

The Interest of Breathing: Towards a Theory of Ecological Interest Formation

Bue Rübner Hansen

Abstract: The question of the interest of breathing is imposing itself, from COVID-19, over Black Lives Matter to the breathlessness of climate anxiety and economic stress. The question is of epochal importance. It was posed and immediately dismissed when the constitution of the capitalist world was established in the mid-17th century. Modern political philosophy, parliamentary politics, and the emergent capitalist world order were built on a gradual reduction of the interest of breathing to the breath of the individual. Today, as suffocation brings back the question of breath with urgency, calls for a “universal right to breathe” co-exist with perverse invocations of the right to breathe as a right to breathe maskless. Behind any claims of right lays an interest. So how can we think the interest of breathing today and historically? Under what conditions does the interest in breathing become an insurgent universality against a suffocating world, and how does it relate to the concrete universality of breath on an atmospheric scale? To answer such questions, we must elaborate a theory of the interest of breathing which is at once partisan and ecological.

Keywords: interest, breathing, ecology, conspiracy, class, commons, covid.

Suffocation is the suffering of the day. There is the stifling atmosphere of pandemic isolation, the breathlessness of anxiety, the stress of work, debt and unemployment. There is the literal suffocation of the lungs of COVID-patients slowly filling with fluid and of George Floyd, at the knee of a police officer. There is the orange sky over California, the grey smog over industrial belts across the world, the airborne pollutants of asthma and early death. There is the suffering of people who simply cannot take it anymore, who push back police with placards paraphrasing Fanon: “We revolt because we cannot breathe”.²

How dare we dream of breathing freely and well, of breathing together? How dare we not?

Until we lose it, breath expands and contracts thoughtlessly in our diaphragm, connecting us with photosynthetic life. We all need to breathe, and this need extends much beyond the human. In this moment of Black, human, planetary suffocation, it is no stretch to imagine a universal right to breathe, as Achille Mbembe has recently done.³ But what is such right, except the barest of need of the barest of life? Is

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1 Acknowledged or not, all writing draws on networks of thought and care. The foremost person in my network, and in both respects, is Manuela Zechner. Oliver Bugge Hunt provided useful editorial suggestions as to where I needed to weave the threads tighter.

2The actual quote, to which we will return, is more radical and more expansive.

3 Mbembe 2020.

breath a right or simply a fact? And if it is a right, who is to practice and enforce it against the processes and agents of suffocation?

The question of the interest of breathing is of epochal importance. It was posed when the constitution of the capitalist world was settled in the mid-17th century, and immediately dismissed. Modern political philosophy, parliamentary politics, and the emergent capitalist world order were built on a gradual reduction of the interest of breathing to the breath of the individual. Today, as suffocation brings back the question of breath with intense urgency, this reduction expresses itself in perverse invocations of the right to breathe: as a right to breathe maskless, even when it may risk others or oneself a “complete disruption of the lung architecture”.⁴The anti-mask protests reveal the importance of specifying this right not as an abstract universality to which those rejecting masks and those needy of respirators may equally lay claim. Behind any claims of right lays an interest. So how can we think the *interest of breathing*?

Recovering the history of the interest to breathe opens a radical questioning of the order of interest that was constructed upon the basis of possessive individualism. It also invites us to think interest as a form of relationality, which is not reducible to the games of self-interested individuals or classes. Instead, we may explore under which conditions this interest becomes an insurgent universality against a suffocating world, as well as a concrete universality of breath on an atmospheric scale. In short, beyond and beneath any abstract universality, we must elaborate on the question of an interest of breathing which is at once *partisan and ecological*.

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1. Forgetting of the interest of breathing

“Where is there any bound or limit set” if elections are opened to “men who have *no interest but the interest of breathing*?” With this speech act, Oliver Cromwell summed up a philosophy of legitimate interest that remains with us today: if the interests of the merely breathing are taken into account, argued the general, the result is anarchy. So began the repression of the interest of breathing. To set the scene for Cromwell’s dismissal of the political legitimacy of the right of breathing, we need to look at the meaning of interest in mid-17th Century England.

In the European Renaissance, the concept of interest had two precise, technical meanings in law and moneylending. In law, interest referred to those that had a direct stake in court cases, so that most social actors could be described as having no interest at all. In its pecuniary sense, interest medieval referred to a compensation upon unpaid loans in medieval times, and then, as the moral and religious

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4 Booth 2020.

rejection of usury waned, to payments upon the loan itself. Interest referred to in-between (inter-esse), to the reality of relation beyond the agents or points in time constituting it: a legal contract or the value of time between a loan and its repayment.

