Capitalism and the Real: How the hegemony of capitalism is preventing action in face of the ecological crisis

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CAPITALISM AND THE REAL: HOW THE HEGEMONY OF CAPITALISM IS PREVENTING ACTION IS FACE OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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How do you feel when you see something beautiful and priceless being apparently destroyed before your eyes? Do you feel outraged? Good. Where is that feeling when you see the planet being destroyed? (Just Stop Oil activist, 2022).

[I]t is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2011, p. 6).

INTRODUCTION

Despite widespread scientific and public consensus on the reality of climate change and the necessity of taking preventative action, current efforts to curb global emissions are falling short. In 2015, 193 countries agreed to contain global warming well below 2°C (Paris Agreement, 2015, p. 3). Yet, five years later, the UN reported that current emission rates put us on a trajectory towards a 2,1-2,9°C increase in global temperatures (Synthesis report, 2022, p. 30). Despite the failure of current international efforts, technical and technological solutions, such as carbon cap-and-trade and carbon capture technology continue being promoted as solutions. Simultaneously, expressions of anxiety related to climate change are increasing (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Pihkala, 2018) while climate activists are met with disapproval and outrage (NOS, 2022). This reflects a disconnect between ideas and actions: despite evidence of the need for new solutions, we are unable to change our course towards global warming and the end of the world as we know it. What explains this apparent state of paralysis?

Psychosocial approaches to climate change offer insights. Ecoparalysis is a state in which people find themselves wanting yet unable to take measures to prevent further ecological deterioration (Albrecht, 2011). Ecoparalysis is closely related to ecoanxiety, anxiety rooted in the fear of climate change. Narratives of the ecological crisis that emphasise the scale and complexities of the crisis may overwhelm people and engender feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness (Hall, 2014). These reactions lead to psychosocial defence mechanisms, leading to ecoparalysis (Pihkala, 2018).

However, scholars from other disciplines have pointed out that what makes the ecological crisis so overwhelming is the fact that it is intrinsically linked to the hegemonic system (Moore, 2017; Fraser, 2022). This is overlooked in the psychosocial perspectives. The ecological crisis is

driven non-accidentally by capitalism, a system premised on endless accumulation through the exploitation and expropriation of nature, yet it threatens capitalism (Fraser, 2021). Firstly, by destroying its environmental conditions for survival. Secondly by requiring systemic change that would entail the dismantling of the system itself. This paradox could help explain our inability to take meaningful action in face of biophysical destruction. In light of this, I ask: *How does the hegemony of capitalism restrain our responses to the ecological crisis?*

In the first chapter I review the existing literature on ecoparalysis which sees ecoanxiety as the main driver of ecoparalysis. In the second chapter I demonstrate how this literature omits an important factor from its analyses, namely the hegemony of capitalism. I draw on critical theory to demonstrate how the hegemony of capitalism is limiting our responses to the ecological crisis. I analyse the ways in which the current stage of capitalism, understood as a hegemonic social order, shapes how we understand and interpret the world and our role in it, and what this means for how we respond to the ecological crisis. I argue that the hegemony of capitalism inhibits our ability to respond to the ecological crisis meaningfully and collectively because it prevents us from seeing alternatives. Through the establishment of capitalism as common-sense, reality is distorted in such a way capitalism becomes what is real. Consequently, we can neither conceive of ourselves of the world outside of capitalism.

Thus, this thesis bridges the gap between psychological and structural drivers of ecoparalysis. The psychosocial literature on ecoparalysis pays insufficient attention to the structural drivers of both the ecological crisis and our responses to it. Ecoparalysis cannot fully be explained without examining the structural forces behind both the ecological crisis and ecoparalysis. I argue that ecoparalysis should not be seen solely as a result of ecoanxiety, rather it stems from the hegemony of capitalism and our inability to envision a post-capitalist future. Furthermore, scholars analysing the hegemony of capitalism have rarely made explicit the implications for our responses to the ecological crisis.

CH. 1. REVIEWING PSYCHOSOCIAL EXPLANATIONS OF INACTION TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Despite growing consensus on the pressing reality of climate change and the need to take urgent collective measures to counter it, global emissions continue to rise (IPCC, 2018). While climate

denialism persists (Agius et al., 2020), the increasing newspaper coverage and the growth of climate movements (Thackeray et al., 2020) are evidence of a shift towards greater acknowledgement. Yet, the recent international climate agreements have been criticised for failing at substantially addressing the crisis (Allan, 2019; Bergkamp, 2017). Scholars have pointed at the lack of binding constraints on CO2 emissions in the Paris Agreement (Allan, 2019), and criticised the COP27 as a "collective failure to deliver a clear commitment to phase out all fossil fuels" (Siva, 2022), pointing out that the fossil lobby was better represented than the ten countries most impacted by climate change (Elton, 2022). Because of the lack of accomplishment and ambition, this current state might be characterised as inaction (Tørstad, 2020).

Psychosocial perspectives maintain that this is not due to apathy, but rather paralysis as a result of ecoanxiety (Pihkala, 2018). Caring too much about something and realising that there is little one can do, can cause one to feel hopeless and powerless (Albrecht, 2011). In this section I will review how inaction has been explained by psychosocial perspectives and highlight some limitations to this approach.

