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Coercive Corporations: How Corporate Exit Threats Bring States to Their Knees

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Coercive Corporations:
How Corporate Exit Threats Bring States to Their Knees

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Abstract

This thesis investigates whether Corporate Exit Threats (CETs), explicit threats by corporations to withdraw investments, relocate operations, or shut down activities in a jurisdiction to influence government policy, constitute normatively illegitimate distortions of political autonomy. Given the growing economic power and mobility of multinational corporations, understanding the normative implications of CETs is increasingly important, yet currently underexplored. To address this gap, this thesis develops a philosophical framework of coercion, drawing on Nozick's classical account and Abizadeh's refinements. Coercion is turned to because it captures a paradigmatic form of autonomy violation and sets a demanding threshold for normative illegitimacy. The formulated framework integrates both descriptive and normative criteria to determine when CETs are coercive. While multiple approaches exist within said framework, this thesis pursues one normative pathway and proposes a sufficient condition under which CETs qualify as coercive. Through applying this approach to Amazon's threats against Seattle's head tax in 2018, this thesis demonstrates that CETs can meet the criteria set for coercion and, as such, concludes that CETs are coercive when they undermine a democratic institution's ability to pursue its self-determined ends by leveraging economic might, such that the government's ability to meet a basic need is constrained. In this consideration, political autonomy is taken as the central normative criterion. This outcome thus renders CETs normatively illegitimate exercises of political power. In this process, this thesis applies and extends existing theories of coercion to the context of CETs, clarifying how such threats operate in democracies and why they are normatively troubling. It thus provides a rigorous, philosophically grounded method for assessing CETs, demonstrating that the normative illegitimacy of corporate influence can be assessed through the lens of coercion. While acknowledging that other frameworks for assessing illegitimate influence exist and remain potential avenues for further research, this

work transforms a broadly held suspicion into a precise philosophical argument, advancing the debate on the moral boundaries within which corporations may operate in democracies.

Keywords: Corporate Exit Threats, Coercion, Political Autonomy, Democratic Legitimacy, Corporations, Corporate Political Activity.

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Introduction

Let us imagine, by way of an introductory thought experiment, a world wherein multinational corporations wield supreme authority, overshadowing democratic governance through sheer economic dominance. While an elected government remains, its autonomy is severely impaired by the demands of these economic giants. All policy is shaped in their favor, with any opposing propositions being immediately rejected. Such a scenario undoubtedly strikes most as extremely troubling, harshly contrasting the steadfast commitment to democratic ideals currently held. It threatens core normative values: democratic legitimacy, fairness, autonomy, equality, to name a few. Society, as has been the common belief since the Enlightenment, is to be ruled by the people, for the people. Nevertheless, at times, reality is not so far removed from the above as we might think and hope, albeit in a subtler form.

To substantiate this, consider the following example: in 2018, the City Council of Seattle (hereafter: Seattle) passed a tax law that specifically targeted large corporations to finance aid for the homeless. Regardless of one's personal stance on this policy, the decision reflects the output of a legitimate democratic process. However, Amazon, confronted with the possibility of financial repercussions from this policy, responded with the threat to move the planned expansions in its hometown, Seattle, elsewhere, which would jeopardize 7,000 jobs. This threat was made to strongarm the state into canceling the proposed tax and, ultimately, this threat indeed led to Seattle repealing the taxes, abolishing its democratically determined policy (Jayaram & Sridharan 2023, 56). This case exemplifies a broader pattern: governments decide upon a certain course of action, powerful corporations object, after which the threat of economic harm forces the government to backtrack on its policies or water them down.

In such a landscape, wherein companies grow larger by the day, amassing increasing amounts of economic (and thereby political) power, my thesis critically assesses the power

dynamic between corporations and government. While there are multiple forms of Corporate Political Activity (CPA) i.e., activities through which corporations attempt to shape government policies, this thesis specifically scrutinizes the practice of Corporate Exit Threats (CETs). A corporation formulates a CET when it explicitly threatens to withdraw investments, relocate operations, or shut down activities in a jurisdiction in order to influence government policy.

I focus explicitly on CETs because, due to increased globalization and growth in corporate size, this form of CPA is becoming increasingly easy to employ, which makes understanding the normative implications of its use crucial. The core value at stake is political autonomy and, by extension, democratic legitimacy. As such, this thesis answers the question: *Do Corporate Exit Threats constitute a normatively legitimate form of Corporate Political Activity, or do they amount to normatively illegitimate distortions of political autonomy?*

My conclusion is that the answer depends on the conditions under which the threat is formulated. I contend that CETs become coercive when the threatening corporation possesses sufficient economic power to render the government unable to meet some basic need. In such instances, CETs are normatively illegitimate. This does not entail that non-coercive instances of CETs are normatively legitimate. Coercion is but a single route through which normative illegitimacy can be shown, and other routes remain unassessed. CETs are then simply not illegitimate on the grounds of coercion.

Whilst much literature addresses CPA broadly, little attention has been paid to the normative status of CETs and its implications are thus insufficiently understood. This thesis aims to uncover the normative detriment that coercive CETs can cause in order to raise awareness for current practices and to present a warning for future practices, especially as the size and might of companies continues to grow. While the conclusion of this thesis may not

initially appear groundbreaking, given that it aligns with the prevailing intuition that corporate influence on democratic governments is normatively troubling, it provides what thus far has been missing: a systematic account of why and when CETs are normatively illegitimate exercises of power. By providing this foundation, this thesis does not merely echo a common suspicion but transforms a widely held assumption into a well-grounded, defensible philosophical position, which in turn contributes to the conversation on the moral boundaries within which corporations may operate in democracies.

To achieve abovementioned, I proceed as follows: chapter 1 lays out the necessary contextual groundwork. First, I explain what corporations are, subsequently, I present the contemporary corporate landscape as one wherein corporations are growing in size and influence, and then I explain that corporations engage in CPA because they view the government as a tool through which the corporation's competitive environment can be bettered. This is followed by a more detailed portrayal of CETs, showing how companies can (attempt to) leverage their mobility and economic might to alter governmental policy. Chapter 2 delves into the philosophical concept of coercion in order to sketch a framework through which CETs can be judged. First, I outline the rationale underlying my choice for coercion as a starting point for the normative assessment of CETs. After this, I formulate Nozick's classical conception of coercion as the benchmark, as this is the background against which the contemporary understanding of coercion rests. I argue that slight alterations and supplementations made by Arash Abizadeh render a superior list of conditions, which still mostly corresponds to that of Nozick. This alteration includes the incorporation of a normative condition, over Nozick's mere descriptive conditions, to showcase the moral significance and unacceptability of coercion. Finally, I lay out the difference between threats, offers, and warnings, also based on Nozick. In short, chapter 1 and 2 form the 'tool-sharpening' part of my thesis. Chapter 3 kicks off the 'tool-use' part, as it synthesizes the

work of the foregoing chapters.¹ First, I show how CETs meet the formulated descriptive conditions. Second, I explain the need for an additional normative condition, which ties the violation of political autonomy into the definition of coercion in the context of democratic agents, due to the deep-rooted importance of autonomy in democratic theory. Third, I show that CETs can violate political autonomy by removing a democratic agent's acceptable choices by rendering them unable to meet some basic need. I then deal with a threefold set of possible counterarguments. Chapter 4 deals with the notion of 'anticipatory coercion', which refers to the possible coerciveness of the expected future threats or actions of corporations, which leads to corporations preemptively aligning their actions with the preferences of corporations. I argue that this cannot be coercive, due to the problematic consequences such an accommodation would have on the use of coercion as an identifier of wrongful constraints of autonomy. Finally, in a brief conclusory chapter, I offer a succinct summary and speculate on the future.

¹ My usage of 'tool-sharpening' vs. 'tool-use' echoes Nozick's words at the outset of his 'Coercion' (1969, 441). I have chosen to use the terms as a nod of respect, aiming for my work to constructively build on his.

Chapter 1: Corporations, CPA, and CETs

The first step in fully understanding the corporate landscape is defining its inhabitants. The terms ‘corporation’, ‘firm’, ‘company’, and closely-related variants are often used interchangeably, whilst differing slightly in precise meaning and connotation. These terms jointly refer to commercial business entities, and for the purpose of this thesis will indeed be used interchangeably, but shall uniformly refer to ‘corporations’ in the matter that I shall proceed to describe. This shall prove important in the proper evaluation of the normative significance of their actions in the context of CETs.

David Ciepley provides a crucial conceptual description of corporations, stating that these are not merely associations of individuals or aggregations of private contracts but, rather, state-created entities with legal personhood. This entails that a corporation can own property, make contracts, and appear in court. This ‘contracting individuality’ also has the right to make and enforce rules beyond the laws instated by the country of residence, albeit solely within its own domain. These rights must be enacted by natural persons associated with the corporation, for a corporation itself can obviously not act. An agent then acts in name of the corporation, with all possible consequences of these actions being, from a legal perspective, attributed to the corporation over the agent (Ciepley 2016, 2). Further of importance is that business corporations, such as we are dealing with, are not ‘member corporations’, such as unions or religious communities, where members jointly govern. Instead, they are ‘property corporations’, which entails that they are hierarchical institutions in which shareholders function as external investors, and not as deliberative participants (Ciepley 2016, 10-11, 17-19). In these corporations, governance is primarily centralized through managerial authority that is legally structured to operate without internal democracy. This legal and institutional architecture, as illuminated by Ciepley, is important to keep in

mind, because it later reveals that corporations exert strategic influence over political processes not as natural persons or democratic participants, but as impersonal, state-constructed legal entities.² What emerges is then not a community of deliberating equals, but a hierarchically governed institution with the capacity to act in politically consequential ways, without itself being subject to political accountability.

Regarding these corporations, over the past decades, some have grown to stellar sizes. At the time of writing, there are five companies with a valuation north of \$1 trillion. The leader of this pack is Apple Inc., currently valued at \$2.97 trillion, which entails that less than ten countries in the world have a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is larger.³ In addition to rising valuations, companies have grown considerably in employee-count, with Amazon and Walmart having 1.6 and 2.1 million employees respectively (Amazon.com, Inc. 2024, 6; Walmart Inc. 2024, 4). To put this number in perspective, this entails that there are approximately fifty countries that have fewer inhabitants than Walmart has employees.

This growth in size can be attributed to several interconnected factors. Primarily among these are liberalization, market deregulation, privatization of formerly public services and enterprises, increased reliance on private sector employment, and enhanced international mobility stemming from globalization (Martin Kroll 2024, 354). The factor of international mobility is of great importance to this thesis, as it grants greater credibility to CETs because this mobility allows for multinational corporations to strategically shift production and profits

² Interestingly, Ciepley argues that the legal personhood of corporations is not grounded in natural rights, but in a charter-based legal fiction justified only by policy need. This entails that corporate influence over the political sphere must be justified on instrumental grounds instead of assumed, as it often is now. This entails that such rights must be granted to a corporation to facilitate the achievement of its authorized purposes (Ciepley 2016, 5). When corporations wield political power, such as through CETs, the burden of legitimacy thus rests on whether such acts advance the authorized purposes under which the corporation was granted its legal rights, instead of on some presumed entitlement to political participation. This interpretation entails that any corporate influence in decision making that has not been instrumentally justified would undermine the equal standing of citizens, thereby undermining the democratic workings of society. This would grant an entirely new dimension to the critique of CPA and CETs. However, as these rights *are* often assumed, I would place my discussion in that context, whilst recognizing that the assumption of such rights has normative consequences.