The general crisis of the 17th century, threw the established understanding of interest into debate and crisis.⁵ In so far as this crisis was of epochal importance in shaping the world of today, we may speak of an Age of Separation: Civil war tore apart England along religious and class lines. The historian Christopher Hill spoke of this revolutionary era as a “great overturning, questioning, revaluating, of everything in England”.⁶ Feudal bonds between lords and their subjects were torn apart, and commoners from the commons. The enclosures and increased trade with colonies and Europe accelerated the commodification of labour and the commodification of the means of subsistence. Meanwhile, the agrarian base of the economy was rocked by the bad harvests of what has later been called “the Little Ice Age”.⁷ There was a general crisis of social bonds and the legal regulation of interests. Rumour of puritan conspiracies and papal plots were rife.⁸ Millenarianism provided a language for orientation in times where existing religious and worldly signifiers were destabilized. In the civil war, when the struggle was over legality in general - the constitution - and its relation to property, the very system that decided on who had a legitimate interest went into crisis. Accordingly, everyone could, at least potentially, and certainly if they commanded men under arms, claim an interest. Interest became what Raymond Williams describes as a keyword: significant, binding, or problematic words both in certain activities and their interpretation, and in certain forms of thought.⁹

In 1647, at the height of the English civil war, the rebels of the New Model Army met in a Church in Putney on the outskirts of London, to discuss a new constitution. The Levellers wanted near universal male suffrage, but grandees like Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton, Cromwell’s son in law, refused an extension of the franchise to unpropertied men. “No man hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom”, wrote Ireton “that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom.” Interest was redoubled into a hierarchy of stakeholdership grounded on property: only property owners were recognized as having a fixed interest in the state, and so the right to an interest in its government.

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5 Parker 2013.

6 Hill 1991, p.14.

7 Parker 1993.

8 Milton 1995.

9 Williams 1988, p.15

In short, being a citizen, as opposed to a mere subject, was defined in terms of the possession of property - first of all the possession of land, rather than inhabitation of the land. Those without such interests were not considered disinterested, but of interests both too insignificant and too capacious to be counted. Only the propertied could be counted upon to defend the property upon which the state depends: what was to stop the poor majority, if enfranchised, from expropriating all land and wealth, and thus destituting all hierarchies, introducing anarchy? Where Thomas Rainsborough argued that “the poorest hee that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest hee”, and thus has no obligation to a government that “he hath not had a voice to put Himself under”, Cromwell ascended to Ireton’s argument, and asked his famous question: “for where is there any bound or limit set if you take away this limit, that men that have no interest but the interest of breathing shall have no voice in elections?”¹⁰

Where Risborough affirmed the voice of the poor, Cromwell saw mere *breath* - the inarticulate passage of air from the lungs. But why did Cromwell refer to breath to dismiss the interests of the multitude, rather than their “base” interests in eating and drinking, by which the poor have so often been dismissed? While we cannot reconstruct Cromwell’s intentions, we know that breath was considered altogether less ignoble than the consumption of food and drink, even spiritual. The connection between life, breath and spirituality was well known among theologians and others educated in Greek, Hebrew and Latin, all languages in which the words for breath and soul - *anima, spiritus, ruarch* - are the same or closely related.¹¹ For some radical protestants, like the Scottish Presbyterian and constitutionalist Samuel Rutherford, breathing was an act of praying, present even in those without eyes to turn to the sky or a voice to speak: “There is life going in and out at thy nostrils: Breathing is praying, and taken of our hand, as crying in prayer. Thou hast heard my voice, hide not thy ear at my breathing, at my cry”.¹²

The New Model Army was, to a large extent, composed of deeply religious men, and it counted among its forces and constituents many without property. In this company, the well-known dismissal of the masses’ base interests in eating and drinking would have been offensive and self-defeating — and recalled an uncomfortable fact: many did fight not

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10 Baker 2007.

11 Pseudo-Plutach credits to Anaximenes for building a philosophy around this connection: “Just as our soul, which is air, holds us together, so also a spirit (pneuma) and air hold the whole world together. Spirit and air have the same meaning”. Fragment found in Friedrich Engels’ notes and fragments for the *Dialectics of Nature*. Marxists.org.

The connection between breath and spirit was not just religious, but scientific, disrespecting modern distinctions between the realms. For instance, Aristotle’s discussion in *De Anima* about whether fish have a soul since they “do not breathe”, was still alive at the time. See Alexander Ross’s chapter on “the strange nature of fishes/they breathe not” in Ross 1652, p. 212.

12 Rutherford 1645, p.41

(merely) for religion, but for bread. Cromwell’s dismissal of the interest of breathing thus achieved a triple feat: it acknowledged the piousness of his interlocutors, which bound them to the uprising Cromwell was leading, while obscuring the issue of the voice and material interest of the poor. Yet this bond, while necessary in the struggle against monarchy, was also a threat to the interests of the Grandees. As Clinical Wasteman notes, every successful bourgeois power since the 1640s has followed the example of Cromwell’s Major-Generals in taking the merely-breathing interest seriously enough to plan some combination of its repression, division and corruption in advance.¹³

The reason the merely-breathing were to be taken seriously related to two excesses of breath, spiritual and bodily: the threat of millenarian fanaticism, and the threat of the insurrection of bare life.