1.1 Psychosocial perspectives on the ecological crisis and the role of emotions

The literature on emotions and the ecological crisis dates to the 1970s. In 1972, psychoanalyst Harold Searles discussed the psychological reasons for apathy in face of the environmental crisis (Searles, 1972). In her book, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World,* Sherry Nicholson (2002) discussed the emotional dimension of environmental concerns. Over the last decade, psychotherapists experienced a growing number of patients dealing with grief, guilt and anxiety related to environmental degradation (Dodds, 2021). This led to the birth of the field of climate psychology, which deals with the psychological implications of climate change. This marks the establishment of psychosocial perspectives, studying the intersection of society, ecology and emotions. The role of emotions is important for two reasons.

Firstly, the ecological crisis has implications for our emotional life. Emotions can be taken to mean that which moves or affects us (Albrecht, 2019, p. 1). We form emotional connections to our natural surroundings and experience grief as a response to its destruction (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Albrecht (2019) calls this the "psychoterratic" implications of climate change. Psychoterratic emotions relate to our relationship with our biophysical environment. Climate change alters the physical environment, including weather patterns, ecosystems and landscapes,

and because we associate these features with home, it threatens our endemic sense of place (Albrecht, 2019). The emotional connection human beings experience towards their biophysical environment can lead to persistent feelings of anxiety about anticipated climate change and uncertainty about its implications.

Secondly, our emotional relationship with nature has implications for how we experience and respond to the ecological crisis. While our connections to the natural environment and the threat of crisis motivates different forms of activism, it also leads to inaction, as fear and anxiety can be paralysing (Bourban, 2023). This thesis is focused on the latter.

1.2 Psychosocial perspectives on ecoparalysis

Passivity and inaction in face of the ecological crisis can take the form of *ecoparalysis* (Albrecht, 2019; Innocenti et al., 2023, p. 2). While ecoparalysis might appear similar to apathy — both resulting in non-action — it should not be confused as such. Ecoparalysis is a psychoterratic conditions that refers specifically to a situation in which people would like to act, or at least acknowledge the need to act and yet find themselves paralyzed (Pihkala, 2018, p. 548). This is a result of caring too much, not too little, and of realising the scale of the problem and one's inability to personally do something about it. People are realising that "[c]hanging the light bulbs in the house [is] not going to solve the world's climate change problem" (Albrecht, 2019, p. 83), they are feeling helpless and hopeless.

Ecoparalysis is most commonly attributed to *ecoanxiety* (Albrecht, 2011; Bourban, 2023; Pihkala, 2018). The realisation that there is little one can do to prevent ecological destruction causes emotional distress, especially because of the emotional relationship between humans and their environment. The fear of such destruction can lead to ecoanxiety, which in turn can foster ecoparalysis because people tend to resort to psychological defence mechanisms when faced with difficult emotions (Ojala et al., 2021, p. 39; Pihkala, 2018, p. 549). While ecoanxiety is reinforced by apocalyptic frames of ecological disaster, it is particularly difficult because it is not based on an uncertain threat, but rooted in scientific evidence (Dickinson et al., 2013, p. 154; Soutar & Wand, 2022, p. 14). Anxiety is closely related to fear and worry and generated by uncertain, troubling situations (Ojala et al., 2021; Soutar & Wand, 2022,; Passmore et al., 2023; Pihkala, 2020). In short, ecoanxiety describes the anxiety felt regarding the threat that climate change poses to our natural environment.

From an existential perspective, ecoanxiety is a rational response to the ecological crisis. The crisis poses a very real threat to life on Earth, presenting us with unprecedented levels of uncertainty about our wellbeing and survival (Passmore et al., 2023, pp. 139-140). The ecological crisis can therefore lead to existential anxiety – a profound questioning and angst related to "life's givens" (Pihkala, 2020, p. 6). Beyond our own mortality, ecoanxiety relates to questions about the survival of all life on Earth (Albrecht, 2019), and a feeling that there is something deeply wrong with our relationship to the natural world (Rehling, 2022, p. 473). Thus, the crisis threatens our ontological security, our fundamental sense of safety and continuity (Wray, 2022). Furthermore, people's symbolic immortality, how they find meaning in life despite the inevitability of death, is threatened (Pihkala, 2018, p. 551). The knowledge of death may become bearable through symbols such as children, accomplishments, religion and the natural world (Nicholsen, 2002, p. 141). These symbols are threatened by the ecological crisis as it generates uncertainty about the future of our offspring and the continuity of life in the natural world (Passmore et al., 2023, p. 144). In sum, the ecological crisis can trigger existential anxieties related to mortality and meaninglessness.

1.3 Ecoanxiety and the four Ds of defence

Despite being a rational response to the ecological crisis, ecoanxiety can lead to irrational behaviours as defence mechanisms prevent engagement with the causes of anxiety. Defence mechanisms protect ourselves from a painful truth and allow us to pretend that the problem is not our concern or responsibility or does not exist at all (Adams, 2016, p. 132). In the following paragraphs I discuss four Ds of defence: denial, disavowal, dissociation and doubling.