³ Based on <https://companiesmarketcap.com>, which continually calculates and updates companies' market caps.

to other jurisdictions, which thus entails that capital can be moved across borders seamlessly, allowing for the eluding of regulation and taxes and manipulation of government processes (Christiano 2010, 197).

As corporations have grown in size, they, as individual entities, have become a force to be reckoned with. Where corporations in the past might have been massive powers within nation-states, the largest corporations now stand alongside the largest nation-states and economically tower over the remainder.⁴

Despite their great size, high employee-count, and internationally segmented nature, large corporations nevertheless manage to present themselves as unitary entities, both in the political and economic spheres of society. The diverse powers found within the corporation consolidate into a single, directive point (Kroll 2024, 351). Fundamental to the vast majority of the relationships within these loci of collective action is that their coordination is not organized through voluntary bargaining but through authority-driven, hierarchical relationships. The corporation is by nature authoritarian, since all authority resides in the upper echelons of the structure (Ciepley 2016, 15). In other words, within these organizations, actors are not equals in a democratic setting, but rather, some agents follow the orders from or work on the behalf of others (Claassen & Bennett 2022, 6). Elizabeth Anderson deepens this insight by contending that most modern workplaces function as ‘private governments’, namely as entities that have unaccountable, centralized authority over workers. She compares the internal structure of such businesses to communist-style dictatorships, where the CEO is a self-appointed or oligarch-appointed de facto dictator, whom the workers must obey. The firm owns all productive assets and organizes work through centralized planning, and thus not, therein similar to Ciepley, through voluntary

⁴ Historical examples come to mind of large corporations that existed alongside nationstates, such as the VOC, however, at the height of their existence they held 36,000 employees, a number dwarfed by current employers (De Vries 1997, 462).

exchange or some internal market mechanism. Anderson emphasizes that this arrangement is undemocratic, as those at the bottom have no formal input into the decisions that dictate their working lives and, in some instances, spill over into their personal lives. The result is a workplace that is defined by hierarchical subordination instead of through the mutual agreement of democratic participation (Anderson 2017, chapter 2). In line with this analysis, Kroll observes that, as a general rule, far-reaching levels of democratization can only be found in smaller businesses, rather than large multinationals (Kroll 2024, 356).

Despite this non-democratic make-up, economically mighty corporations are increasingly relevant political actors within democracies, due to their growing influence (Kroll 2024, 351). However, before explaining *how* corporations influence politics, I shall first take a step back and explain *why* they do so. In explaining this, shedding some light on *how* is unavoidable, but a more detailed account shall follow. As for the *why*, succinctly summarized, companies (aim to) influence politics in order to achieve some benefit which they otherwise would not have. This is possible because government policy greatly affects corporate performance, as it dictates which taxes, laws, and regulations a company must adhere to. As such, ‘the government may be viewed as a competitive tool to create the environment most favorable to a firm’s competitive efforts.’ (Epstein 1969, 142).

A clear-cut example of a company cunningly influencing government policy in its favor is Walmart. Over the last decade, Walmart has annually spent between \$6 and \$8 million on lobbying, specifically lobbying against the raising of minimum wage and for the retention of the USA’s federal food stamp programs. Walmart does so to protect the \$13 billion in revenue that it generates through food stamps, some of which comes from purchases by their own employees. Walmart’s goal, which it additionally works towards through other tactics, is to prevent them from having to pay their employees more and to

prevent their employees from not receiving government-funded food stamps - part of which they spend at Walmart (Bennet, Brouwer, and Claassen 2022, 1).

This example clearly portrays the effects of government policy on corporate performance, as well as the potential upside that lies in CPA. All in all, the goal of CPA is thus to produce policy outcomes that are favorable to a corporation's 'survival and success' (Hillman and Hitt 1999, 826).

Having established *why* corporations engage in CPA, I shall proceed with a more detailed account of the *how*, which is split into two parts. First, it must be assessed if a company has sufficient economic might to be able to successfully engage in CPA, and second, should this be the case, which different forms of CPA a company has at its disposal.

The assessment of the first step, it must be realized, is entirely relative to the domain wherein a company wishes to engage in CPA. Obviously, the amount of economic power necessary to exert influence over some institution depends on the size of the institution that is attempted to be influenced. To exemplify this, it can easily be imagined that the amount of power necessary to influence the federal government of the USA is much higher than the amount necessary to influence that of the Netherlands. On a smaller scale, the same principle stands. It can easily be imagined that in a small town, the attempted CPA of a local baker that generates <1% of the town's revenue fails, where that of the local mine that generates >50% is successful. In the above, to clearly portray the point, other possible facets of importance are disregarded, such as the vastly differing political systems found in the Netherlands or USA. All in all, whether a company has sufficient power to successfully engage in CPA is relative to its goals. The specifics of when this point is reached exactly are not of importance to this thesis, as the conceptual point stands, which is sufficient to work with.

We can now continue with the second aspect, that of the actions at a corporation's disposal. Broadly formulated, by having secured political power through amassing control

over essential resources, corporations can persuade, coerce, or in various form influence the government according to their strategic interests. There are many forms of CPA, such as, but not limited to, financial injections in political campaigns, lobbying, political advertising, coalition building. These actions are unified by a common goal: to produce policy outcomes that are favorable to a corporation's flourishing.

This thesis, however, has a narrower scope, focusing not on CPA as a whole, but solely on CETs. As mentioned, a CET is when a corporation explicitly threatens to withdraw investments, relocate operations, or shut down activities in a jurisdiction in order to influence government policy. In employing a CET, a company thus leverages its ability to mobilize capital and jobs. In order to avoid confusion, a similar but different form of CPA must be examined, namely capital strike. Capital strike is when a corporation withholds new investments or curtails economic activity to protest or avoid government policies. The key difference, albeit a slight difference, is that withdrawing an investment is available to all corporations, whilst relocation, i.e., exits, are only available to those sufficiently mobile (Winters 1996, 22; Fairfield 2010, 40). Capital strike stops the economic activity, whilst CETs have economic activity continue or move elsewhere. In practice there is considerable overlap, as a CET might initially manifest as a slowdown in investment until the corporation's demands are met, which would make it a de facto capital strike.

This form of political influence is reserved for corporations, with there being a clear asymmetry in exit power between corporations and citizens. Corporations can credibly threaten to exit, shifting capital and operations elsewhere if policies do not align with their interests but, whilst individuals can technically emigrate, this is rarely a feasible or politically significant response in a way that a CET may be. This imbalance grants corporations a distinct form of political leverage that allows them to influence governments in ways that are not available to the citizens who must live under the resulting laws.

Now, to generate further understanding of what CETs are, I shall list some examples. I have attempted to find examples from all over the globe, in order to showcase the prevalence of the issue. Whilst there are sufficient examples to be found, those located in the West remain the most striking, which might be attributed to the Western political and economic systems of which the corporations are part, but I dare not speculate on this matter. Unfortunately, a single thesis is too brief to solve this question in addition to those I have taken upon myself to answer, so without further ado:

As seen in the introduction, in 2018, Amazon threatened to halt expansion plans in Seattle, potentially costing 7,000 jobs, after the city passed a tax targeting large companies to fund aid for the homeless. In response to this threat, Seattle repealed the tax. I shall later turn to this example in far greater detail.

In 2020, in Alameda County, California, Elon Musk threatened to relocate Tesla's headquarters and to move future expansions to Nevada and Texas, after Alameda County refused to lift Covid-19 shelter-in-place orders. Musk tweeted that Tesla's remaining in California depended on how the company was treated going forward. Musk then reopened the factory in defiance of court orders. Shortly after, Alameda County agreed to allow Tesla to reopen if they adopted specific safety protocols, thus watering down the initial policy (Jayaram & Sridharan 2023, 56).

In 2021, in Georgia, Apple threatened to abandon major economic projects in the state if the legislature ended up passing a bill increasing independent developers' share of app store revenues. In response to this threat, the state dropped the bill (Birnbaum 2021).

In 2016, in Nigeria, foreign airlines faced a currency crisis that prevented them from repatriating ticket revenues due to strict foreign exchange controls. In response, they threatened to suspend or halt services, to pressure the government to act. In response to this

threat, the Nigerian government eased some of the foreign exchange restrictions for the aviation sector, but did not enact a full policy overhaul (BBC 2016; Dzirutwe 2024).

In 2024, in the Netherlands, ASML threatened to shift its future investments abroad if the Dutch government proceeded with its planned restrictive migration policies. In response to this threat, the Dutch government launched ‘Operation Beethoven’, an initiative of multiple ministries, through which it granted ASML the retention of access to foreign talent in addition to the watering down of anti-expat financial policies. The CET thus allowed ASML to extract policy concessions (Kassam 2024; van Houtert 2025).

In all of the above examples, economically mighty corporations use CETs to create environments that ameliorate a company’s position.⁵ Governments fear the economic consequences they are threatened with and thus succumb to the demands of the corporations. In chapter 3, I will argue that such threats can be coercive, following the economic might and subsequent threats of the corporations. In chapter 4, I shall also consider the government’s anticipation of possible CETs.

⁵ A less clear-cut example, but one still worth mentioning is that in 2014, in Thailand, Toyota expressed concerns about the political instability in the country and its potential impact on company operations. As such, it threatened to alter its \$609 million investment plans and to reduce production. In addition to a return in political stability due to a coup, obviously not stemming from Toyota’s threats, the government introduced various incentives to aid Toyota, such as tax benefits. In response to the threat, the Thai government thus altered policy to retain Toyota’s capital (Dhanananphorn 2014).

Chapter 2: Coercion, the Conversation

As promised, this chapter proceeds with the breakdown and analysis of the philosophical concept of coercion. This is done to create a framework within which CETs can later be placed and subsequently judged. As such, this chapter does not yet evaluate the possible coerciveness of CETs but lays the conceptual terrain within which such an evaluation becomes possible and meaningful. The importance of this pursuit is that, if CETs can be shown to be coercive under certain circumstances, this would adversely impact the normative acceptability of their use.

The choice to evaluate CETs through the concept of coercion is motivated by both normative and practical considerations. Normatively crucial is that coercion constitutes the most clear-cut form of autonomy violation, in comparison to other forms of influence. This makes coercion a particularly suitable candidate for assessing whether the autonomy of democratic governments is being undermined. Especially within democratic theory, coercion carries a distinct normative weight, as it bypasses deliberative processes and constrains political agents in ways that are fundamentally at odds with the ideal of self-rule. At a later point, I shall provide an in-depth account of the normative significance hereof. Practically speaking, coercion is a well-theorised concept with clearly formulated criteria developed in the philosophical literature, which thus allows for a structured and precise analysis.

Additionally, coercion sets a demanding threshold, such that, if CETs can be shown to be coercive, their normative illegitimacy is immediately clear. However, if CETs cannot meet this threshold, it does not automatically imply their normative legitimacy. Rather, it leaves open the possibility that CETs might still be normatively illegitimate under less demanding criteria of influence. Through my choice for coercion, I thus leave room for further research into possible 'weaker' forms of autonomy violation by CETs. Finally, and important from a

methodological standpoint, I am able to offer more depth and conceptual focus by narrowing scope to one specific form of influence.

Now, before proceeding with a philosophical account, it is instructive to begin with how coercion is commonly understood in everyday language, namely, as an agent using some threat or action to intentionally constrain someone's choice by creating negative consequences that should come to pass if the target does not comply. The coercer might issue a threat such as, 'if you do not do X, I will impose Y', where Y is then an outcome that the coercee has clear reason to avoid. In 'successful' instances of coercion, the threat is deemed credible by the coercee in conjunction with an outcome that is sufficiently negative such that the coercee complies.