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2. Interest unbound

In a break from the debates at Putney, there was time to listen to a sermon. The Baptist preacher Thomas Collier announced the coming rule of the saints, which entailed a freeing of conscience from the established church and of justice from government: a revolution both inner and outer. The aim was to impose the “great interest of God, the public good” so that “justice and righteousness may flow down abundantly without respect of persons.” As noted by Stephen Engelmann, this conception of interest “links the interior of the individual to a global project that can just as easily be posed against as with the ruling apparatus of state”, without being limited by law, neither natural, constitutional, nor common.¹⁴ For these millenarians, decisions were not to be based on scripture alone, but on the seizure of eschatological time. Under exceptional and pressing circumstances, “God’s commands may be intermittent, unprecedented, even unreasonable ...” and always to be interpreted by the conscience and strategy of the collective of saints.¹⁵ A decade later, the royalist pamphleteer Sir Roger D’Estrange who had made his name railing against “dissenting fanatics”, warned:

Take heed to such puritans, very pests in the church and commonwealth, whom no deserts can oblige, neither others nor promises bind; breathing nothing but sedition, and calumnies, aspiring without reason, and making their own imaginations (without any warrant of the word).¹⁶

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13 Wasteman 2012.

14 Engelmann 2003 p.127.

15 Engelmann 2003, p.134.

16 D’Estrange 1662, p.116.

D'Estrange points to the key challenge of Millenarianism: the unbounded nature of its passions. His distinction between the imagination of the diggers and the word, served to sever the essential tie between imagination and word in the Millenarian self-understanding. With all social and religious order upended, the word had to be read imaginatively, and the imagination had to be guided by the word, which, after all, had first opened a caesura in English society, as politico-theological dissent led to civil war. Living in a messianic rupture of time, which needed to be kept open at all costs, their faith was in the word, in as much as it kept open the Event. Any attention to the Book was guided by an extreme attention to signs and the revolutionary awareness that all that is said and done matters. Ultimately, the aim of the saints would be to establish "great interest of God, the public good".¹⁷

The real threat of the breath of sedition, to the Grandees, lay in its capacity to combine with the interests of the merely breathing. Cromwell's and Ireton's fought fiercely against the extension of citizenship to the unpropertied, because they feared this would entail an admission that they have "freedom to the land, [to take] the ground, to exercise it, till it". Indeed, even if the vote was never extended to the propertyless, some took matters into their own hands. In 1649, at St. George's Hill in Surrey, a loose movement which called itself the True Levellers, began digging where they were. Landless peasants reduced to utter misery by civil war and the meagre harvests of the cold 1640s, the diggers lived at the threshold of bare life. They did not and could not rest content to demand representation for the breathing. Indeed, they engaged in forms of mutual aid and squatted the land to re-establish what they had never had or what had been taken from them through the enclosures: Land for subsistence farming, and so a living relation with plants and animals, the seasons and nutrient cycles, a metabolism in nature which was not, or only marginally, mediated with the world of property and property right, and processes of production and conquest. Common among the Diggers and other millenarian groups at the time, like the Ranters, the Familiarists and the Quakers, was a belief in the equality of the sexes; some even believed in sexual freedom outside marriage.

In such struggles we find the opening to a notion of interest beyond property and contract. For Cromwell and Ireton interest referred to, in Raymond Williams' useful distillation, "an objective or legal share of something, and the extended use, to refer to a natural share or common concern".¹⁸ This definition of interest drew on the narrow financial and legal concepts of interest, but the words' Latin root— *inter-esse* — allowed its extension to a much broader semantic field: "to be between",

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¹⁷Woodhouse 1986, p. 50.

¹⁸Williams 1988, p.15.

"to make a difference", and "to concern". Indeed, the land the Diggers took an interest in was itself interstitial: the fallow lands between the fertile fields of the lords, the commons that existed between popular use and lordly dominion. "Oppressing lords of manors, exacting landlords and tithe-takers", wrote the digger leader Gerrald Winstanley, "may as well say their brethren shall not breathe in the air, nor enjoy warmth in their bodies, nor have the moist waters to fall upon them in showers, unless they will pay them rent for it...".¹⁹ The problem for Winstanley and his co-conspirators wasn't just rents, but private property itself:

...so long as we, or any other, doth own the Earth to be the peculiar Interest of Lords and Landlords, and not common to others as well as them, we own the Curse, and holds the Creation under bondage.²⁰

For the diggers, the freedom of mankind and of the Earth were mutually dependent, in a continuous sensuous communion:

And when this tree of life is fed upon and delighted in (by the five senses, which is the creation, mankind, or the living soul), then these five rivers are called pure rivers of the waters of life; for the life of truth and peace is in them, and they are the sweet conveyors of the waters or breathings of life from one to another through the whole body: and so bringing all into a oneness, to be of one heart and one mind.²¹

The Diggers' interest in the land isn't possessive, as much as a caring concern. The care is articulated in terms of a spiritualization of nature, a proto-ecological spirituality. For Winstanley, God is Tree of Life whose "waters and breathings" pass through the five senses. *Deus, sive natura*. The connection between breath and the spiritualization of nature is historically profound. Speculating about the origins of religion, Freud ascribed great importance to the etymological connection between breath and spirit:

Man found that he was faced with the acceptance of "spiritual" forces, that is to say such forces as cannot be comprehended by the senses, particularly not by sight, and yet having undoubted, even extremely strong, effects. If we may trust to language, it was the movement of the air that provided the image of spirituality, since the spirit borrows its name from the breath of wind (animus, spiritus,

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¹⁹Winstanley 2009, p.295, language modernised.

