desire undermines concrete human needs and the natural foundations of life. Yet, the frame of reference of this sense of responsibility is the continuum of positions of relative externalization and-internalization: What it regulates are still the actions of the abstract, property-based persons of market exchange, and the discriminations and ‘privileges’ that are attacked are often associated with what is perceived as an unjust distribution of the means to appropriate others’ labour, rather than with the unjust relations of appropriation as such. One indication of this is that, somewhat paradoxically, the strongest supporters of such policies are often not those internalizing the greatest burdens, but those who have most thoroughly internalized the post-oedipal, ‘fatherless’ condition. From such a subject position, pursuing an ego-ideal that posits the greatest possible enjoyment as the highest goal in life, being made the subject of internalization by deeply engrained structural patterns of power in
society due to social or physical properties one did not choose—be it gender or age—is experienced as an intolerable heteronomy (Soiland, 2013). At the same time, those actually internalizing the most, but not sharing the same expectations of life, most often indifferently accept their fate and try to make do with the help of the cheap goods and services they can afford (Eversberg, 2020a, 2020b).

Flexible capitalist subjectivity as a problem for democracy

This is all highly consequential for political democracy. The hierarchical, exclusive democracy of organized capitalist times has largely been eroded. But while advanced capitalist democracies may be said to have become much less exclusive, they have also become much more unequal.

Initially, the dominant push of flexible capitalist restructuring was to foster competitive consumerism, in line with neoliberal theory’s tenet that consumer choice is the only legitimate site of democratic agency (Slobodian, 2018: 108). One problem with this is that the subjectivities it brought about are characterized by an internal hierarchy that exempts all personal desires from critical scrutiny and subjects all non-consumptive concerns that ‘citizenship’ may entail to the pursuit of these desires. We might see such ‘replacement of citizenship by customership’ (Crouch et al., 2016: 506) as the subjective side to the broad debates of recent years on ‘depoliticization’ (Swyngedouw, 2014) and ‘post-democracy’ (Blühdorn, 2013). Political preference tends to be perceived as another instance of consumer choice—and thus itself as an expression of personal desire that, as a personal ‘property’, is immunized against any legitimate challenge. The hierarchical separation between the public and private realms, now transposed into an inversely hierarchical relation between the ‘private’ desire and the public political subject, encroaches on the space of possibilities of democratic deliberation and inflicts a loss of political imagination. Debates about combating the climate crisis, for example, have long tended to home in on ‘political consumption’ and the purported power of consumers, while barring any suggestion that binding collective decisions to limit opportunities for appropriating labour and nature and to end the most destructive practices may be necessary. This expresses an inability of the flexible capitalist doxic anthropology to provide concepts of political action operating on any other register than that of consumer choice. Even contemporary social movements, still imagining emancipation as an individualist quest to overcome alienating standardization, suffer from this reductionism (Blühdorn, 2013: 240–1; Soiland, 2013).

The second problem with ‘consumer citizenship’ is that, since consumers are not equal, and the relations of consumption permanently increase inequality, it ultimately furthers an aristocratic rather than a democratic order. ‘The fulfilment of choice in an unequal society is always at the expense of others and is, in that, a negation of choice, of freedom’ (Sivanandan, 1990: 20): Mirroring the continuous hierarchical distribution of opportunities to abstract and externalize is an equally continuous inverse distribution of differential pressures to internalize, to practically, concretely bear the costs of others’ pursuit of desire and of the systemic
imperative for growth of profits. The more people that are exposed to these pressures of internalization, the harder it is for them to exercise citizenship rights in any meaningful sense.