Classical work on coercion primarily surrounds coercion in the context of the state and its citizens. Thomas Aquinas believed that the government should bear the sole right to coerciveness and that it should be kept away from private parties. Hobbes held a similar position, stating that the state functions through its ability and right to coerce. More recently, Kant held that governmental coercion was fundamental to the protection and guarantee of the rights of citizens (Anderson 2023). However, despite the common association of coercion with the relation between governments and their citizens, this relationship need not be present. Coercion can occur between any two agents, as long as a power dynamic is present through which one party has the ability to constrain the other's options. In other words, can P have Q (not) do X? Whether this involves a government and its citizens, two governments, two citizens, or, as I argue, a company and a government, is irrelevant to assessing the presence of coercion.

The starting point of the contemporary philosophical debate on coercion can be pinpointed in Robert Nozick's 'Coercion' (1969). Despite this work being released as a preliminary to a longer study on liberty, it has formed the background against which the

philosophical conversation takes place. Whilst authors may diverge on the specifics, the core of Nozick's framework has been widely adopted for the majority of all subsequent work, be it explicitly or implicitly (Anderson 2023). I shall remain close to Nozick's account of coercion but opt for slight alterations and additions, which I shall argue for upon their introduction.

Nozick's account starts by formulating a set of necessary conditions for the presence of coercion in an act between two agents. He formulates an initial list, which he consistently chips away at by running through a wide array of hypotheticals and counterfactuals, finally ending up at the following: person P coerces person Q into not doing act A if and only if (Nozick 1969, 441-443):⁶

- (1) P threatens to bring about or have brought about some consequence if Q does A (and knows he's threatening to do this).
- (2) A with this threatened consequence is rendered substantially less eligible as a course of conduct for Q than A was without the threatened consequence.
- (3) P makes this threat in order to get Q not to do A, intending that Q realize he's been threatened by P.
- (4) Q does not do A.
- (5) Part of Q's reason for not doing A is to avoid (or lessen the likelihood of) the consequence which P has threatened to bring about or have brought about.
- (6) Q knows that P has threatened to do the something mentioned in 1, if he, Q, does A.
- (7) Q believes that, and P believes that Q believes that, P's threatened consequence would leave Q worse off, having done A, than if Q didn't do A and P didn't bring about the consequence.

⁶ The formulation Nozick opts for is that of a preventative threat, such that P prevents Q from doing A, however, the conditions could be altered such that P forces Q to do A (which Q does not want to do).

Two things stand out in Nozick's list of requirements. First, that Nozick reserves a large role for the mental states of the actors. Second, that Nozick has a built-in 'success' condition, such that coercion only takes place if Q indeed does not do A.

On the first point, Nozick's stressed importance of the agents' mental states narrows the interpretation of coercion. Condition (6), whereby Q must know that P has threatened to do the thing in (1), prevents the following situation from being coercion:

[...] P threatens Q, saying that if Q performs a particular action, a rock will fall and kill him. P thinks Q knows of his (P's) infamous procedure of murdering people, but Q thinks that P is telling him about some strange natural law that holds independently of human action, namely whenever someone performs this action, he gets killed by a falling rock. That is, Q understands what P says, not as a *threat* but as a *warning* (Nozick 1969, 441).

In the above situation, if Q does not perform the particular action, this is because he believes that P has warned him. We might even venture that Q is thankful for P's warning. As such, Q does not experience this as coercion, nor does he realize that coercion was attempted. Nozick's necessary condition that one must realize one is being coerced remains unmet in the above situation, which for Nozick entails that P does not coerce Q.

An additional requirement that stems from Nozick's focus on mental states, is the perceived credibility of the threat of P by Q, as mentioned in (5). This condition stipulates that Q must believe that P's threat to carry out A is credible, for Q takes action to prevent (the consequence of) A from happening. If Q did not find the threat credible, its prevention would not be necessary. Such a condition ensures that, regardless of whether P is bluffing or not, as long as Q finds the threat credible, the attempt at coercion can succeed. This stipulation thus widens the scope of possible instances of coercion, for it shows how the perception of the coercee can be more important than the objective feasibility of the threat.

The second aspect of Nozick's conditions for coercion that stands out, is his inbuilt success requirement, found in condition (4). This requires that, for P to successfully coerce Q, Q must actually not do A. It is relatively uncontroversial that if Q forgoes action A due to P's threat, the action is coerced. Nonetheless, it seems that instances where coercion is intuitively present are precluded under this condition. Imagine that Q currently does not wish to do A but might form the wish to do so in the future – however, Q already knows that they *would* be prevented from fulfilling said wish in that case, is there then no coercion present at all? Perhaps one would never have had the intention but stating that there is no coercion present appears counterintuitive. To remedy this tension, in cases where an explicit threat has been made, Abizadeh differentiates between *actual coercion* and being *subject to coercion*.

To simplify the matter, before proceeding with an explanation of Abizadeh's differentiation, I shall adopt his list of necessary conditions, which mostly correspond to that of Nozick (Abizadeh 2008, 64). Adopting Abizadeh's framework allows for the easier incorporation of his abovementioned differentiation into our future analysis. Additionally, its concise wording lends itself for easier application. Slight differences between Abizadeh and Nozick reveal themselves under close scrutiny, but these shall be dealt with after listing the new conditions. For Abizadeh, the following conditions encapsulate both actual coercion and being subject to coercion (2008, 58):

- (1) P communicates to Q his intention to cause outcome X if Q undertakes action A.
- (2) Q believes that $X \wedge A$ is worse for her than $(\neg X) \wedge (\neg A)$, such that X provides Q a reason not to do A.
- (3) P's reason for threatening X is his belief that X provides Q a reason not to do A.
- (4) Q believes that P has the capacity to cause X and intends to do so if Q does A.

(5) Q does not do A.

(6) Part of Q's reason for not doing A is to avoid X.

The differences worth mentioning are twofold, neither of which undermine the applicability of the framework for our purposes. First is that Nozick includes a nested belief structure in condition (7), which requires not only that Q believes the consequence would make action A undesirable, but also that P believes that Q believes this. This structure necessitates a mutual awareness of the interaction as coercive. Abizadeh has no such requirements but still captures the essential behavioral dynamics, as P communicates an intention, after which Q forms a belief about it, which alters Q's action. This alteration by Abizadeh allows for a clearer focus on motivational structure, without being overdemanding. For perhaps P does not necessarily believe that Q believes that the consequence would make action A undesirable, but is limited in their options, desperately hopes so, and (successfully) formulates the threat as a final hail Mary. Second, Nozick requires that P intends to have Q recognize that they are being threatened in condition (3), whilst Abizadeh forgoes this requirement. Abizadeh hereby broadens the scope of coercion. While Abizadeh requires that P communicates an intention and that Q believes that P will act on it, it does not require that Q recognizes this as a threat. Q may simply believe that a consequence (enacted by P) will follow from doing A. Nozick, however, demands that P intends for Q to realize they are being threatened. Abizadeh's model is more flexible, as it captures cases lacking explicit recognition, such as those of subtle or misconstrued threats. To exemplify this, I would revert to Nozick's example of the falling rock. In this situation, P has the goal to coerce Q into doing $\neg A$, so P communicates to Q that a rock will fall on his head and kill him, should Q do A. Then, regardless of the perception of P's intention by Q, should Q comply with P's wishes, his actions have been altered through this communication. Q, due to P's communication, was limited in their

options and had no feasible alternative than to do $\neg A$. As such, this would suffice for being a successful instance of coercion. Thus, even if Q misconstrues the communication as a warning, it may still constitute coercion, provided that the communication meets the criteria of a threat, which shall later be formulated. The focus, here thus shifts away from the recognition of the coercee, Q, towards the consequences of the communications, namely the altered actions of Q by P.

Having established the applicability of Abizadeh's conditions, Abizadeh's differentiation between actual coercion and being subject to coercion can be explained. In cases of the former, an agent is successfully prevented from doing something that they would likely have done in the absence of their coercive counterpart. However, for the latter, an agent can be subject to coercion regardless of whether or not their actions have successfully been prevented or compelled, all that is relevant is that the coercive measure is in place and that the threat is serious enough that one has 'a reason of great weight' to do as ordered (Miller 2010, 115). Abizadeh clarifies this with the following examples: a person who, despite a law against public expression, nonetheless spoke, was still subject to the law's coercive threat. Moreover, a person who did not speak, for whom the law's coercive threat played no role in this decision, since she never had any intention of speaking, was also subject to legal coercion (Abizadeh 2008, 57-59). This showcases that one whose actions are actually coerced is also subject to coercion, but one subject to coercion need not actually be coerced. Under both of the options, the threatening agent acts coercively. To clearly distinguish between the two, Abizadeh explains as follows. P's threat subjects Q to coercion only if:

- (1) P communicates to Q his intention to cause outcome X if Q undertakes action A.
- (2) P believes that $X \wedge A$ is worse for her than $\neg X \wedge \neg A$, such that X provides Q a reason not to do A.

(3) P's reason for threatening X is his belief that X provides a reason not to do A.

(4) Q believes that P has the capacity to cause X and intends to do so if Q does A.

However, P's threat actually coerces Q's (in)action only if two more conditions are met:

(5) Q does not do A.

(6) Part of Q's reason for not doing A is to avoid X.

This differentiation adds a crucial layer to the conceptual framework surrounding coercion, as it reveals that agents may be implicated in varying degrees of coercion. The utility of this distinction lies in its ability to account for the pervasive influence by powerful actors in the absence of actual coercion. To be subject to coercion is to operate under the shadow of another's capacity and willingness to impose detrimental consequences, depending on the coercee's (future) actions. N.B. should Q be aware of P's threat to X if Q undertakes action A, despite Q not wanting to A at that time, any future prevention in forming the will to A due to X fulfills conditions (5) and (6), such that Q would be actually coerced.

In addition to one being subject to coercion or being actually coerced, it appears that a clear form of influence, and possibly coercion, is missing, as the above only deals with cases wherein explicit threats have been made. I here refer to the fact that the mere presence of powerful actors and their expected future threats or actions can influence political behavior. To investigate this, Chapter 4 will analyze whether a government is coerced when pre-emptively altering policy to prevent possible (future) threats. As this conception of influence is grounded in the expectation of the subjected party, I have dubbed it 'anticipatory coercion', rather than, for example, 'potential coercion', which would more allude to the actual ability of the coercer to enact power. The referred to influence stems from the structural power of

corporations, which can affect democratic policy despite the lack of a (yet) communicated explicit threat. This power, it may be argued, pressures governments into anticipatorily aligning their actions with the preferences of corporations out of fear of future consequences. This additional aspect is crucial to investigate, to ensure that CETs have been examined in full, namely in the case of past-, present-, and future CETs. As for now, I shall proceed with the former two.