²⁰Winstanley 1983, p. 84

²¹Winstanley 2009, p.7

Hebrew: ruach = smoke). The idea of the soul was thus born as the spiritual principle in the individual... Now the realm of spirits had opened for man, and he was ready to endow everything in nature with the soul he had discovered in himself.²²

The Diggers were not animists, but animism shares with pantheism a crucial trait, which it appears Freud overlooked. The discovery of spirit/ breath in nature, is also a discovery of nature in us as living breathing creatures. This isn't merely a matter of adding "introjection" to Freud's thesis of projection. The relation is not specular, but a matter of inhalation and exhalation. It is a matter both of spirit and matter, whose unity is *life*.

To know the secrets of nature is to know the works of God ... how the spirit or power of wisdom and life, causing motion or growth, dwells within and governs both the several bodies of the stars and planets in the heavens above; and the several bodies of the earth below, as grass, plants, fishes, beasts, birds and mankind.²³

Spirit isn't inherent in the individual, or rather, it only inheres in the individual insofar as it circulates between it and creatures of all kinds (including, crucially, as we now know, plants) via a common atmosphere. For Winstanley, the communion of man and nature doesn't efface the distinction but thinks their higher unity not only in terms of origin or author (both are "God's creation"), but as sensuous exchange. In this exchange, breath does not stand out, piously and humbly, from eating and drinking. Instead of the voiceless piety of bare life, it is a struggle against the institutions that block the material and spiritual relation with the Tree of Life: private property, established religion and the state. Indeed, the Diggers' weaving of networks of interdependence reminds us that life is rarely bare, except from the point of view of the state. The interests emerging from these networks were interstitial and unbounded, widening, fanatically, the cracks in the edifice of law, and repairing, ecologically, the tears in the web of life.

In ruling class discourse, the threat posed by the Diggers and other radicals to the order of private and public interest wasn't just a local, English phenomenon. As the historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown, the English grandees saw the diggers as a part of a transnational "Hydra", the mythological many-headed beast who grows a new head whenever one is chopped off. Across the growing empire, the

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²² Sigmund Freud, 1939. In Arabic too, a similar connection between spirit and air is made. The arabic for spirit, *روح* (*rūh*), shares its etymology with the word for wind, *rīh*.

²³ Winstanley 2009, p. 324-325

Hydra would rear its heads, engaging in struggles for land and breath.²⁴

Refusing private property and the state, and practicing subsistence commoning and religious communion, the diggers rejected everything about the emergent ideology of possessive individualism, which became hegemonic after this age of separation. The diggers were soon crushed militarily, their ideas repressed by censorship, their potential followers discouraged by their demonization. Soon corruption was added to the repression and division of the interest of the merely breathing.

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3. Possessive individualism

After Putney, the civil war ran its course, culminating in the execution of King Charles I in January 1649. The parliamentary victory established a Commonwealth under the leadership of Cromwell. Suffrage wasn't extended to the propertyless, but Leveller demands such as the abolition of monarchy and the Church of England's monopoly of religion were followed. Cromwell did not run the risks of demobilizing his radicalized army, deploying instead the New Model Army in the subjugation of Ireland. Soldiers from the army were thus offered a way to gain land, which did not threaten the English elite, but rather supported its colonial ambitions under Cromwell's ruthless leadership. Meanwhile enclosures continued in England, not merely as elite land-grabs, but to ensure a sufficient population of "productive" workers.²⁵

As slavery became central to English empire-building, an old Roman republican concept of freedom started to (re)gain prominence. No longer was the free individual based merely on the freedom from the "dependency" under which women and children suffered, but also from the non-freedom of slaves. Free men were thought to be dependent on and owned by no-one but themselves. Their *possessive individualism* was, pace Macpherson, aristocratic and agrarian, rather than bourgeois. The model individual for this mode of thought wasn't so much the individualized market actor, as the protestant patriarch, whose relationship to God had been individualized.²⁶ Throughout, self-interest wasn't found anthropologically and universally, but imbued institutionally and particularly to certain subjects, through contract and property law. Cromwell and Ireton had grounded the franchise — a legitimate interest in government — on the ownership of immovable property in England. However, as colonialism, industrialism and world trade increased the

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²⁴ Linebaugh and Rediker 2000.

²⁵ S. Fortrey, *England's Interest and Improvement* (1663), pp. 19- 20; Referenced in Hill 1991, p.51.