Denial is "an unconscious defence mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality" (Cohen, 2001, p. 5) aimed at protecting us from the pain the truth would cause (Weintrobe, 2013, p. 36). Denial involves both knowing and not knowing at the same time. Stanley Cohen (2001) calls this the denial paradox: "[i]n order to use the term 'denial' to describe a person's statement 'I didn't know', one has to assume that she knew or knows about what it is that she claims not to know – otherwise the term 'denial' is inappropriate. Strictly speaking, this is the only legitimate use of the term 'denial'" (pp. 5-6). In some cases denial helps dealing with the initial emotions that appear after learning something difficult, because it pushes away parts of the truth that are too heavy to bear. This is called negation. Negation refers to the repressing of "a fact that finds its way into your consciousness" (Wray, 2022, p. 45) and denial of

the consequences. Negation might help people process their difficult emotions and eventually lead to mourning and acceptance.

A more severe form of denial is disavowal. Disavowal entails accepting the truth but minimising its significance (Cohen, 2001). This leads to a distortion of reality: we accept that the ecological crisis is a fact, but deny its psychological, political and moral implications (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 10-11). This distortion of reality prevents us from addressing the cause of ecoanxiety (Weintrobe, 2013, p. 39). By continuing on our current path,, we escalate the ecological crisis, and acknowledging this fact increases our anxiety. In response, we resort to disavowing what this means for our lives, and so we continue on living as we did before.

Another defence mechanism is dissociation. Dissociation is a form of psychic distancing from the destructive consequences of our actions, a numbing that allows us to emotionally detach from the suffering our actions may cause (Nicholsen, 2002, p. 159). Lifton (2017) compares psychic numbing to the animal instinct of playing dead in the face of a threat. Instead of acknowledging our dependence on the environment and our relatedness to its destruction, the lack of visible escape routes makes us "freeze" and defend the status quo.

An more extreme form of dissociation is doubling. Doubling entails the splitting of oneself in two selves, allowing for the participation in activities that one self finds morally reprehensible through the second self: "someone can be one person, morally speaking, in a destructive activity and another person, morally speaking, in another area of life" (Nicholsen, 2002, p. 160). This can create a double reality where activities of daily life are split off from the knowledge about the ecological crisis. This allows daily activities to continue normally without being interrupted by the disturbing knowledge of their consequences (Norgaard, 2011, p. 5). Doubling is particularly widespread in situations where people are both perpetrator and victim, because it is hard to accept that one's own actions are causing oneself harm. The framing of the ecological crisis in terms of "anthropogenic" climate change denotes the fact that global warming is caused by human activity. However, the term is contested as it overlooks the exploitation and oppression of some human communities by others (Haraway et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it leads people to experience themselves as both victims and perpetrators of the crisis.

1.4 Social construction of ecoparalysis

The four D's - denial, disavowal, dissociation and doubling - rarely occur in isolation from each other or from social contexts. Psychosocial perspectives to the ecological crisis understand psychological defence mechanisms as social psychological and socio-cultural phenomena (Adams, 2016, p. 147). Denial occurs through a process of social interaction which Kari Norgaard (2011) refers to as *socially organised denial*. Socially organised denial is "the process by which individuals collectively distance themselves from information because of norms of emotion, conversation, and attention and by which they use an existing cultural repertoire of strategies in the process" (p. 9). In other words, how we understand and experience, and therefore respond to the ecological crisis is not just up to the individual, it is socially and culturally determined.

1.5 The limitations of psychosocial perspectives: The elephant in the room called Capitalism

From psychological perspectives, ecoparalysis is explained as an irrational response as a result of psychological and social defence mechanisms. This suggests that one solution to ecoparalysis would be to avoid apocalyptic narratives of climate change (Hall, 2014). However, this individualises ecoparalysis and does not trace the ecological crisis to its structural drivers. As a result, the ecological crisis and its drivers are depoliticised, removing it from the sphere of politics. This focus on personal responsibility prevents critical questioning of the system. In doing so, the literature takes capitalism for granted.

This is a reflection of the hegemony of capitalism. Capitalism, understood as a social order, has become common sense (Brown, 2015). In the current era of financialised capitalism, neoliberal political rationality permeates not just the economy, but every sphere of life, from the social and political to the ecological (Fraser, 2015). By disavowing the implications of capitalism and its hegemony on the ecological crisis on the one hand, and focusing on individual responses to it on the other, psychosocial perspectives remain uncritical towards the structural driver of the ecological crisis and ecoparalysis and risk reproducing capitalist discourse.

In order to answer the research question, *how does the hegemony of capitalism restrain our responses to the ecological crisis?*, I will take a critical theory approach to the study of capitalism and its hegemony. Based on existing accounts of capitalism as a social order and discourse (Fraser, 2021; Harvey, 2005), I analyse what implications this has for our responses to the ecological crisis.