In more recent years, the injustice and ecological destruction that result have sparked a politics of responsibility that voices calls for equality in the interest of those being forced to carry greater shares of the burdens and being deprived of the rewards. From this perspective, democratic citizenship implies individual accountability according to the standards of equality the democratic polity has committed itself to. Citizens ‘privileged’ by relations of externalization can, by reference to those standards, be called on to relinquish their privileges and re-internalize the costs of their practices. These politics of responsibility have rightly challenged the inequalities of appropriation and externalization in all of their intersecting dimensions (such as gender, ethnicity and age). Yet, by framing their demands in terms of appeals to citizens to reflect on and relinquish their ‘privileges’, the movements waging these struggles have mostly remained trapped inside the abstract, property-based paradigm of personhood. While this in no way delegitimizes the concerns, it stokes doubts as to whether their aims can be reached this way. In assigning personal responsibility for domination to the concrete (male, white, old) people that tend to profit from it, such politics of responsibility discount its systemic causes that lie at the abstract level of capitalist societalization. Stressing the central role of desire as the focal point of flexible capitalism’s subjectivation regime as I have done here must not obscure the abstract systemic character of capitalism: Desire itself is produced and engineered in the service of that greater, a-subjective, automatic compulsion to accumulate that governs capitalism in all its manifestations. Ultimately, the ones that get to appropriate even the efforts of the most ‘privileged’ humans in order to fulfil their desires are corporations: those wholly abstract persons that, having no body and needing no care, can neglect all human matters in pursuit of endless growth. To the extent that it discounts this central problem and remains caught within the paradigm of abstract property-based personhood, the politics of responsibility seems unable to effectively challenge the hierarchy and domination at the heart of that form of personhood itself.

Currently, the dilemma of the politics of responsibility feeds into a broader crisis of democracy that manifests itself in a deepening divide, or polarization, in the political landscapes of advanced capitalist countries (Geiselberger, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). On one side you have the constituencies of one or the other version of the politics of responsibility, most of whom have experienced competition as a threat as well as a challenge, found themselves having to internalize some of the costs of others’ desires, or expect such a fate for themselves in future. Their calls for responsible citizenship as a condition for justice are wholly inimical to those on the other, conservative-authoritarian side of the divide. Gathered here are those in whose experience the organized capitalist promise of entitlement for hard work and the flexible capitalist appeal to the unconditional pursuit of desire have been combined into an absolute will to defend their ‘right to externalize’. To people holding such beliefs, which are no less a product of flexible capitalism than the
politics of responsibility, consumptive citizenship is an exclusive right they are entitled to and others are legitimately excluded from (Hochschild, 2016). Challenges to that entitlement spark resentment both against the ‘traitors’ at the top and against those struggling to partially make good for their previous exclusion. This sentiment is itself born of ‘customership’, that flawed analogy between political and consumer choices: Right-wing politicians and voters expect respect, even deference for their views, however outrageous, dismissing any opposition—based, for instance, on state-of-the-art climate science—as an illegitimate personal attack. So far, however, this whole battle has taken place on the firm ground of a shared abstract, property-based conception of personhood, which forms the foundation of the global imperial order of appropriation and externalization. Although a third camp that could challenge that order altogether is currently hardly discernible (Eversberg, 2018b), the recent surge of movements for environmental justice and degrowth may signal the emergence of counterforces to the flexible capitalist mode of production and subjectivation based on a conception of global solidarity rooted in relational, care-based notions of personhood (Eversberg and Schmelzer, 2017) and a non-individualist approach to democracy (Kothari et al., 2019).