²⁶ As Carole Pateman has noted, the "independence" of the contractarian, possessive individual typically obscures relations of interdependence and domination within the household. Nowhere is this clearer than in case of the Aristocratic patriarch. Pateman 1988.

power of the bourgeoisie, and of aristocrats who invested or married into commerce and industry, the respect for movable property grew. In short, it became imaginable that also merchants and industrialists without landed property could have a legitimate interest claim on the vote. Definitions and distinctions between interests grounded in property and breathing, in fixed and moveable property, etc., didn't just discriminate between pre-established interests, but encouraged the formation of some interests over others.

With the dismissal of the unbounded interests of eschatologists and the dispossessed, it may be surprising that the capitalist pursuit of profit - which we know to entail a bad infinity - was not equally rejected among the puritan elites of Britain. The reason for this was that commerce and production were seen as essentially self-restrained activities, requiring hard work and frugality. As interest was gradually individualized, it became connected to proto-psychological theories of passions and affects, something that had been unthinkable when interest was a legal term for having a stake in a relation.

As Albert Hirschman has shown in his seminal intellectual history, *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), philosophers from Hume to Adam Smith called upon the concept of interest to provide a materialist theory of the overcoming of the private vices in the absence of religious prohibitions.²⁷ Already Spinoza had written that “[a]n affect cannot be restrained nor removed unless by an opposed and stronger affect”, affirming a basic materialist insight: knowledge alone is not enough to transform behaviour: “No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered an affect”.²⁸ Hume similarly affirmed that “There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction”. The name of the affect capable of restraining or orientating other passions is *interest*. While focus was on the constraint of harmful passions – the vices – in 17th century philosophy the term generally includes what we may call affects (joy, sadness, fear, anxiety, hope), and motivations (need, desires, want).

What marks out interest from other passions is its in-betweenness: it is not pure need, want or desire, but the articulation of such motivations in relations to others in consideration of an ensemble of social relations upon which the individual is dependent (morality, legality, the fluctuations of the market, etc.). According to Hirschman, the concept of interest understood as “concerns, aspirations, and advantage” gained currency in late 17th century Western Europe, with a meaning not limited by person’s welfare, but comprising “the totality of human aspirations”,

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27 Albert O.Hirschman 1977

28 Spinoza 1899, p.185, prop VII and XIV

while denoting “an element of reflection and calculation with respect to the manner in which these aspirations were to be pursued”.²⁹ Interest, we may say, became the name of this orientation, at once practical and theoretical, between an individuated life and the relations within which it is lived.

In his study of Jeremy Bentham’s philosophy of interest, Stephen Engelmann points to the importance of institutions, *experience* and *expectation* in orientating and limiting interest.³⁰ The subject cannot be said to have an interest, in something that neither experience nor expectation suggest the possibility of (some may dream of settling other planets, but can’t be a matter of interest unless the scientific possibility of doing so emerges). Our experiences are profoundly shaped by the ways we reproduce ourselves, saturated with family history, work-life and interactions with the state, just as expectations are shaped by our beliefs in anything from progress or climate change to fear or trust in the police. In short, interests are not brute facts inherent in the subject or in its position within economic relations. They are an emergent orientation guided by experience and expectation, navigating between passions (or affects), on the one hand, and the institutions, events, relations and ideologies which shape experience and expectation, and reward or punish passions, on the other. Interests, in other words, while different from needs and desires are no pure calculative rationality, but a reflexive passion shaped by the forms of production, politics and thought in which the subject exists. But the existence of the individual subject is itself a contingent and contested historical phenomenon, and this is where the question of collective interest formation arises.

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4. The breath of the working class

The Diggers, as a simultaneously proletarian and anti-proletarianization movement, had developed a strong interest of breathing. In the apocalyptic atmosphere of the Civil War, the Diggers emerged as a combination of a Millenarian orientation and expectation and squatting as a material strategy of life and survival based on its participants’ agrarian experiences. They formed, we may say, an interest in breathing that was both spiritual and material. However, the history of the workers movement may be narrated as a forgetting of the interest of breathing.

Already a generation after the Diggers, John Locke developed a theory of property based in labour.³¹ Extending the circle of possessions

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29 Hirschman 1977, p.32

30 Engelmann 2003, p.4

31 Locke 1689.

that may ground citizenship to taxpayers in general, he created an opening for free workers to claim a stake in the state; the price of “possessing their own labour power” was their taxability. In this way, workers could be imagined as members of the civil society, that is of market individuality, and be treated, in their own humble way, as possessive individuals. While the working class in England was profoundly international and most of all *transatlantic*, a large part of the working class was increasingly nationalized as English. In short, the institutional and expectational horizon of its interest formation was increasingly national not only at home, but in the colonies. For centuries, the colonies provided the propertyless English a path, however perilous, to private property and so to precarious forms of settler colonial citizenship. Writing 170 years later, Hegel noted that colonial conquest provided an essential solution to the problem of the rabble. Unlike other ways of dealing with the problem of the dispossessed which all were contrary to “the principles of civil society” - self-help, independence, hard work, etc. - the export of the propertyless to the colonies would instead expand the reach of civil society, and the circle of possessive individuals.