The need to consider capitalism arises not only from its role in the ecological crisis, but also because its hegemony shapes the political and social context in which the crisis occurs. Our responses are inevitably shaped by capitalism. In building my argument I adopt concepts such as hegemony, capitalism, neoliberalism, and governmentality from the Marxist tradition of structural critique. I review arguments of scholars such as Fraser (2021) and Brown (2015), who rely on Gramsci's hegemony by acknowledging that capitalism's dominance is not purely economic, and Michel Foucault's neoliberal governmentality, a mode of subjectification which requires subjects subjugating themselves. These concepts help us understand how the hegemony of capitalism shapes our subjectivities, politics, and emotional relation to nature, and thus, how we respond to the ecological crisis. Based on these concepts, I will answer my research question in the following chapter

CH. 2. "PLAYING POSSUM" IN THE FACE OF CRISIS: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE HEGEMONY OF CAPITALISM SHAPES OUR RESPONSES TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

In this chapter, I argue that the hegemony of capitalism limits our responses to the ecological crisis because it's establishment as common sense distorts reality in such a way that we cannot conceive of neither ourselves nor the world outside of capitalism. Consequently, are solutions to the ecological crisis are limited to those within the system, thus not tackling the root of the crisis, namely capitalism itself. Firstly, taking a theoretical approach, I look at what is meant by saying capitalism drives the ecological crisis. Secondly, I will look at the current stage of capitalism, f*inancialised neoliberal capitalism,* and its mode of government. Thirdly, I will analyse the implications of the hegemony of capitalism for how we deal with the ecological crisis. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for the concept of ecoparalysis.

2.1 Capital's cannibalisation of nature: Capitalism, contradictions and crises

Nancy Fraser (2022) paints capitalism as a monster that cannibalises its social, political and ecological conditions of possibility in its quest for limitless expansion. More than an economic system organised around private ownership, wage labour, market exchange and production for profit, capitalism should be understood as a social order in which a profit-driven economy

empowers investors and owners to accumulate wealth by free-riding on its "non-economic" conditions of possibility (Foster and Clark, 2018; Fraser, 2022; Moore, 2017). Capitalism constructs an "economic" realm in which "value" is generated through production and exchange (Fraser, 2021). This realm is separated from the "non-economic" realms devoid of "value". Yet, capital is constitutively dependent on social activities, political capabilities and natural processes. The exploitation of wage labourers - whose social reproduction costs capital pays in the form of wages - have always depended on the expropriation - appropriation without compensation - of enslaved and colonised people (Fraser, 2021; Pickren, 2021). Similarly, the exploitation of labour depends on various forms of uncompensated carework performed by families and public goods. Additionally, capital relies on nature's ability to self-replenish. The disavowal of the "non-economic" costs of production inclines capitalism towards crisis: "[s]imultaneously needing and rubbishing nature, capitalism is a cannibal that devours its own vital organs, like a serpent that eats its own tail" (Fraser, 2021, p. 101). The current public disinvestment from social reproduction, undervaluing of carework, ethno-racial oppression, gender inequality, police brutality, denial of labour rights, livelihood insecurity, are all rooted in the current system of financialised capitalism (Fraser, 2021, p. 96).

2.2 The new common sense: Financialised capitalism, neoliberalism and hegemony

Financialised capitalism, sparked by a transformation in the international order towards globalised free trade (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005), is characterised by the finance capital - currencies, stocks, futures and derivatives - taking centre stage. This led to a shift in the balance of public to private power: banks and financial institutions became increasingly important, states lost control of their own currencies, and trade unions were weakened due to relocation of manufacturing to the peripheries. Effectively, capital's influence was extended over its non-economic conditions of possibility (Fraser, 2015). This shift went hand in hand with a new political rationality: neoliberalism.

2.2.1 Neoliberalism

According to its proponents, neoliberalism is a set of economic policies grounded in political and economic theories emerging in the 1970s, advocating for free trade, free movement of capital, and a state limited to securing property rights and functioning markets (Harvey, 2005). However,

neoliberalism is more than a set of economic policies. Drawing on Foucault, Wendy Brown (2015, p. 121) understands neoliberalism as a political rationality, an order of normative reason that orders the relations between the economy, politics and society. Neoliberalism normatively extends market rationality - the ideas, values, metrics and practices that govern the market - to all spheres of life. It maintains that all spheres of life are best governed as such (Brown, 2006).

This market rationality is also extended to the individual. Neoliberalism emphasises freedom from constraint, and assumes that the individual is an autonomous economic maximiser (McDonald et al., 2017, p. 366). Individuals are encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs of their own enterprise, tasked with self-management and self-development (Han, 2017; Adams et al, 2019). Thus, rather than being coerced, individuals subjugate themselves to market rationality which dictate their interests, desires and aspirations (Read, 2009). Drawing from Foucault, Brown (2003) refers to this as "neoliberal governmentality". Neoliberal governmentality entails both subjectification, the governing and objectification of others into subjects through processes of knowledge and power, and subjectivation, the ways in which individuals construct themselves as a particular subject, in other words, the governing of one's self (Hamann, 2009, p. 39). Freedom implies responsibility for one's own wellbeing, and as market rationality is extended to every sphere of life, all activities are perceived in terms of self-improvement, including education, exercise, meditation and friendship (Han, 2017).