Conclusion: Towards democratic anthropologies of degrowth

Democracy in a substantial sense implies a claim to equal participation of all in collective self-government (Graeber, 2007b). Modern bourgeois societies have endorsed that claim as a founding principle—and consistently failed to live up to it by systematically undermining it through the social domination inherent to their own mode of operations. I have offered an account of how this has played out in organized and flexible capitalism, and how both have furthered that domination by deepening the increasing abstraction of personhood that Graeber calls the ‘generalization of avoidance’. Both regimes have produced their own distortions of and limitations to democracy, resulting from the ways in which the imperative to expand and appropriate inscribed itself into the personhood of citizens. In terms of future democratic prospects, this narrative may not offer all too much cause for optimism: Generalizing avoidant (i.e. structurally hierarchical) relations to such a degree as to enshrine them within the inner structure of the subject, the doxic anthropology of flexible capitalism, ostentatiously anti-discriminatory as the politics of responsibility it generates may be, appears ultimately irreconcilable with a genuinely egalitarian democracy. Rather, the complex global hierarchies of appropriation and externalization that enable the consumptive as well as responsible forms of citizenship of flexible capitalism are ultimately a highly advanced form of the practices of building the formal political equality and freedom of citizens on outward expansionism, and the appropriation of labour and care in a dissociated private sphere that is well known from the history of European democracies. However, recent struggles around enduring coloniality, violent racism and climate justice indicate that the liberal politics of responsibility could be facing a challenge from emerging movements ready to question the abstract logic of capitalist
modernity itself in the name of global solidarity and environmental justice (Brand and Wissen, 2018; Kothari et al., 2019).

This begs the question of what alternative principles a non-appropriative, non-externalizing democracy could be built on, or what alternative, emancipatory principles of *societalization* we can imagine. Societalization—the establishment of institutions and sets of rules that are different from *community* in assigning rights and obligations on a universal basis, regardless of concrete personal attributes—need not necessarily imply expansionism and externalization. Why shouldn’t egalitarian forms of societalization be possible that build on relations of care rather than exchange, improving the welfare and participatory opportunities of most people *without* having to expanding the rate of metabolic throughput? A truly universal and ecologically sustainable form of democratic societalization would need a conception of citizenship not defined by property, exchange and the inequalities and exclusions associated with them. And this requires challenging the hierarchical separation of the public and private that has been a defining feature of European democracy, which enables the abstract economic personhood of the public citizen proffered by private appropriation of others’ labour as property. It is that separation, and the systematic denial by abstract personhood of the ineluctably concrete acts of care and the gifts of nature that all humans depend on, that any genuinely egalitarian type of social organization would have to learn to do without.

Rather than trying to model non-hierarchical social relations on the symbolic counterpoints of joking and the carnivalesque, as Graeber himself (2007a) seems to suggest, it seems to me that struggles for substantial and sustained emancipation ought to be based on what constitutes both the real inversion and negated foundation of hierarchy: namely, efforts to constitute relations—both among humans and with extra-human nature—based on the principle of care and the consciousness of mutual dependency. By highlighting the great variability of how human societies have organized these relations, and exposing the doxic anthropologies of capitalist modernity in their historical specificity, anthropological research offers valuable contributions to thinking about what future transformations of, or beyond, capitalism may await us, and about the possibilities and problems these transformations may hold for such ‘caring democratization’. A key part in this is of course challenging grandiose, grossly simplifying structural accounts like the one given here. Anthropologists, like sociologists, are particularly well equipped for exposing the inconsistencies and ruptures in how the doxic anthropologies sketched out here play out in people’s actual socially specific experience (Eversberg, 2014b; Ortner, 2005; Skeggs, 2011). Understanding people’s multifarious ways of dealing and struggling with the pressures of exploitation and internalization as manifestations of non-identity points to paths toward human conditions liberated from the growth imperative that are already present as subordinate elements in human practice.

For envisioning possibilities of such transformations, the heterogeneous movements and actors of the ‘degrowth spectrum’ (Eversberg and Schmelzer, 2018) are obvious allies. Anthropologists’ insights resonate with their understanding that what is at stake is not further ‘liberation’ of the individual, but forms of autonomy
built on different, relational and caring concepts of personhood (Eversberg and Schmelzer, 2017). Conversely, degrowth movements’ calls to engage in a pluriversal dialogue about ‘a world where many worlds fit’ (Kothari et al., 2019) and for a ‘decolonization of the imaginary’ (Latouche, 2005), as well as the manifold prefigurative practices movement actors experiment with to explore the practical implications (Treu et al., 2020), are promising points of departure for inquiry into what democratic anthropologies of degrowth might look like, and what societal changes will be required to bring about conditions under which their generalization may become possible.

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