With regards to the large working class that remained in Britain, Marx and Engels’ were painfully aware of its suffocation. For Engels, the breathless, suffocated masses posed a deep blockage to the nationalization of the working class. In this study on the condition of the English working class, Engels frequently returned to the question of breath. There were the bleachers who were obliged to breathe chlorine, the young women workers, who suffered “coughs, narrow chests, and shortness of breath”, “enervation, exhaustion, debility, loss of appetite, pains in the shoulders, back, and hips, but especially headache”.³² There were the fourteen-year-old grinders suffering from asthma, who, in the words of one doctor quoted by Engels,

appear to breathe the most comfortably in that posture in which they are accustomed to sit at their work. Their complexions assume a muddy, dirty appearance; their countenance indicates anxiety; they complain of a sense of tightness across the chest; their voice is rough, and hoarse; their cough loud, and as if the air were drawn through wooden tubes; they occasionally expectorate considerable quantities of dust, sometimes mixed up with mucus, at other times in globular or cylindrical masses enveloped in a thin film of mucus.³³

For Engels, Manchester, the leading city of industrialism, illustrated the extreme capacity of the human organism to endure suffocation. The city

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³² All quotes from the digital version of *The Condition of the English Working Class* found at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/>.

³³ Ibid.

showed in how little space a human can move and “how little air – and such air! – he can breathe”. Engels referred not to Manchester in general, but to the quarters on the east and north-east of the city, in which the bourgeoisie did not live, since the prevalent western and south-western “wind drives the smoke of all the factories hither”, for the working people to breathe. The atmospheric suffering of the “multitude of the poor”, “a race ... robbed of all humanity”, wasn’t just inscribed in urban geography, but in the built environment:

They are drawn into the large cities where they breathe a poorer atmosphere than in the country; they are relegated to districts which, by reason of the method of construction, are worse ventilated than any others ... As though the vitiated atmosphere of the streets were not enough, they are penned in dozens into single rooms, so that the air which they breathe at night is enough in itself to stifle them. They are given damp dwellings, cellar dens that are not waterproof from below or garrets that leak from above.³⁴

Yes, breathing was a need. But as a demand, it was rarely raised. The reason, we may gather is that it this would have required a leap of working-class capacities, a process of collective interest formation on a scale appropriate to the problem. Individual workers do need fresh air and may actively pursue this as an interest when they look for work or housing. However, such behaviour amounts to little less than workers competing for decent conditions of life. More generally, we can say that while there may be universal human needs, this does not imply that there are universal human interests: people who need the same may compete over it, rather than form a common interest. The universal need to breathe has no direct relation to the interest of breathing, except as a near-tautology on the level of the individual: it needs to breathe, so it has an interest in conditions that allow it to do so.³⁵ To connect need (or desire or “passions”) to interest requires a theory of *interest formation*.³⁶ Even a shared problem of suffocation may not lead to a common interest. For the coincidence of needs to result in a common interest there has to be mechanisms of overcoming scarcity: practices of sharing and mechanisms of redistribution, or economic trajectories of growth or forms of collectively reappropriating wealth, which project the overcoming of overcoming of scarcity. In short, collective interests need to be based on collective experiences or expectations that the

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³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ But even here, interest and need are not the same. A suicidal person may need to breathe, but have no interest in doing so.

³⁶ For an elaboration of the question of interest formation, see Hansen 2015.

needs/desires/passions of different individuals or groups can be aligned. In short, to form a collective interest, individuals need either to trust institutions or themselves.

The development of a Mancunian class interest in breathing required an expectation that the air and dwellings of Manchester could be changed for the whole class, which required trust in institutions' willingness and capacity to do this (making petitions etc. meaningful), or in the workers' own revolutionary capacity to enact a vast scale transformation of industry, of labour, of the city and housing. Engels had great confidence in this latter scenario, imagining the working-class as a people onto their own which had "become a race wholly apart from the English bourgeoisie". In other words, Engels thought the degradation of the working class was akin to a process of racialization, which may result in open class/race warfare.³⁷

Sensing this danger all too well, and troubled by the physical weakness of even young workers and army conscripts, social reformers and philanthropists undertook the work of improving the living conditions and air quality of the working class. The expectation that institutions and social progress would gradually respond to the need of fresh air – paired with the belief that some degree of pollution was a condition of progress -- gradually depoliticised the question of air quality, taking it outside the scope of articulated collective interests, just as the welfare state itself slowly transformed the struggle for collective interests into a regime of institutionally guaranteed universal and individual citizenship rights. In his classical text on social citizenship, T.H. Marshall drew an analogy between the welfare state's gradual, but never complete elimination of air pollution and class difference:

And so in time, as the social conscience stirs to life, class-abatement, like smoke-abatement, becomes a desirable aim to be pursued as far as is compatible with the continued efficiency of the social machine.³⁸

Thus, in the imaginary of the reformer, the suffocation of working class life is remedied, but never abolished, by a "social conscience" rather than struggle. This forgetting of the collective interest of breathing has had profound consequences on working class subjectivities. This produced a class of workers possessive of rights, and perhaps of savings and humble apartments and houses, but without collective interest in questions of social and natural ecologies. The workers movement increasingly limited its demand to those which could be satisfied by mechanisms of

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³⁷ For a discussion of the strange use of the concept of race, see Kouvelakis 2004, p. 207-211.