Whilst six necessary conditions have been listed, Joseph Raz argues that the list is not yet definitive. This is so because Raz observes that coercion is inherently an evaluative concept, meaning its full definition cannot be adequately captured through purely descriptive conditions such as (1)-(6). The reason for this is that describing an interaction as coercive already engages in moral assessment, as coercion presupposes the normative significance of autonomy and responsibility (Raz 1986, 148-150). This presumption is recognized in one's evaluative judgements concerning whether an agent's actions were forced and if their actions could be morally justified or excused, in order to determine the presence of coercion. In this evaluation, before assessment of justification or excusability is possible, it must thus be determined whether an agent was forced to act. Stances differ as to when an action is forced, but Raz dictates that an action is forced when the agent regrets the circumstances that leave them with no reasonable alternative and when their resulting action is either justified or excused. Here, it can be recognized that the very identification of an action as being due to coercion relies on normative judgements surrounding the agent's choice. The subsequent evaluation of justification or excusability then constitutes a second normative layer, not merely assessing whether the agent was forced, but whether their response to the circumstances can be morally defended or forgiven (Raz 1986, 151-152).⁷ As such, coercion

⁷ Raz draws a distinction between justification and excusability in the context of coercion. An action is justified when the reasons supporting compliance, including the avoidance of threatened harm, outweigh the reasons against it, including the violation of the agent's autonomy. By contrast, an action may be excused, though not

directly impacts whether an agent can be held fully responsible for their decisions, or if they should be partially or wholly absolved of their moral responsibility. The answer to this question depends on the severity of the restriction placed upon their autonomy and the legitimacy of the coercive pressures exerted (Raz 1986, 149-152). Merely descriptive facts, such as threats or changes in behaviour, are insufficient to determine whether coercion has occurred, as these alone do not reveal why certain pressures illegitimately undermine autonomy or alter responsibility. This distinction is only discernible through normative criteria, therefore, coercion cannot be fully understood outside the context of a broader moral theory.

Accordingly, coercion is best conceptualized as a thick concept that integrates descriptive characteristics with evaluative judgements. This is exemplified in Raz's account, which combines factual conditions, found in (1)-(6), with normative evaluations concerning wrongful restrictions of autonomy. Recognizing coercion as a thick concept not only clarifies its conceptual structure but also emphasizes the importance of jointly satisfying descriptive and normative criteria in its definition (Väyrynen 2025). Raz thus proposes the addition of conditions (N) and (S), where (N) is a normative condition and (S) formulates a sufficient condition for when (N) is met. These are thus not merely supplementary but integral to fully articulating coercion's conceptual and normative dimensions. Given the central focus of this thesis on evaluating CETs via coercion, the enhanced framework combining both descriptive and normative criteria is indispensable, as it ensures that subsequent analyses can effectively demonstrate both the presence of coercion as well as assess its normative status.

Understanding the necessity of the above, Abizadeh follows Raz and incorporates such a normative condition to supplement his descriptive framework. As the normative

justified, when the agent's choice is dictated by the preservation of personal needs essential to sustaining a morally worthwhile life (Raz 1986, 152).

relevance of Abizadeh's evaluation lies in the violation of personal autonomy in those affected by border laws, he formulates the normative condition:

(N): P's threat invades the autonomy of Q (Abizadeh 2008, 58).

However, since the normative relevance of the investigation of this thesis lies elsewhere, my normative condition shall diverge from Abizadeh's. In the next chapter, I will argue that the normative significance of coercion in the context of CETs lies in its potential to undermine the political autonomy of governments. This argument will be developed in due course.

Finally, Abizadeh formulates a possible sufficient condition, which, when combined with (1)-(4) and (N), is sufficient for Q to be subject to coercion, and in combination with (1)-(6) and (N) is sufficient for Q to be actually coerced. That condition is that a threat is coercive if:

(S): X leaves Q with an inadequate range of valuable options (and Q would have an adequate range were X avoided) (Abizadeh 2008, 59).⁸

The function of this iteration of condition (S) is to specify when and how autonomy is violated. More generally, as stated, (S) functions to specify a sufficient condition under which the normatively important value encased in (N) is violated. Summarized, the final conditions of (N) and (S) make the analysis of coercion regarding its potential normative illegitimacy possible. The potential violation of the relevant normative value then either requires justification, to re-grant the action normative legitimacy, or renders the action morally

⁸ Abizadeh formulates multiple sufficient conditions, the listed condition among them.

impermissible. In relation to CETs, I shall in the following chapter explain how political autonomy is violated through coercive CETs and what the consequences hereof are.

We are now approaching the final steps of the chapter, having fully laid out the conditions for the determination of whether some communication meets both the descriptive and normative requirements necessary to qualify as coercion. The final step in this process of conceptual roadmapping is Nozick's distinction between threats, offers, and warnings. This distinction will prove crucial, for Nozick and Abizadeh state that coercion must stem from threats, and not warnings or offers. As such, if CETs are to be coercive, it must be determined that these are indeed threats in the philosophical sense and Nozick grants the framework necessary to categorize the relevant communications.

Nozick first differentiates between threats and offers. Whether P makes a threat or presents an offer to Q depends on the change in outcome that Q can expect to happen due to P's communication. If the outcome after the communication would leave Q worse off than in the expected course of events prior to the communication, then it is a threat. However, if the outcome would leave Q better off, then it is an offer (Nozick 1969, 447). Nozick calls this 'expected' course of events the 'baseline' situation, whereby 'expected' can mean both 'predicted' or 'morally required', depending on the situation. Nozick explains that when the situations underlying these two options diverge, the option most preferred by Q is the applicable baseline.

An example of a threat would be a robber saying, 'Give me your money, or I'll shoot you.' In this case, the baseline is that one is normally not harmed if one does not give away one's money. As such, it is a threat. However, it would be an offer if a philanthropist were to say, 'Give me all your money, and I'll double it and return it to you.' For the baseline is that if you give away all your money, this is usually not doubled and returned to you. This is relatively straightforward. Nonetheless, complexity arises in cases where threats and offers

might be mixed. To clarify, Nozick provides an example where a drug dealer tells a recurring customer: 'I won't give you your regular drugs anymore, but I'll give you even better drugs if you beat someone up.' The question that then determines if this is a threat or an offer is: would Q prefer the old situation, which is to pay for the regular drugs, or the new option, which is to beat someone up for better drugs? Should Q opt for the former, then the communication involves a threat, but if his preference falls upon the latter, the communication involves an offer. Summarized, Nozick's key test is Q's comparative evaluation and subsequent preference between the available pairs of actions and consequences i.e., does Q prefer the new option to the original option (Nozick 1969, 448-451)?

Continuing, Nozick also differentiates between threats and warnings, which is assessed in a similar fashion to threats and offers. As, here too, it boils down to a comparison of the situation regarding the expected course of events. However, 'expected' here simply means 'predicted' (Nozick 1969, 455, 460). As such, the communication of a certain fact e.g., 'If a law is passed that dictates that we have to double the wages of our staff, we will close up shop,' can either be a threat or a warning. If the rise in wages renders the shop unprofitable, forcing it to close, the statement is a warning; it merely communicates what will inevitably happen. By contrast, a threat is the communication of an intended action that one would not undertake in a world where one could not communicate said threat. The communication is solely made to induce compliance or extract concessions from the threatened party. Applied to the example: if the shop owner would not actually close shop if the law gets passed because he can easily afford to stay open, but he knows that by threatening to close shop he can withhold the law from being passed, it would be a threat. The statement is not a genuine forecast, but rather a tactic to pressure the opposition, despite that his threat would never have come to pass (Elhauge 2016, 501, 522-524). Threats thus have a tactical or strategic element.

In practice, however, discerning whether something is a threat, or a warning is extremely difficult, as the underlying intentions and motivations of the possible coercer are often opaque.

A further complicated scenario is when one's warning influences the actions of the opposing agent, which is something the warner is aware of prior to issuing the warning. Is this then a warning or a threat? Nozick is inclined to say that it is a warning, as the warner does not worsen the alternatives, but rather, he communicates what will happen regardless (1969, 456). In practice however these cases are extremely difficult to judge, for the outcome of certain situations is not as surefire as currently presented.

All in all, warnings communicate an outcome that would come to pass, regardless of the possible communication of the warning. Threats, on the other hand, issue a strategic communication that worsens the presented alternatives in a manner that does not necessarily follow from the situation.

To conclude, in this chapter I have laid the conceptual groundwork for evaluating CETs by developing a detailed philosophical framework of coercion. Drawing primarily on Nozick and Abizadeh, I have distinguished between actual coercion and being subject to coercion, emphasized the importance of having both descriptive and normative conditions, and clarified the difference between threats, offers, and warnings. Central to this framework is the notion that coercion involves limiting one's options through a communicated threat, with the normative weight thereof stemming from the undermining of core normative values, such as autonomy or, as seen in the next chapter, political autonomy. This foundation enables a proper analysis of the power dynamics between large corporations and the government, as it can now be shown how CETs can coerce states and why this is normatively illegitimate.

Chapter 3: CETs as Coercion

It is time to put the sharpened tools to use, and to show that CETs can be coercive. As such, I shall take the following steps: first, I shall show that CETs are indeed threats over warnings or offers. Second, I shall apply the descriptive conditions to a specific CET to showcase their applicability, namely the CET made by Amazon in Seattle in 2018. Third, I shall formulate and subsequently apply the normative conditions. To be able to do so, I shall first dive into the concept and role of (political) autonomy in democracies, explain why this value is thus normatively important, and portray under which conditions political autonomy is undermined. The outcome of this explanation shall form conditions (N) and (S). Fourth, I shall draw general conclusions as to when CETs are thus coercive and the consequences hereof.

In determining that a CET is indeed a threat and not some form of offer or warning, one must keep in mind that a corporation, when formulating a CET, communicates its intent to withdraw investments, relocate operations, or shut down operations in a jurisdiction in order to influence government policy.

In the previous chapter, it has been established that the difference between a threat and an offer is that a communicated intent constitutes a threat when the consequential outcome would leave the recipient worse off than in the expected course of events. As such, the change in outcome that the government can expect to happen due to the corporation's potential threat must be evaluated. I shall use Amazon's CET in Seattle as an example for the coming chapter, after having fleshed it out: in this situation, Seattle decided to instate a tax on large corporations to raise funds for homeless-aid. The new tax would charge large employers – those with a revenue exceeding \$20 million – about \$500 per employee. In response, Amazon communicated that it would cancel two of its planned expansions in Seattle, stating

that, ‘pending the outcome of the head tax vote by the City Council, Amazon has paused all construction planning’ in addition to ‘evaluating options’ on occupying office space with new employees in another building, which had already been constructed. This threat put 7,000 jobs in jeopardy. Additionally, after initial talks between the two sides, an Amazon spokesperson stated: ‘We remain very apprehensive about the future created by the council’s hostile approach and rhetoric towards larger businesses, which forces us to question our growth here,’ thereby formulating a much broader threat to the corporation’s hometown, housing more than 50,000 Amazon employees. The only justification Amazon attempted to offer was the claim that the city of Seattle had a ‘spending efficiency’ problem, which Amazon was ‘uncertain would change for the better’, implying that this should be addressed instead of taxing large corporations from an ‘anti-business position’ (Wingfield 2018b). After an attempted watering down of the tax from \$500 to \$275 per employee by Seattle, which did not diffuse Amazon’s threat, Seattle opted to repeal the tax, a month after the tax having passed unanimously. The economic consequences in relation to Amazon’s employees, as well as the expected ‘prolonged [and] expensive political fight’ that would ensue were cited as the reasons for the repeal (Wingfield 2018a; Wingfield 2018b; Streitfeld and Ballentine 2018).

In assessing if Amazon formulates a threat or an offer, the question at hand is as follows: does Amazon’s communicated intention deviate from the expected course of events upon instating such a tax, and if this is the case, how so? Recall, ‘expected’ can here either mean ‘predicted or ‘morally required’. If the government imposes some tax, the predicted course of events is that a company does not leave or halts its plans. There are circumstances wherein this would be expected, namely when the tax is egregious or threatens the company’s livelihood, but generally the imposition of a tax does not lead to a company’s exit. In the case of Amazon, the watered-down tax would amount to approximately \$12 million, which is a relative pittance compared to the \$233 billion in revenue Amazon generated that same year

(Amazon.com, Inc. 2018, 17). There is clearly no egregious or livelihood-threatening taxation present in this case. All in all, Seattle could have expected that Amazon was to retain its plans. Morally speaking, as part of a democracy under which one is obliged to pay taxes, the company is morally required to pay taxes and not alter its plans. Seattle's expectation would thus rightly have been that Amazon would keep its plans in place. Either way, Amazon deviates from the expected course of events, thereby creating a worse situation than the baseline through their communication. Their communicated intent is thus indeed a threat and not an offer.