Neoliberal governmentality requires subjects that derive meaning and identity from capitalism, and thus actively stitch themselves into it, actively remaking themselves in terms of market rationality (Teo, 2018, p. 584). This requires that neoliberalism becomes common sense. Hence, neoliberalism should be understood not only as a political project aimed at restoring the conditions for capital accumulation and class power (Harvey, 2005), but as "a restoration of capitalism as synonymous with rationality" (Read, 2009, p. 32) through which capitalism becomes the only way of organising society, it becomes hegemonic.

2.2.2 Capitalism's hegemony

Capitalism's hegemony refers not only to its dominance as an economic system, rather it denotes the pervasiveness of capitalism across society. Drawing from Gramsci, Fraser (2015) defines hegemony as "the discursive face of domination, the process by which a ruling class establishes its authority and naturalises its domination by installing the presuppositions of its own worldview

as the common-sense of society as a whole" (p. 172). These presuppositions include ideas about the subject and agency, the responsibilities and capabilities of public power, the social order and principles of justice and morality, and the availability and desirability of alternatives. Hegemony is what makes capitalism not only the dominant system, but the only imaginable way of organising society.

The neoliberal common sense posits subjects as autonomous entrepreneurs, who because of their freedom are responsible for their own wellbeing. Freedom is conceived of in terms of economic choice — the subject is free as it can choose how to invest in its human capital. This freedom results in a moralisation of choice: morality is measured based on an individual's ability to self-care (Brown, 2015). State interferences, such as "free" welfare services, are consequently seen as oppressive of individual freedom and, besides that, inefficient (Fraser, 2015, p. 182). The state as well as the subject is understood to be best governed by market rationality. These values have become common sense: the subjects' freedom is seen to be inherent in human nature, and thus, neoliberal governmentality remains hidden from sight (Sugarman, 2015, p. 105). This has become common sense, diminishing the questioning of the status quo and the imagination of alternatives

So far I have argued that the hegemony of capitalism shapes our subjectivities, identities, social interactions and politics by presenting neoliberal rationality as common sense across all spheres of life. Now, I analyse how this applies to the ecological crisis. What are the implications of the internalisation of neoliberal subjectivity and governmentality and its establishment as common-sense for our responses to the ecological crisis?

2.3 Green capitalism, and depoliticization: How neoliberalism shapes our responses to the ecological crisis

2.3.1 Green capitalism

Evidently, neoliberalism shapes our responses to the ecological crisis by extending market rationality to the domain of climate politics. As a result, neoliberalism prescribes market-based solutions to the ecological crisis. Neoliberalism fosters a belief in technical solutions such as the carbon cap-and-trade principle, which allocates carbon emissions to be traded on the carbon market (European Commission, n.d.). It promotes investment in technology such as bio-energy carbon capture and storage (BECCS), which despite their contested efficiency are deemed as

carbon-reducing measures in the International Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) (Hickel, 2020, p. 120). And it promotes changes in consumption behaviours.

These solutions are powered by what Fraser (2021) calls "a new green-capitalist imaginary" (p. 119). Under financialised neoliberal capitalism, the whole of nature is subject to an economising logic. Just like the social and political sphere of life, ecology is dominated by an economising rationality which uproots nature from its place-specificity and gives it abstract economic "value". This lies at the heart of solutions such as carbon "offsetting", which maintain that carbon emissions in one location can be compensated by planting forests in another. This ignores the costs borne by local ecosystems, as well as the communities that depend on them. Neoliberalism also affects our responses in more hidden ways, through the radical abstraction of individuals from their social context and depoliticization.

2.3.2 Radical abstraction

Neoliberalism leads to "an experience of radical abstraction from context" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 191). Under financialised capitalism, social and ecological context is subordinated because capital is increasingly detached from its material and place based-sources, and instead relies on fluid assets such as currencies and stocks. Radical abstraction is reinforcing the ontological separation between economy and ecology. As a consequence, it leads to cost displacement in the form of environmental externalities. The abstraction of people from ecological context disregards the connection between individuals and nature and between human societies and nature, and thus reinforces the separation of humanity and nature. This strengthens a feeling of insulation from the ecological crisis, and lets us overlook destruction that does not affect us directly. When nature is separated from us, we do not need to feel grief at its destruction, and the less *visibly* dependent we are on it, the less we need to worry. This abstraction is evident in the rural Norwegian community that Kari Norgaard (2011) describes. Community members not yet hit by the effects of climate change, downplayed the ecological crisis, despite being aware of its effects in the Global South.

The abstraction of individuals from society leads to a denial of social relatedness (McDonald et al., 2017). As people seek to improve and invest in themselves, they might move to a different country to get the "best" education. This constitutes a detachment from their local community and a denial of social interdependence. As individuals are focused on self-optimisation, they lose touch with the concerns of the community, and instead prioritise their own

needs and aspirations. Thus, the ecological crisis is experienced as a personal problem rather than a societal concern.

The abstraction of individuals from their social and environmental context goes hand in hand with their self-responsibilization. Because individuals are posited as free and autonomous actors, they alone are responsible for taking care of themselves. Thus, neoliberalism conflates morality with economic rationality: it equates moral action with making rational choices for one's self (Brown, 2015). The moral autonomy of an individual is measured in terms of the individual's ability to self-care. Not only does this put individuals in competition with others, it presents failure to provide for one's own needs and to satisfy one's desires as moral failure. A moral citizen is one who is capable of taking care of their own needs, and does not rely on the state to provide it with health care or social services. This neglects and prevents scrutiny of institutions and structural drivers behind issues such as poverty, inequality, unemployment and the ecological crisis.