³⁸ Marshall 1950, p.32.

money and citizenship, guided by the expectational machine of progress. Compared to the fights for higher wages, the 8-hour working day, for holidays and welfare rights, the struggles for breath (for public health, parks and dignified housing, etc.) isn't remembered much, and mostly as a story of modernization. Across Western Europe, the working class was nationalized into forms of stakeholderism, and made respectable to the extent it joined the ranks of those whose passions were guided by interest. Class demands became premised on citizenship and indexed to the growth of the wealth of the nation, whatever its ecological costs or (neo)colonial means.

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5. Breathing, leisurely

The interest of breathing was largely forgotten in the metropolis. The consequence has been an impoverishment of the concept of interest. Interest has come to be characterized by the tactical and strategic orientation of any individuated multiplicity - a person, a family, a corporation, a nation - in obtaining and controlling specific objects and objectives. Interest has been reduced to self-interest.³⁹ That this is the case within liberal and conservative traditions is obvious. But this was also often the case on the left. Not only within reformist workers movements, as mentioned above, but in the revolutionary movements who pursued the insurrection of the merely breathing - of the dispossessed, the rabble, the proletariat, surplus population – with the aim to socialize rather than abolish property. Too often, the Utopian horizon was the individuation of humanity as a possessive individual, in an ideology of progress the aim of which wasn't to overcome the bad infinity of capitalist accumulation, but to liberate it from the shackles of merely private property.

Among all these traditions of 20th century Western politics – liberalism, conservatism, social democracy and socialism, the concept of freedom remained the one that was forged in the age of separation. Its positive definition in terms of independence and sovereignty, be it individual or national, carried the mark of the forms of unfreedom it was defined against: the patriarchal dependency of women and children, the dependency of subsistence farmers on nature, and the unfreedom of enslaved Africans. The ethics, politics and epistemologies connected, rightly or wrongly, with blackness and subsistence farming, childhood and womanhood (animism, play, care, etc.) were cast as other not just to freedom but to the regime of rationality built up around the concept of interest. Practices and rationalities of caring for interdependencies within social and natural ecologies were cast as other to the grand project of Progress, even if they continued to subsidize and supply this

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³⁹ Swedberg 2005. Mathiowetz 2007.

project with energy, raw materials, and cheap labour.⁴⁰

As other, all these practices could return in the romanticized form that is inescapable when such practices are described rather than lived. Rather than the troubles and joys, labour, and daily struggles of taking care of interdependencies, we got fantasies of noble savages, infinitely caring mothers and innocent children. With regards to nature, we find not the difficulties and joys of joint metabolism — composting, planting, weeding, watering, foraging, hunting and caring for animals, and so on, but a romantic description of nature as a beautiful other (but even here the breath of nature reaches out, almost erotically, to touch and enter the subject):

I experienced the same blissful thrill, it was like a breath of fresh sea air blowing down upon me from the purest sky; the depths of speculation lay before me like the unfathomable sea from which one cannot turn one's eyes straining to see the ground below; in God we live, move and have our being! We become conscious of that when we are on the sea; we feel that God breathes through all around us and through us ourselves; we feel such kinship with the whole of nature, the waves beckon to us so intimately, the sky stretches so lovingly over the earth, and the sun shines with such indescribable radiance that one feels one could grasp it with the hand.⁴¹

Breath became reduced to a basic bodily function, or to the luxury of vacations by the sea, in the mountains and by lakes, all of which slowly trickled down to the worker-citizens. Eastern practices of breathing like yoga and meditation were imported as self-improvement exercises, shorn of their collective spiritual dimension. Pantheism became a matter of the holiday epiphanies of hikers and campers, swimmers and surfers. The interest of breathing became an interest in leisure, in parks and travels to “exotic” destinations, and one that could be satisfied through the key mechanisms of interest-as-possession and rights: the ownership of money or holiday homes for some, the rights of workers and citizens to paid holiday for others.

And so, slowly, freedom was reduced to self-possession (of money, property, and rights). Interest was reduced to the interest of the self and nation, breath to an aspect of the individual body, and nature to an environment to be conquered or conserved. The subject that emerged from this violent and contested historical process was not the individual suddenly recognized as free and independent. Instead, as we have seen, it was a body individualized and separated by the state and market, a

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40 Moore 2016.