Alternatively, is Amazon communicating a warning? Would Amazon cancel its plans regardless of whether they could communicate their exit? As expected, the answer to this question is more complex, as their intentions are opaque. Two hypotheticals must be considered in reviewing this question: would Amazon have left regardless, or would Amazon have stayed? Under this consideration, it can be thought that Amazon would have left, assuming that there was a financially superior alternative location, which would make up for the already made costs and time lost. In such a case, Amazon might be expected to leave. This hypothetical seems far-fetched, as Amazon was in the midst of erecting a large enough building to house 4,500 people, which carries considerable costs – both in construction, as well as in preparatory work. In contrast to the \$12 million it would cost Amazon per year, disbanding these plans over the instated tax seems disproportionate (Wingfield 2018a). Nonetheless, if there *were* some financially superior alternative locations, which makes up for costs made, then Amazon might have left Seattle regardless of their communication. Conversely, it can be thought that Amazon would still make enough money to make the expansion worthwhile, especially considering that they do not have to alter course, which is a financially and administratively burdensome affair. In the case of Amazon, I would venture that they are financially capable of continuing the expansion into Seattle *in addition to* any

present feasible alternative. At the time of writing, their revenue has grown from \$233 billion in 2018 to \$638 billion in 2024 (Amazon.com, Inc. 2024, 2). Obviously judging from posteriority is easy, but it is safe to say that the \$12 million annual tax should have posed no financial difficulty or harm to the extent that warranted the threat. Nevertheless, disregarding these assumptions, it can be uncontroversially stated that Amazon employs a tactic in their communication. They know their communication may lead to Seattle repealing its taxes. Amazon, in employing this strategy, is further aware of the fact that their intentions are hidden from Seattle. Seattle can thus never know if Amazon is presenting a conditional threat or an outcome that is independent of their will. All that is clear, is that Amazon presents an outcome that they will bring about in order to pressure Seattle into compliance. As such, considering the strategic element of the communication, in addition to the impossibility of uncovering their intent, it can be safely assumed to be a threat over a warning.

In regarding these considerations surrounding the status of the communication as a threat, warning, or offer, it does not matter whether Amazon is bluffing or whether they would actually follow through with their threat, all that is relevant is the perceived credibility of their intention and, apparently, Seattle perceived it as sufficiently credible.

It has now been established that CETs can indeed be a threat. Obviously, each instance must be examined individually, but this provides the assurance that CETs *can* be threats. Such judgement must always take place on a case-by-case basis, however, to prevent endless repetition, I shall not mention this after every conclusion drawn from examples, but this acknowledgement is implied. Now, without further ado, I shall portray how our example meets all the previously formulated descriptive conditions. Not yet incorporating the normative conditions, Amazon subjects the Seattle government to coercion if:

- (1) Amazon communicates to Seattle their intention to halt their expansions if Seattle imposes their tax.
- (2) Amazon believes that halting their expansion plans in conjunction with Seattle imposing their tax is worse for Seattle than Amazon continuing their expansion without Seattle imposing their tax, such that halting their expansion plans provides Seattle a reason not to impose their tax.
- (3) Amazon's reason for threatening to halt their expansion is their belief that halting their expansion provides a reason not to impose the tax.
- (4) Seattle believes that Amazon has the capacity to halt their expansions and intends to do so if Seattle imposes their tax.

However, Amazon's threat actually coerces Seattle only if:

- (5) Seattle does not impose their tax.
- (6) Part of Seattle's reason not to impose their tax is to avoid Amazon halting their expansions.

The above portrays how Amazon's threat meets conditions (1)-(6), thereby meeting all necessary conditions formulated thus far for the presence of one being subject to coercion and actual coercion. However, the normative conditions remain unmet, as such, coerciveness has not yet been proven. Where the meeting of the above conditions was relatively straightforward, the normative conditions require a bit more work.

A first step, that I am quite sure will aid in the process of applying these conditions, is their actual formulation. Recall, these conditions are necessary because, as Raz stated, coercion is an inherently evaluative concept, which entails that its full understanding cannot

be captured through descriptive conditions alone, which is all we have so far. Normative conditions are thus necessary in conjunction with descriptive conditions.

The normative value at stake in Abizadeh's framework of coercion is personal autonomy. To capture this, personal autonomy was encased in the relevant normative condition, with a following formulation of sufficient conditions that fleshed out when personal autonomy was violated. However, where Abizadeh is concerned with the potential coerciveness of the state towards individuals, I invert this relationship: I assess the potential coercion of corporations towards states. Accordingly, the relevant normative value is not individual autonomy, but political autonomy, which roughly refers to the capacity of a democratic state to author and execute its own will.

However, before formulating and applying condition (N) to our case study, we must first better understand what political autonomy entails and why its violation is normatively significant within democratic theory. Hence, the following section outlines the role of multiple forms of autonomy in grounding political legitimacy, and shows how coercion undermines not merely singular choices, but the very basis of democratic authority and legitimacy.

First, fully formulated, I here understand political autonomy as a government's capacity to determine and pursue collective ends, on the basis of the deliberative reasoning of the people and their legitimate representatives, free from constraint by agents external to the democratic process. Collective ends are here understood as the ends that stem from the legitimate democratic process. Political autonomy thus entails the independence of a democratic state in formulating and executing policy in accordance with reasons that are internally generated instead of being externally imposed.

The etymology of autonomy already conveys this idea of collective self-rule. Derived from the Greek *autos* (self) and *nomos* (law), autonomy originally referred to the capacity of city-states to be self governing, meaning that it made and abided by its own laws. Autonomy in its original form was thus not individual but civic, as it was the condition of a people who ruled themselves rather than being ruled by others (Piper 2025).

Further along in history, Rousseau argues in *The Social Contract* that true political freedom is not the absence of governance, but lies in self-governance, where citizens are free as co-authors of the law, provided these laws reflect the collective will aimed at the common good (Neuhoser 2011, 478). When laws arise from this shared will, each citizen obeys not an alien authority, but a law they have given to themselves as part of a collective. In Rousseau's terms, individual political autonomy (later dubbed public autonomy) is what ensures that each person, in obeying the law and even surrendering a part of their status as individuals, remains free (Rousseau 2002, 163-168, 170-175).

Jürgen Habermas furthers this tradition by explicitly distinguishing between private autonomy, where one has the freedom to shape one's own life within a protected sphere, and public autonomy, where one has the freedom to participate in the democratic will-formation that determines the law (Habermas 1996, 86-88). He argues that the legal rights that secure individual freedom are legitimate only if they arise from procedures in which those same individuals have equal standing. Public autonomy ensures that the law is justified by public reason, while private autonomy ensures that individuals are capable of participating in such reason-giving. Private autonomy is thus the capacity to govern one's own life, whilst public autonomy specifically concerns one's political voice, that is, one's freedom to partake in collective decision-making as an equal. These two forms of Habermas' autonomy thus provide two dimensions of one's self-rulership. Moreover, these two forms cannot exist without the other, which is why he dubs them 'co-original' (Habermas 1996, 102-104). These

dimensions are thus deeply intertwined, despite being conceptually distinct. The former is the condition for effective participation in the latter, while the latter is the condition under which the former can be democratically justified.

Against this background, democratic and political autonomy can be connected. On the one hand democratic autonomy denotes the condition that citizens live under laws they have helped make, be it directly or through their representatives, while retaining equal standing in the processes that produce those laws. On the other hand, political autonomy refers more specifically to the capacity of the state to act independently in accordance with the democratic will. The former concerns the autonomy of the citizenry, whilst the latter concerns the autonomy of democratic institutions. Both variants equally treats its citizens not as passive subjects but as autonomous agents that govern themselves, the former assuring this freedom, the latter embodying the outcome (Christman 2020).

This shared structure is noticeable across differing traditions of democratic thought. Liberal theories place private autonomy at the center of political legitimacy, for the state is legitimate only if it protects individuals' capacity to lead lives of their own choosing. Further still, deliberative democracy builds upon both by insisting that legitimacy stems from public deliberation among free and equal participants (Christiano and Bajaj 2024). This even carries into Republicanist thought, where the status of a citizen is determined by their right to being 'politically autonomous authors of a community of free and equal persons' in which citizens attempt to reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in the equal interest of all – generally understood as 'non-domination' (Habermas 1994, 22). Despite their differences, each tradition rests upon the rejection of rule that is alien, or in other words, a rule that is disconnected from the consent of those who must obey.

The common conceptual ground across these various forms of autonomy, across differing forms of democratic (and even republican) theory, is that autonomy relies on not being dominated by another's will. Autonomy, in its many forms, contrasts such domination and requires that everyone impose rules upon themselves, be it individually or collectively, rather than being subjected to external imposition.

In conclusion, public, private, political, and democratic autonomy are not isolated ideas but interconnected facets of the democratic ideal of self-rulership. When properly balanced, these autonomies work together to legitimate power by anchoring it in the will and reason of the governed themselves. Autonomy is thus both the means of democracy, namely through participation and consent, as well as its end, namely a free people governing itself. This shared commitment to autonomy as the basis of political legitimacy is what unites the diverse strands of democratic theory, providing a common ground even as different theories debate the best ways to realize it.

This brief conceptual exposition on the role of autonomy in democracy has aimed to demonstrate that, despite this thesis' focus on political autonomy specifically, the violation stemming from coercion takes place at such a basic level of autonomy that it violates all of its varying forms and interpretations. Almost every form of democratic theory encases some form of autonomy as inherently valuable. As such, if autonomy's core tenet of self-ownership and legislation is always violated under coercion, no matter which democratic theory one adheres to, the political actions following coercive measures are democratically illegitimate. This illustrates the extent to which autonomy is structurally embedded in democratic legitimacy.

However, returning to political autonomy specifically, its value is thus essential for ensuring that the outcomes of democratic governance are democratically legitimate, as they are the product of public reasoning and inclusive, fair deliberation in which all affected

citizens possess equal participatory standing. By contrast, corporations are non-natural persons, as they are mere state-created contracting individuals, which stand outside of the democratic process (Ciepley 2016, 19). If corporations thus coerce the government away from or towards certain policies, the resulting policies are democratically illegitimate. All in all, the violation of political autonomy is normatively significant both as a value in itself and due to its implications for the democratic legitimacy of resulting policy. The very openness that grants democratic institutions their legitimacy, recognized in their transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, also renders them structurally vulnerable to powerful actors. This fragility is not incidental but inherent to the architecture of democracy, and this renders political autonomy of crucial importance. To conclude, the normative condition I propose, which in conjunction with (1)-(6) and the soon-to-be-formulated (S) leads to actual coercion, is as follows:

(N): P's threat, X, violates the political autonomy of Q.