This influences our responses to the ecological crisis as it conceals capitalism's relation to it. Furthermore, corporations have capitalised on this moralisation of individuals. Corporations use "eco-friendly" rhetoric to shift the blame onto the individual consumer (Jensen, 2019). For example, the "carbon footprint" calculator, which measures individuals personal contribution to emissions, was introduced by an advertising campaign from British Petroleum, the world's second largest non-state owned oil company (Kaufman, 2020; Solnit, 2021). To conclude, the moralization of individual consumption reinforces the subjectivation of individuals as rational consumers (rather than citizens) and cloaks the responsibility of corporations.

2.3.3 Depoliticization

Market rationality and the focus on self-care has changed the idea of what it means to be a good citizen. Society is no longer seen in terms of democratic participation, but rather as a group of autonomous individuals that are concerned with their own wellbeing and express their autonomy through consumption choices (Brown, 2003). With the privatisation of public services, such as welfare and education, the relationship between citizens and their states have changed: instead of active participants of democracy, they are consumers of services provided by private actors that are supported by the state. This results in depoliticization.

According to Swyngedouw (2011), depoliticizations refers to the removal of an issue from "the political", meaning the space in which the people can contest meanings and debate over what

is the best way to organise society (p. 119). When an issue, such as the ecological crisis, is depoliticised, it is placed out of reach of public power, and instead makes it a policy problem to be solved by experts and technocrats within an preconceived framework (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015, p. 19). This shifts the issue from the political to the personal realm. Healthcare, welfare and social security are increasingly privatised or provided through public-private partnerships. Neoliberal rationality assumes that these tasks are better governed by the market or through market rationality. Issues that were once considered social, such as poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, and homelessness, are now considered personal (Hamann, 2009, p. 39). This results in a blurring of the political and personal.

This is echoed in the increased influence of private interests in public policy making, through lobbying and the corporatisation of public bodies. Political bodies are increasingly "managed" by the private sector and adopting its language: instead of interest groups or classes we get "stakeholders", "guidelines" instead of law, "facilitation" instead of regulation, and "standards" instead of policies and coercion (Brown, 2015, p. 129). This shift in language reflects a shift to "governance", a specific model of public life and politics in which public life is reduced to problem solving and implementation, and politics is reduced to consensus-building (Brown, 2015, p. 127). Under neoliberal governance, democracy becomes procedural and technical and is detached from public power.

In other words, the construction of citizens as consumers, and the reduction of citizenship to self-care, is depoliticising the ecological crisis and diminishing civic virtues and capacity for collective action. Because individuals are so focused on themselves, their desires and their goals, they are detached from their social and political context and the collective concerns of society. Additionally, public power is hollowed out from within through the extension of market rationality to public policy-making. Finding solutions for the ecological crisis is left to technocrats and corporations unaccountable to the public.

In sum, the focus on the individual prevents a questioning of the structural drivers of ecological crisis and the corporations profiting from it. Instead of questioning the status quo and demanding corporate accountability, individuals are made to feel morally bad for their contributions to the ecological crisis. Because morality is conflated with rational action, a moral individual is one who makes good consumer choices. Consequently, individuals are encouraged to make lifestyle changes such as reducing their consumption. Individuals are prevented from

seeking structural change, and their collective strength and civic virtues are diminished. Simultaneously, public power is delegitimised as constraining individuals' freedom of choice and thus perceived as inefficient. This prevents collective action. Rather than seeing the ecological crisis as an issue of public concern, created by structural factors, which should be solved through collective action, the ecological crisis becomes the moral responsibility of individuals.

As the literature on ecoparalysis demonstrates, the effects of neoliberalism are invisible. Neoliberalism has demonstrably become common sense. This leads me to my thesis that the hegemony of capitalism prevents us from imagining possible alternatives.

2.4 Saving the environment to save capitalism? A distortion of the real and existentialism

2.4.1 Capitalism and the real

Hegemonic worldviews include common sense ideas about the future and possible alternatives to the current system (Fraser, 2015). Capitalism is presented as the only possible and desirable economic and political system, and the extension of market rationality to all spheres of life is diminishing our collective ability to envision alternatives. Work, relationship, friendship, leisure, and even our identity itself, are all approached through the lenses of entrepreneurialism, investment, productivity and profit. In every sphere of our lives we are thinking in neoliberal terms.

This has led to what Mark Fischer (2011) calls "'capitalist realism'": the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (p. 6). Under capitalist realism, even critiques of capitalism end up reinforcing the same system. As an example, Fischer mentions the movie Wall-E (2008). The film is about a robot on an uninhabitable earth that has been destroyed by consumer capitalism and corporations, and therefore is unmistakably a critique of capitalism. However, it ends up reinforcing the hegemony of capitalism because it allows the viewer to *consume* anti-capitalism without having to *question* capitalism outside of the cinema. In other words, "the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity" (Fischer, 2011, p. 16). By making fun of its human characters, the movie perpetuates cynical reactions to capitalist critiques. Lacking alternatives to capitalism, people react to criticism with cynicism and ridicule.

This is echoed in Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay's (2009, pp. 201-206) idea of the "inversion of the real". Under capitalism's hegemony we can only accept as "real" that which fits

the assumptions of capitalism. Capitalism is taken as a given, as something that cannot be replaced and thus *must* be saved. The physical world filled with living beings is secondary to capitalism. In the inversion of the real, “human existence” becomes synonymous with “civilization” and “the world” becomes synonymous with “capitalism”. Consequently, “the end of capitalism” comes to mean “the end of the world”. In effect, we are more scared to see capitalism come to an end than we are of the destruction of our planet (Magdoff & Foster, 2011). This inevitably shapes our responses to the ecological crisis: As alternatives to capitalism are unthinkable, we can only imagine solutions within its hegemony that are ultimately inefficient because they perpetuate the very system which drives the ecological crisis. Given that under the current hegemony, "capitalism" has come to mean "the world", what does this mean for our understanding of our place in it and consequently our understanding of self?

2.4.2 Capitalist existentialism

Capitalism has seeped into our consciousness and shapes our desires, aspirations and hopes (Fischer, 2011, p. 13). According to Byung-Chul Han (2017), under neoliberalism we no longer see ourselves as subjects, but as projects, constantly seeking self-optimisation and productivity. Individuals are conceiving themselves in terms of market rationality and human capital and thus have become “auto-exploiting labourer[s] in [their] own enterprise” (p. 5). Neoliberal governmentality is aimed at making subjects dependent rather than to coerce, and “proves so effective because it does not operate by means of forbidding and depriving, but by pleasing and fulfilling. Instead of making people compliant, it seeks to make them dependent” (p. 20). Rather than repressing needs, neoliberalism stimulates them. As an “entrepreneur of [themself]” under the illusion of unlimited self-production, the individual seeks perpetual self-optimisation, running “on the compulsion to always achieve more and more” (p. 38). This imperative exhibits fanatical traits - people see no alternatives. We fashion ourselves according to what we see as real, and under neoliberalism, we construct ourselves in terms of market rationality, as enterprises to invest in.

Thus it is evident that the hegemony of capitalism shapes not only how we see the future, but how we see ourselves - and our offspring - in the future. Threats to the hegemonic order are therefore experienced as existential. Beyond raising questions about mortality and symbolic mortality, the ecological crisis tells us that there is something fundamentally wrong with the

current hegemonic order. Thus, people might experience ontological insecurity, insecurity related to our sense of being and continuity. This might force us to question what is real. If we do not question what is real, we are led down a path of hopelessness as we are unable to see alternative futures. Yet, realising that preventing destruction requires changing the system is also threatening, because we have internalised neoliberal political rationality to the extent that growth and self-optimisation have become common sense. In other words, we do not know ourselves outside of the hegemonic order. The ecological crisis threatens not only our current lifestyle, but our only way of being and knowing. The solutions we propose seem to be attempting to save capitalism rather than the environment, or perhaps saving the environment for the sake of saving capitalism.

2.5 Discussion: Hegemony and ecoparalysis

Grounded in the analysis of the hegemony of capitalism, understood as the way in which the presuppositions of the capitalist worldview becomes common sense, I have argued that capitalism shapes how we conceive of ourselves in relation to the state, to others and to non-human nature. Seeing ourselves as autonomous entrepreneurs, we have internalised the neoliberal subjectivity of the self-governing *homo oeconomicus* - our desires, aspirations and needs are all shaped by neoliberal capitalism. We assume this identity in every dimension of our lives. The illusion of freedom hides the power of neoliberal governmentality. We are compelled to take responsibility for our own lives which means that even collective issues like the ecological crisis are framed as our personal responsibility. As a result, our ability to mobilise collective action is diminished.

Permeating every dimension of our existence, every relation and social interaction, capitalism remains hidden in plain sight. Capitalism is common sense, one of life's givens, thus, we do not question it. Anything that contradicts capitalism cannot be conceived as real. As a consequence of this "inversion of the real, it is more important to save capitalism, from which we derive meaning and identity, than it is to save the environment, ontologically separated from capitalism and thus not "real". Hence, any solutions to the ecological crisis must occur within the system. The hegemony of capitalism prevents us from targeting the structural causes of the ecological crisis, namely capitalism itself and its relentless thirst for growth. This has implications for how we understand ecoparalysis. In particular, I argue, the defence mechanisms that lead to eco-paralysis do not occur in isolation from the influence of capitalism's hegemony.

Ecoparalysis, as Albrecht (2011) contends, might occur as we realise that our individual actions will not make a difference. Whereas this might be true, this realisation does not explain why collective action is not happening. This can better be explained by the effects of neoliberalism. Under neoliberalism, individualisation and depoliticizations are undermining our ability to collectively mobilise a challenge to the system. On top of that, we see capitalism as the only possible way of organising society. As we see no escape route, we "freeze" and are compelled to defend the status quo. Psychosocial perspectives argue that "freezing" is the result of *dissociation*, a denial of our relatedness to nature in order to protect ourselves from a painful truth - that the ecological crisis threatens to disrupt our way of life (Lifton, 2017). However, dissociation is not only taking place within the individual psyche. In fact, this occurs at the individual level only after it happens at the societal level, as a consequence of capitalism's ontological splitting of humans from nature.