This condition establishes the normative element of coercion that solidifies its definition. However, this prompts the question of when Q's political autonomy is violated, for, though we have seen that political autonomy as a value is normatively important, we have not yet seen when this value is violated. There are multiple routes through which political autonomy can be violated and any such answer would provide us with a sufficient condition. In similar fashion, Abizadeh formulated three sufficient conditions for when individual autonomy is violated (2008, 59, 64). To formulate such a condition for political autonomy, we must first return to the used definition of political autonomy: political autonomy is a government's capacity to determine and pursue collective ends, on the basis of its own deliberative reasoning, free from constraint by agents external to the democratic process. Given this

definition, political autonomy is thus violated if a government is no longer free to determine or pursue its collective ends due to constraint by an agent external to the democratic process. In such a situation, the government no longer acts based on the will of the people, but rather enacts the will of some alien agent. In line with this understanding, I argue that a sufficient condition for P to violate the political autonomy of Q is, if:

(S): X extracts such an amount of value from A, that A no longer meets a basic need (where A would have met a basic need, were it not for X's value extraction).⁹

Showing that this condition violates autonomy requires a few steps. So, to grant some perspective as to what I am working towards: this condition results in Q acting involuntarily in forgoing A, such that Q's political autonomy is undermined.

Under the circumstances of condition (S), democratic political institution Q wants to enact the collective will in the form of action A. Q's reason for opting for action A is that it would achieve consequent Y. However, should X extract sufficient value of action A through the prevention of Y, then action A is no longer of any use for the government.

In such a case, an agent outside of the democratic process, P, has limited Q's enactment of the general will in all practical sense. This is so because, since Y has been removed, the original action A in conjunction with consequent Y no longer exists. As such, action A, in its original form (as the cause of Y), is no longer an option for the government. More schematically portrayed, imagine two variants of option A: A, whereby consequent Y follows the action, and A*, whereby consequent Y does not follow the action. In this situation, A and A* encase the exact same action by Q, but through interference by P, the

⁹ As this is a sufficient condition, other conditions can thus also be formulated under which political autonomy is undermined. A possible condition, which is extremely demanding, but strikes at the core of the definition of autonomy, would be that P violates the political autonomy of Q if: (S) X leaves Q with no options other than those deliberately kept available by P.

outcomes differ. Q's possibilities have thus been altered by P. However, that one's options have been altered does not imply that one cannot pursue one's own ends, especially since we can see that Q is still free to A/A*. The only difference, albeit a key difference, is that Q no longer has any reason to do A/A* for Y no longer follows.

To show that Q cannot pursue its own ends but instead acts in a forced manner, I turn to Serena Olsaretti. Olsaretti differentiates between freedom and voluntariness. Freedom concerns the mere availability of options, where one is free to choose between differing options as long as there are no external barriers preventing actions – this we can recognize in the situation regarding Q's ability to A/A*. Voluntariness, on the other hand, depends on the acceptability of the options: a choice is voluntary if and only if it is not made *because* there is no acceptable alternative to it, or otherwise formulated, a choice is voluntary if there is an acceptable alternative (Olsaretti 2004, 138-140). A person can thus be free to choose but not do so voluntarily as is the case in the following example, where the threat has removed the acceptable alternatives: 'Your money or your life.' Obviously, one is free to be killed instead of handing over one's money, but the handing over of the money would not be voluntary. The violation of voluntariness is central to the violation of autonomy, because one's ability to act in accordance with one's own will is undermined. This is not the case because choices do not exist, but because the made choice is unacceptable. Such a focus on voluntariness assures protection from the possible counter that 'Q can always ignore P's threat', which might be technically true, but has no bearing on practical considerations.

Continuing, the question remains of when a choice is acceptable. Olsaretti states that the standards of acceptability by which one assesses options are objective, viewing the satisfaction of basic needs as central (2004, 140).¹⁰ Under this understanding, an option is

¹⁰ What basic needs are depends on one's interpretation, and the concept could be swapped for basic functionings or capabilities instead (Olsaretti 2004, 154). Capabilities are the doings and beings that one can achieve if they so choose (Robeyns and Byskov 2025). This can be broadly or narrowly interpreted, I shall err on the side of caution and stick to very basic claims on what 'basic needs' entail for a government to function.

unacceptable if pursuing or choosing it threatens some basic need – this threat can either entail having a basic need left unfulfilled or a possessed basic need lessened (Olsaretti 2004, 140, 154, 157). Acceptable choices allow for the fulfillment of basic needs and are voluntary when acted upon. Summarized, a choice is involuntary if it is made to avoid having a basic need unmet.

If Q thus makes a choice in response to X in order to avoid having a basic need unmet, it is involuntary. Thus, in condition (S), if Q aims to employ A to meet a basic need, namely consequent Y, the value of which is lessened by X such that it no longer meets said basic need, the remaining option, A*, is no longer acceptable, for it leaves a basic need unmet. Where initially A was acceptable, X has rendered (now) A* unacceptable.

Under such a threat, Q remains with a dichotomous choice between A*, which is unacceptable as it leaves basic needs unmet, and $\neg A$, which is unacceptable as it leaves basic needs unmet. P, through employing X, has left Q with two unacceptable options, where it previously had the acceptable option A. Now, should Q choose either A* or $\neg A$, the choice is involuntary. This involuntariness, as we have seen, violates the political autonomy of Q. As such, (S) constitutes a sufficient condition for the violation of political autonomy.

Under (S), the core question of whether X violates political autonomy and thus if it is coercive, is thus if it renders Q unable to meet some basic need, which is embodied in consequent Y. So, if Q's action A allows for the meeting of a basic need, consequent Y, but this is prevented through P's employment of X, then it is coercive. However, if this condition is not met, this does not indicate that A is necessarily non-coercive. Condition (S) is sufficient but not necessary, which entails that other conditions may yet prove the coerciveness of A. Otherwise formulated, the coerciveness of A then remains unproven, but this proof can be attained through alternative routes. Summarized, (S) proves coercion, but $\neg(S)$ does not prove non-coercion. A further reminder in line with this, is that proven non-

coercion would still not entail normative legitimacy. CETs that are non-coercive may still qualify as normatively illegitimate on other grounds.

Continuing: a response that I can imagine comes to mind, is that Q might have other means through which they might be able to meet the basic need that A aims to fulfil. If this were the case, Q would still possess an acceptable option, and thus retain their voluntariness and political autonomy. My answer is twofold: first, not all basic needs can be met through alternative means. In such cases, where A presents the only viable course of meeting some basic need, its prevention necessarily renders the meeting of said basic need impossible, and renders Q coerced.

Second, in the case of individual autonomy, it would be conceded that this objection could bear some fruit, as an individual might be able to follow differing paths to meet A. However, political autonomy differs from individual autonomy, as a government is normatively bound to pursue the collective ends mandated by the democratic process. Where an individual can shift goals to meet basic needs, a government cannot simply change its ends without undermining democratic legitimacy. Even if a government could theoretically pursue the same basic end through alternative means, democratic mandates often specify particular means, legitimacy depends on collective authorization for any change in course, and alternative means may not be equally acceptable, feasible, or aligned with the values underpinning the original mandate. Thus, if an external agent blocks Q's ability to meet a basic need through the mandated course of A, political autonomy remains violated, even if other means to meet the basic need might theoretically exist.

Especially relevant here is the fact that the consequential deviation stems from an agent located outside of the democratic process. David Ciepley's analysis provides crucial conceptual depth here. Recall, he explains that corporations are not natural persons or voluntary democratic associations, but mere legal individuals, no more than constructs

endowed with rights and powers for specific public purposes. Unlike citizens, who participate in democratic processes with equal standing, or associations formed through deliberative consent, corporations operate as centralized legal entities whose authority is derived not from political participation but from state-issued charters. What this entails, is that when a corporation threatens a government e.g., *Amazon v. Seattle*, it is not a citizen in battle with its representatives, but an unaccountable legal agent leveraging powers granted by the state against the democratic authority of that same state. This is of normative significance as well, for not only is political autonomy here undermined and thus democratic legitimacy threatened, but this is done by an entity of which we have seen that it should have no place in the deliberative structure of a democracy. All in all, not only does the political autonomy remain violated, but this happens at the hand of a legal entity without the same democratic accountability or rights as a natural person.

Finally, in conjunction with conditions (1)-(6), the following conditions allow for the assessment of the presence of coercion. P coerces Q, if:

(N): P's threat, X, violates the political autonomy of Q.

(S): X extracts such an amount of value from A, that A no longer meets a basic need (where A would have met a basic need, were it not for X's value extraction).

These can now be applied to the Seattle example, where conditions (1)-(6) have already been met. In this example, Seattle wished to implement a head-tax to raise money for homelessness aid. It can here be, I assume, uncontroversially stated that implementing taxes, as well as protecting the human rights of those worst off in society i.e., the right to life of the homeless, are both basic needs that a democratic institution has. Without the ability to raise

funds through taxation, a democracy could not function. Additionally, a fundamental moral interest of a state, and core to its functioning, is the protection of individual security rights (Buchanan 1997, 46-48). As such, Seattle's implementing a tax was the enactment of a basic need in itself and also had as a goal to meet a further basic need. However, as previously anticipated, one might object that Seattle could have pursued this basic need through alternative means, such that repealing this particular tax would not undermine its political autonomy. However, as I have argued, political autonomy also attaches to the specific means endorsed through democratic deliberation. The head tax was not an incidental choice, rather, it was publicly debated, passed unanimously, and explicitly aimed at corporations, seen as contributors to the very crisis the policy aimed to address. To suggest that any alternative would suffice overlooks that this tax embodied a deliberate distributive aim, as a core expression of the democratically formed collective will. All in all, even if functional substitutes existed, they were not the options chosen and adopting them under corporate pressure would sever the connection between democratic will and implementation.

Despite the described normative standing of the tax, Amazon, by threatening to halt its expansions, lessened its economic viability. Due to the expected economic loss as a consequence hereof, namely the assured loss of 7,000 jobs and a looming open threat regarding the future of Amazon in Seattle, as well as the political backlash, the tax would no longer be worthwhile. This is a simple matter of weighing competing options, where the costs are higher than the benefits. Consequently, the tax is no longer able to meet the basic needs of Seattle, namely the raising of funds through taxation and the protection of the human rights of those worst off. Seattle now no longer has any reason to impose the tax. As such, an agent outside of the democratic process, namely Amazon, has altered the options of Seattle. Seattle could no longer implement the tax and raise the funds (to protect those worst off), this option combination no longer exists. Indeed, Seattle is still free to implement the tax, and as such

retains its freedom, but we have seen that this does not assure non-coerciveness. Seattle's acceptable option of implementing the tax exists no more, for the tax no longer meets a basic need and leaves it unfulfilled, and as such is an unacceptable option. The option of not implementing the tax is also unacceptable, for this also clearly leaves the basic need unfulfilled. As such, Seattle has two unacceptable choices, to implement the tax without the benefits or not implement the tax – where implementing the tax was originally an acceptable option. This entails that either choice, which in practice resulted in Seattle repealing the tax, would be involuntary. All in all, Seattle acted involuntarily, which renders its political autonomy undermined and Amazon's CET coercive. All in all, condition (S) has been fulfilled, which subsequently fulfills condition (N). The normative conditions are satisfied because:

(N): Amazon's threat violates the political autonomy of Seattle.

(S): Halting expansions extracts such an amount of value from Seattle's proposed tax, that the tax no longer meets a basic need (where the tax would have met a basic need if not for Amazon's threat).

In other words, Seattle lacked the capacity to pursue the collective end it had decided upon on the basis of its own deliberative reasoning, due to constraint from an agent external to the democratic process, namely Amazon. All in all, conditions (1)-(6), (N), and (S) have been met, which means that the above supplies us with a situation wherein a corporation, through employing a CET, actually coerces a democratic institution.