According to psychosocial perspectives, another driver of ecoparalysis is disavowal. Disavowal leads to a distortion of reality. It entails recognising that the ecological crisis is happening and experiencing anxiety as a result. Simultaneously, this anxiety leads to the denial of the implications of the ecological crisis. The spiral of anxiety and denial leads to paralysis. However, this mechanism is not insulated from capitalism. Its hegemony contributes to the distortion of reality, because it further prevents us from questioning and addressing the causes of the ecological crisis. Not only does the hegemony of capitalism add to the experience of anxiety, by perceiving a threat to the system as a threat to the self, but it also reinforces the distortion of reality preventing us from acting. Simultaneously, disavowal reinforces the hegemony of capitalism. Given that capitalism distorts reality in such a way that prevents us from scrutinising the system, the creation of a double reality in which the knowledge of the ecological crisis and its implications for capitalism is split off from the activities of daily life, can also not be seen as separated from its hegemony. This process of splitting reality in two reinforces the distortion of the real, preventing us from collective action.

While the psychosocial perspectives acknowledge that denial is a social process, they do not recognise how these social processes of denial are shaped by and reproduce the hegemony of capitalism. By understanding ecoparalysis merely as an effect of ecoanxiety, psychosocial perspectives risk reinforcing hegemonic discourse, individualising and depoliticising the ecological crisis. Rather than seeing the ecological crisis as an issue of public concern, created by

structural factors, and which should be resolved through collective action, it becomes the moral responsibility of individuals who are tasked with self-help and positive psychology (Pickren, 2021). However, the psychosocial observation of ecoanxiety, or existential anxiety is correct. The ecological crisis is experienced as an existential threat because it threatens to destroy the environmental condition which capitalism depends on. This threatens our ontological security, what we know as real and what we derive meaning and identity from. Under neoliberalism we see ourselves as autonomous and rational individuals seeking self-growth in every sphere of our lives, and as a consequence we cannot separate our identity from the system that shapes it. Thus, a threat to the system is an existential threat to our identity. In sum, the inability to imagine alternatives outside of capitalism, leads us down a spiral of hopelessness, anxiety, psychosocial defences and ecoparalysis.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored how the hegemony of capitalism restrains our responses to the ecological crisis. My main argument is that the hegemony of capitalism causes an inability to imagine alternative futures. This prevents us from addressing the ecological crisis meaningfully. As we self-identify and draw meaning from the capitalist system, any threat to the system is an existential threat. Consequently, the psychosocial defences mechanism to anxiety, are an effect of the hegemony of capitalism, a distortion of the real, and the inability to imagine ourselves and the world outside of capitalism. Because capitalism systematically drives ecological crisis, solutions within the system are inefficient. Thus, we "freeze" as we see no escape.

I highlight and address the limitations of psychosocial perspectives on the ecological crisis. By emphasising psychological processes and overlooking the social structures in which those processes take place, this perspective risks depoliticising the ecological crisis, and reproducing the hegemony of capitalism. It treats capitalism as a given, and remains uncritical of its role in causing ecoparalysis, thus demonstrating and reproducing the hegemony of capitalism and the internalisation of neoliberalism as common sense.

This conclusion has implications for the study of the ecological crisis and emotions. It highlights the importance of considering the implications of structural forces and hegemonic discourse in psychosocial analyses. Moreover, analyses of the hegemony of capitalism have rarely

made explicit the implications of this for our responses to the ecological crisis. My thesis bridges these two areas of study. Additionally, the argument has a practical significance regarding challenges to the system driving the crisis in ecology, care, cost of living and political legitimacy.

There are also weaknesses to my account. The debate about capitalism is a century-old one, and there are many disagreements relating to its history and implications, for instance about whether capitalism originated with the industrial revolution or before (Moore 2016, Malm 2013). Due to the limited scope of this thesis I was limited to discussing definitions widely used in the study of politics and ecology. However, a more nuanced discussion on capitalism would have been welcome. This also applies to the terms hegemony and neoliberalism. My discussion is limited to general observations with limited space for examples. Future research could focus on particular dimensions of neoliberalism and analyse how these play out in practice.

Moreover, structural analyses always pose the risk of downplaying or overlooking agency. While this thesis studies how structure shapes agency, this does not mean that agency is determined by structure. My hope is that by studying how our actions - or inaction - is shaped by the hegemony of capitalism, we can create agency outside of this dimension. By resisting the societal pressures to achieve more and to measure well-being based on growth, and rather focus on community and collective concerns, the ecological crisis might be re-politicisation. This is crucial for global issues requiring collective political responses. Many environmental justice movements already achieve this by linking ecological justice and systemic change. As Fraser (2021) argues, what we need is an anti-capitalist counter-hegemonic bloc. Future research should be directed at how these movements counter the hegemonic discourse by creating new democratic spaces.

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