In conclusion, the above analysis has demonstrated that CETs can constitute acts of coercion that undermine the political autonomy of democratic institutions. By rendering

previously acceptable options unacceptable, specifically when such options serve basic needs, CETs can force governments into involuntary decisions, thereby violating the core condition of voluntariness, and by extension political autonomy. In such cases, CETs are not a normatively legitimate form of CPA but a normatively illegitimate distortion of the democratic process. They represent a coercive interference by non-democratic agents that compromises the legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

To counter this, one could contend that Seattle's decision to repeal its proposed head tax does not constitute a case of coercion, but simply constitutes an example of ordinary democratic governance, where the state has to respond to conflicting public priorities. Democratic institutions are frequently required to navigate trade-offs between public goods, in this case between funding social programs and the economic interest in retaining corporate investment and employment. The mere fact that such decisions entail significant costs does not render them coercive. Additionally, on a pluralist view, Amazon's involvement should not be regarded as an external intrusion into the democratic process but as a legitimate instance of interest articulation within the public sphere. Corporations, much like unions, civil society organizations, or other minor coalitions advance their interests through recognized political channels and that Amazon's influence proves more substantial than others follows from its economic position, which remains well within its democratic rights (Christiano and Bajaj 2024).

This counter could be supplemented by arguing that the distinction between influence and coercion is here falsely portrayed, as the latter occurs only when an agent is left without any viable alternative other than compliance to the will of another. In this instance, however, Seattle retained both its legal and institutional capacity to enact the tax. The city council debated, projected the consequences of Amazon's threatened relocation, and ultimately chose freely, albeit under pressure, to repeal the tax. This would more accurately be described as

prudential governance, rather than coercion, as it is no more than altering plans in response to new considerations. In this line of thought, that a powerful entity such as Amazon influences the decision does not undermine autonomy but simply reflects the reality of political decision-making.

Additionally, and finally, from a proceduralist perspective, one could argue that democratic legitimacy does not hinge on the content of the outcome but on the integrity of the process that produces said outcome. Seattle's legislative proceedings remained uninterrupted: the tax was proposed, debated, implemented, contested, and repealed, with each step occurring in accordance with the constitutionally valid procedure. At no point did Amazon override the democratic process. Thus, provided that political decisions are undertaken by legally authorized representatives through legitimate institutional procedures, the mere presence of external pressure, even if strategically motivated, does not by itself amount to coercion (Habermas 1994, 24-26).

The line of reasoning above expresses a widely held and initially compelling view, namely, that the legitimacy of political outcomes remains intact so long as the relevant institutional procedures have been followed. Under this stance decisions made under external pressure are not suspect, provided they emerge from constitutionally sanctioned deliberation by the appropriate governmental bodies. While such procedural assurance is crucial, I contend that this alone does not, and cannot, settle the normative question at stake. We have seen that democratic legitimacy depends not only on adherence to formal procedures but also on the conditions under which these procedures unfold. It is precisely the normative dimension of these surrounding conditions that reveals the action as coercive.

In this light, the claim that Seattle's decision merely reflects a routine democratic trade-off, albeit a difficult one, proves unconvincing. Whilst it correctly highlights that governments often confront hard choices between conflicting public goods and correctly

notes that democratic agency does not require complete isolation from other strategic actors or material consequences, it fails to adequately address the specific structure of the choice Seattle faced, or the source of the constraints shaping it. What may appear to be a weighing of interests in response to economic pressure, upon closer examination reveals a structurally compromised political decision, which under the conceptual framework developed thus far, warrants classification as coercive. This is because Amazon's strategically formulated threat imposes a constraint on Seattle, preventing it from fulfilling a basic need, which renders its available options normatively impermissible. Although Seattle formally retains its ability to act, the practical consequence of the act that was essential to meeting its basic need is effectively nullified. This hinders the fulfillment of the achievement of the collective end stemming from the democratic process, which leaves Seattle's political autonomy undermined.

The idea that Amazon's conduct should be viewed as a typical form of interest articulation draws from pluralist democratic theory, where Amazon is assumed to act in kind to other interest groups (Christiano and Bajaj 2024). However, this analogy ultimately fails. While pluralism maintains that legitimacy arises from a diversity of voices operating within a shared political space, it assumes that these actors are subject to comparable normative constraints, most notably mutual accountability. Amazon, however, occupies a markedly different position than the average citizen, or subject. As Ciepley has argued, corporations like Amazon are private legal entities with substantial economic leverage but without any democratic mandate. As such, they stand outside the reciprocal structure that is required for pluralism and the relationship is asymmetrical and unequal (Mouffe 1999, 747). Its influence arises not from engagement within the political system, but from its capacity to reshape the external environment through credible CETs, rather than engaging in reciprocal democratic dialogue (Mouffe 1999, 749). This asymmetry undermines the normative equivalence on

which pluralist models depend, and hereby undermines the democratic legitimacy of Amazon's actions.

Furthermore, full understanding of the distinction between influence and coercion requires comprehension of the fact that it is not the mere presence of cost or pressure that signals coercion. Rather, coercion arises specifically when one actor constrains another's set of acceptable options such that a previously viable course of action becomes unacceptable—where the agent's basic needs, here preconditions necessary for pursuing legitimate democratic aims, remain unmet. On this account, Seattle remained legally free to enact the head tax, but Amazon's threat rendered that option devoid of its intended value. What remained was a right in name only, as it was now emptied of any practical consequence, thus leaving Seattle's basic needs unmet. According to the voluntariness condition previously developed, such an alteration of available options is normatively significant, as Seattle's repeal of the tax did not constitute a mere re-evaluation but a concession to constraints imposed by an actor external to the democratic process. They no longer possessed the capacity to pursue the collective end that stemmed from its own deliberative reasoning due to constraints by an agent external to the democratic process.

It might be argued that applying this standard of voluntariness to institutional agents like governments is overly demanding. Governance often entails decisions among imperfect or costly options, and the absence of ideal alternatives is not itself indicative of coercion. This general point is granted. However, in fear of repetition, the present framework does not treat difficulty alone as sufficient for coercion. The relevant criterion is not that all options were flawed, but rather that one actor strategically eliminated the acceptable option for the democratically mandated course of action, which aimed to meet a basic need. Seattle's decision was not simply made under constraint but it was structurally shaped by interference that rendered the policy unviable.

A final consideration concerns procedural legitimacy. The objection rightly points out that the decision to repeal the tax occurred through ordinary institutional channels. Yet the preservation of formal procedure does not, on its own, establish normative legitimacy. As previously argued, procedural integrity is necessary but not sufficient for democratic autonomy. If the deliberative space is constrained by threats that invalidate core policy options, the process may still function formally while failing to operate autonomously. The mere observance of legal form does not ensure that political will is genuinely self-determined.

The framework I offer identifies forms of coercion that are to be found beneath formal legality. It reveals how asymmetrical power, particularly when strategically deployed, can deprive political institutions of their capacity to pursue democratically endorsed ends. It thereby extends the understanding of political autonomy beyond mere institutional form, to include the practical and normative preconditions necessary for self-rule.

To conclude, the objection is right in highlighting the complexities of governance in democratic contexts, however, once the make-up of Seattle's decision space is examined, alongside the character of Amazon's intervention and the voluntariness-based account of autonomy is employed, it becomes clear that the example at hand is not an instance of difficult governance, but a clear example of coercive distortion.

Chapter 4: 'Anticipatory Coercion' as Coercion?

We have thus far established that CETs can subject governments to coercion and actually coerce them. However, as alluded to in chapter 2, this leaves unexplored a third and subtler category: anticipatory coercion. In many political contexts, policymakers alter their behavior not in response to a communicated threat, but based on the, often well-grounded, expectation that such a threat would follow certain government actions.¹¹ These anticipatory actions complicate the dynamic somewhat, for they blur the boundary between strategic foresight and possibly coercive constraint. Should this anticipatory coercion be integrated within the framework of coercion or is the structural influence free of coercion? Before continuing with this question, I briefly outline how corporations have influence without formulating explicit threats.

The origin of the fear of threats that governments may have, stems from the structural power of corporations, which they hold by virtue of their position in capitalist economies (Young 2018, 4). These companies control crucial resources and enact influence on important aspects of society, such as flow of capital and the related impact on employment levels, credit availability, prices, and tax collection (Young 2018, 1). As such, the government must appease them to assure continued investment (Young, Banarjee, and Schwartz, 10). In response, governments thus aim to facilitate 'business confidence' through their action. This is conventionally defined as the expectations of profit in a given market by corporations but can be far broader interpreted to include corporate expectations of future government action

¹¹ One might question whether it is the threatened action or the threat itself that governments anticipate. I would argue that governments primarily fear the threat, not the action, because they know the action will never materialize, for they will yield as soon as the threat is made. As such, it is the expectation of the threat, not the action, that guides their decision. In this sense, the anticipation of the threatened action is secondary to the anticipation of the threat. This dynamic rests on a reasonable assumption, namely that corporations almost always issue threats before acting. Since actions like exit are typically costly for corporations, a threat is preferred to immediate retaliatory action.

across policy realms. Declining business confidence, with its implicit promise of threats and retaliation, alters government behavior and animates policy changes designed to ameliorate confidence (Young 2018, 8). As such, an explicit threat may not even be necessary, as policymakers are aware of what kinds of policies may trigger corporate resistance.

In accordance with this, certain policies are not even discussed out of fear of retaliation. Especially in situations where CETs, capital strikes, or other threats or actions have been employed in the past, which grants credibility to future threats and leads to governments expecting them as well (Young, Banarjee, and Schwartz, 10). Once corporate power has been demonstrated, the fear of repetition is generally sufficient to achieve policy compliance (Young 2018, 8). As such, politicians are constrained by the stranglehold companies have over the economy.

So, can the influence I refer to as ‘anticipatory coercion’ truly be considered coercion? The concept is here understood as a situation wherein a democratic government anticipatorily aligns their actions and policies with the preferences of corporations, out of fear of future threats or actions. This definition thereby encases future CETs as well.

To portray this situation in a more schematic manner: Q wishes to carry out action A. P has not made any threats towards Q surrounding action A. However, Q expects P to formulate a threat, X, should Q (be known to want to) carry out A. X renders A impossible, or removes its value. Due to this expectation, Q does not A. All in all, Q pre-emptively alters their plans due to a potential future threat. The clear difference between previously examined situations and the situation at hand, is that P has not formulated any explicit threat, so the sole presence of any threat or CET thus lies in Q’s expectations.

To establish whether coercion is present in such a situation, I shall first examine Abizadeh’s descriptive conditions. If these can be met, I shall proceed with the normative conditions. Regarding the above situation, requirements (4)-(6) are met, but (1)-(3) remain

unmet. P does not yet communicate any intention, which undermines (1), P does not yet have any belief surrounding a possible outcome, undermining (2), nor does P formulate any threat, which undermines (3). Q does believe that P has the capacity to cause X, and that P would have the intention to do so if Q does A, hence (4) is met. Furthermore, Q does not do A in order to avoid X, which renders (5) and (6) met.

Initially, this would prove that Q's (in)action is not coerced, but the fact that (1)-(3) are expected to be met warrants further investigation. Could the expected fulfillment of (1)-(3) be sufficient for coercion, over their current fulfillment? This would entail an understanding of coercion that could be considered diachronic, instead of synchronic, as is currently the case, where the conditions must be met at some specific time.

My interest in this answer lies in the fact that if this is sufficient, then as long as A encases the meeting of a basic need, which would remain unmet in the prevention of A, this would be coercion in an identical manner to the previously considered explicitly formulated (corporate exit) threats.¹²

Intuitively this line of thinking has some pull: if Q is justified in their belief that P will threaten to X in response to A, due to P always having done so in the past in comparable situations, for example, then the absence of an actual threat seems like a temporal formality rather than a morally relevant distinction. In such cases, the practical effect on Q's autonomy seems identical to that produced by an explicit threat, for Q refrains from pursuing a course of action necessary to satisfy a basic need under pressure from a constraint they rationally and reliably foresee. If coercion is fundamentally about unjust interference with autonomous agency through conditional threats, then a reliably predictable, even if not yet communicated, threat seems to satisfy that condition in substance if not in form. This suggests that, under conditions of rational certainty, that Q's response is predictively based should not disqualify it

¹² This reasoning is based on condition (S), but other sufficient conditions for coercion would also suffice.

from being classified as coercion, that is, if the moral and functional effects are indistinguishable from a case of explicit threats. However, the legitimacy of this claim depends on whether the concept of coercion can accommodate such predicted threats without overreaching.

To proceed, I believe the answering of this question is best approached not through initially arguing that such an accommodation of anticipatory coercion is possible, but rather through diving into the possibly problematic consequences that follow from incorporating it. I will argue that there are too many such consequences, with such a level of severity, that it undermines the plausibility of accommodating such cases within a coherent theory of coercion. I dive into the four considerations that, whilst not exhaustive, reflect my core concerns.

A first objection to the accommodation of anticipatory coercion into a theory of coercion concerns the potential divergence between Q's expectations and what would have actually occurred. If P never intended to threaten Q or would have responded with a far weaker reaction than Q anticipated, then Q's decision would have been based on a mistaken counterfactual. In such cases, classifying the situation grants a normative weight to an expectation that never would have materialized. Unless Q were to be history's first proven clairvoyant, this remains an insurmountable obstacle. The odds and expectations may be well grounded but cannot attain the epistemic certainty required to match the force of an actual communicated threat. Without anchoring coercion in what is demonstrably imposed, it risks collapsing into a speculative projection of possibilities rather than the diagnosis of actual constraint.

A second objection is that, upon allowing coercion to hinge on Q's belief, over P's communicated intent, one introduces epistemic relativism into the understanding of coercion. If any agent's subjective fear or anticipation of retaliation is sufficient to trigger coercion, the

concept becomes vulnerable to misuse by overly cautious or misinformed actors. While beliefs may be reasonable or unreasonable, without objective markers, it is difficult to distinguish between genuine coercion or mere perceived pressure. This renders the ground on which coercion stands too unstable. To preserve the integrity of the concept, coercion must be tied to intersubjectively accessible conditions instead of the internal state of the allegedly coerced agent.

A third objection is that our understanding of coercion presupposes a mutual relationship between coercer and coercee, wherein one party intentionally imposes a constraint upon another's options. Anticipatory coercion lacks this dynamic. In such instances, P is not only unaware of Q's intended action but also does not communicate anything that might influence Q. The constraint arises from Q's internal prediction, however well founded these may be, and not from an external imposition. So, while it may be rational for Q to act on these expectations, an internally generated reaction by Q cannot constitute coercion due to its lack of traceability to an opposing agent's deliberate act. The absence of intention, communication, and awareness on P's part undermines the claim that coercion occurs. This mirrors conditions (1)-(3) of the conditions.

The fourth and final objection that I formulate is based on the fact that coercion is a thick concept, which means that it is normatively charged. This entails that it demands justification from the coercer and attributes moral responsibility for the constraining of the coercee's agency, as we have seen in Raz and Abizadeh. These normative dimensions break down in cases of anticipatory coercion, where P is neither aware of Q's intentions nor actively trying to influence Q's decisions. It seems morally unjust to hold P accountable, or to demand justification from P, when no intentional act has been undertaken. Furthermore, if the constraint on Q does not stem from P, but from a historical pattern wherein threats have been formulated in analogous situations, it becomes unclear whether P actively coerces as an

individual or if the structure that past actions have erected does. In such a case it does not appear to be personal coercion, but an impersonal form of structural coercion or influence, which might be a distinct phenomenon but lies beyond the scope of the interpersonal coercion examined here. N.B. This does not preclude all forms of moral responsibility, for if P helped establish the pattern shaping Q's expectations, P may be morally accountable for their part in said coercive structure, but not for some specific unvoiced threat envisioned by Q that altered Q's behavior absent any action by P.

All in all, these objections show that anticipatory coercion, despite being politically significant and a clear form of possible influence, cannot be accommodated with a coherent account of coercion. Its reliance on counterfactual assumptions undermines the conceptual precision necessary, its movement towards epistemic relativism blurs the required distinction between imposition and perceived imposition, its lack of an interpersonal relationship defies the structure that coercion necessitates, and finally, it risks unjustly attributing blame where no agency has been exercised by the supposed coercer. If coercion is to remain a morally loaded concept that aims to identify wrongful constraints of autonomy, then it must be limited to cases where an agent knowingly and intentionally imposes a conditional threat. What I have dubbed anticipatory coercion, constitutes a broad problem of structural dependence on economic powerhouses, which definitely requires close attention and further research, but not whilst being regarded as a form of coercion. As such, seeing that the meeting of conditions (4)-(6) and expected fulfillment of (1)-(3) is not sufficient to constitute coercion, the normative conditions need not be looked into. An expected threat that breeds anticipatory changes, thus including expected CETs, cannot be coercive.

That being said, this does not entail that anticipatory coercion is benign or normatively unproblematic. The mere capacity to coerce, especially when concentrated in unaccountable corporate actors, remains troubling, despite their not acting on it. We have

seen that their structural power alters the incentive landscape for democratic actors, as governments may anticipatorily dilute or abandon policies to prevent economic retaliation, instead of acting in accordance with democratic deliberation. This appears to close off regulatory paths that challenge corporate interests. As a result, what appears to be free political choice takes place against a background of invisible constraints, subtly shifting the locus of political authorship away from citizens and their representatives. Even when no coercion takes place, the mere presence of such latent power adversely impacts political autonomy by forcing democratic agents to second-guess the permissibility of their own mandates in light of possible corporate threats. This in turn lessens the normative legitimacy of resulting policies, which can hardly any longer be said to reflect the uninfluenced will of the people. Instead, the policies embody compromises made under the shadow of disproportionate corporate influence.

Conclusion

Let us, in a systematic fashion, return to the question at hand: *Do Corporate Exit Threats constitute a normatively legitimate form of Corporate Political Activity, or do they amount to normatively illegitimate distortions of political autonomy?* I have argued that CETs can constitute a form of coercion that undermines political autonomy, and by extension, the democratic legitimacy of the consequential policy outcomes. In such instances, CETs are normatively illegitimate distortions of political autonomy. This conclusion follows from the central claim that when CETs remove acceptable options from the choice set of a democratic government, specifically when these options regard the securing of basic needs, the government at hand no longer acts voluntarily. Accordingly, their compliance with corporate demands is then not strategic in nature but coerced. I shall retrace the steps taken, restate the reached conclusions and briefly speculate on next steps.

I started off the thesis by sketching the context that was to be dealt with. Herein it was shown that corporations are impersonal, legal entities, with a markedly undemocratic make-up. Despite this, corporations are swiftly growing in size and therefore in economic and political might, with the largest standing shoulder-to-shoulder with nation-states. These political actors engage in CPA and use CETs in order to create a more favorable business environment for themselves and occasionally do so to such an extent that their tactics become coercive.

Having set the scene, channeling Nozick and Abizadeh, I arrived at a list of necessary conditions through which potential coerciveness of threats—not offers or warnings—could be assessed. Herein, I distinguished between being subject to coercion and actual coercion, to ensure a clearer differentiation between coercion types. This was further supplemented by the argumentation that coercion is a thick concept, due to its inherent evaluative qualities and presupposition of the normative significance of autonomy and responsibility, which thus

warranted the inclusion of a normative condition in the requirements.

After having shown that CETs can, with ease, fulfill the necessary descriptive conditions, the necessary normative condition, (N), was formulated alongside a sufficient condition, (S), which formulates when (N) is met. (N) is based on the deep-rooted necessity of (political) autonomy in democratic theory, which generates the conclusion that coerciveness undermines political legitimacy. (S) is based on Olsaretti's distinction between voluntariness and freedom as being sufficient for the undermining of autonomy, which is invoked upon an agent's (prevented) ability to pursue acceptable choices. Other sufficient conditions may be formulated as well, as this is not exhaustive but goes to show that coercion *is* possible through CETs. Finally, through employing the case study of Amazon v. Seattle, it was shown that CETs are capable of meeting all relevant conditions for CETs to be coercive. From this, it can be concluded that CETs can undermine the political autonomy of democratic institutions and result in democratically illegitimate policy. Under such conditions, CETs are normatively unacceptable. Finally, in response to possible counterarguments, I have shown that, whilst formal legality is crucial, it is not sufficient to ensure non-coerciveness.

Finally, to offer a comprehensive account of CETs, I analyzed the anticipatory coercion stemming from expected threats. In many instances, governments alter their behavior based on the anticipation of future threats, including CETs, which might be considered coercion. However, upon closer scrutiny, the accommodation of such instances into a coherent theory of coercion is not feasible. This would undermine the conceptual precision necessary for such a morally loaded concept and overattribute coerciveness, attributing blame in situations where no agent has acted.

In sum, I have shown that CETs can be coercive when actors outside of the democratic process leave democratic governments unable to pursue collectively self-determined ends through strategic leveraging of economic might, such that the government's

meeting of a basic need is constrained. In these cases, CETs form normatively illegitimate distortions of political autonomy. That being said, CETs that do not fulfill the previous demands are not automatically legitimate or normatively permissible. They have simply not yet been proven to be normatively problematic, but various routes of achieving this verdict remain, albeit outside of the scope of this thesis. Whilst CETs might then seem no more than legitimate paradigmatic instances of democratic governance in the form of balancing interests, this cannot be assumed. The strong influence, albeit non-coercive, remains normatively troubling, especially due to the non-natural and non-democratic nature of corporations, and thus requires further research.

Continuing, the fact that CETs can form proven normatively illegitimate distortions of political autonomy is problematic, must be taken seriously, and should not remain an abstract philosophical concern. As CETs increase in frequency and scale due to the continued corporate expansion and growing capital mobility, philosophers and governments alike must remain vigilant. The framework I have developed shows that CETs can be coercive and thus must be treated with caution. Their proliferation, if left unchecked, poses a serious threat to the institutional integrity of democracies.

Although the conclusion reached may reflect a widely held suspicion, namely that corporate interference in democratic-decision making is normatively problematic, this thesis goes a step further. It transforms this widely held intuition into a structured philosophical argument, providing a clear, systematic framework for understanding when and why CETs are morally impermissible. By grounding coercion in the concept of involuntariness and the frustration of basic needs, and by showing such interference violates political autonomy, I have provided a clear-cut, defensible account of coercion in the corporate-political context.

This work seeks to shift the conversation from suspicion and intuition to a justified argument. In this thesis, I have focused on CETs as a possible form of coercion that can

undermine political autonomy and democratic legitimacy. However, I do not claim that this captures all normatively problematic instances of CETs. Other forms of influence may still threaten the integrity of democratic decision-making without constituting coercion, such as through what I have referred to as anticipatory coercion. Such mechanisms deserve further investigation. Future research should examine these alternative forms of undue influence and assess the normative legitimacy of CETs in these lights. This would contribute to developing a broader normative account of CETs in democratic societies, and support the assessment of CPA more generally. I further invite scholars across disciplines to build upon this analysis and respond to the institutional vulnerabilities this thesis has identified. While it lies beyond the scope of this thesis to lay out institutional reform or regulatory strategy, the normative groundwork laid here should inform future efforts. Since CETs can strike at the heart of democratic legitimacy, they not only warrant philosophical attention but demand political action.

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