41 Engels 1840.

possessive and acquisitive interest premised on the domination of its passions. Psychoanalysis built a whole psychology and business model on helping this Ego navigate the contrary pressures of the Superego and Id. This was to be an uneasy, anxious subject. Either it would betray its own desires or the social norms regulating the behaviour of individuals. Whatever it chose, it would be guilty, only differently.

Individual freedom had become a matter of an anxious, mostly unconscious choice between different forms of guilt. Kierkegaard called this choice *the abyss*, the moment of facing freedom and possibility (or desire, as Lacan would say⁴²), where the subject either leaps or turns away, shuddering.⁴³ The severance of Godly, lordly and patriarchal dependency had left the subject seemingly alone with its possessions and anxiety. What disappeared from view was any interdependencies and desires that did not take the forms imaginable and acceptable to possessive individualism, in other words all those interdependencies and desires that were not mediated by contracts between legal persons, such as the marriage contract, the labour contract, the commercial contract, the rental contract, the social contract, and, for some, the Godly covenant. Today, as the question of the interest of breathing has re-emerged with great urgency, this refusal to affirm the interdependencies of collective breathing reveals its violence and stupidity in the anti-mask protests.

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6. My body, my breath

In the pandemic, our efforts to stay breathing and avoid respirators, is very much a matter of thinking ecologically. Within the logics of potentially exponential contagion, and our global networks of interdependency, the health of one is the health of all. We must avoid breathing together, so that we may all breathe. But many fight the masks and the physical distance required to stop contagion. They do so, not in the name of breathing together, but in defence of their individual right to breathe freely. As a sign of a woman at a protest: “My body, my choice”.

The perhaps most frequent complaint of the anti-mask protesters — a strange assortment of conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists and small business owners eager to force their workers back to work — is related to breath. In a viral clip from a demonstration in Utah demonstrators rejected the existence of asymptomatic carriers and chanted “no more masks! No more masks!”. A male donned a t-shirt at once mocking and adopting the language of identity politics: “I identify as a fresh air breather”, while a woman in her mid-40s seemed both sincere

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42 Lacan 2014, p. 189

43 Kierkegaard 1980, p.61

and trolling when she said:

George Floyd was saying 'I can't breathe' and then he died. And now we're wearing a mask and we say "I can't breathe", but we're being forced to wear it anyways.

At a similar protest in Berlin a man demanded a "return to democracy" against "the masks that make us slaves". Protesters in Austin, Texas, marched to the chant of "we can't breathe!". At an anti-mask protest in Madrid, this contemporary black liberation slogan was rendered "*queremos respirar!*" — we want to breathe.

When the anti-mask protesters dress up in discursive black face and faux feminism, they reveal the implicit power of radical discourse. But the right's co-optation of the slogans and signifiers of emancipatory movements presupposes that these terms speak to the constituencies of the right. If breathing and suffocation work cross-politically as metaphors of freedom and oppression, it is because they have an affective resonance beyond the fascination of the movements who first make those claims. Anti-mask protesters may be lying, bullshitting, and trolling, sometimes self-consciously so, but their manipulations attempt to address, and perhaps express, experiences of breathlessness and suffocation. As somatic expressions of anxiety and stress, troubled breathing is no doubt ubiquitous today, also among those who oppose liberatory movements and public health measures.

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7. Individualism and conspiracism

The last decade has accelerated the decline of stakeholder society into the middle classes. Insecurity of incomes from salaries and small businesses, has increased along with indebtedness. There has been an epic real estate crash and a hollowing out of social citizenship, American hegemony, GDP growth and the belief in progress itself are in doubt. All this has created a deepening mismatch between experiences and expectations, or perhaps better: it has made experience-based expectations increasingly precarious. In short, a disorientating rift in the navigation of self-interest has emerged. The product of this insecurity and disorientation has been a profound rise in stress and anxiety. The turn to meditation and mindfulness, and the proliferating selection of self-help guides for dealing with shortness of breath are not surprising in this context.

In the face of anxiety, phobia attempts to stabilize meaning. It may rationalize the anxiety by projecting sinister interests or perverse, corrosive desires onto others. The mask serves as a metonym of such interests and desires. Sometimes it is presented as a malevolent deep

state plot against democracy and at others, or simultaneously, as a conspiracy against "free speech" led by transsexuals, feminists, and Cultural Marxists. Rather than face the inconsistency of the symbolic order itself, it can now be defended. An interest is established, an interest in avoiding or defeating the mask, and fighting those who desire it. Thus, contemporary conspiracism may, at least partially, be understood as psychic responses to anxiety in the crisis of stakeholder interest.

On this point, it's important to distinguish our analysis from Richard Hoefstaedter's 1964 argument about "the paranoid style of American politics", which is frequently used today to analyse Trumpism and contemporary conspiracy theories.⁴⁴ Hoefstaedter, who admitted to a broadened and polemical use of the concept, did not relate paranoia to milder psychic states such as fear and phobia, nor did he explain it as a psychic response to anxiety. Instead, in good liberal fashion, he described paranoia as an effect of millenarian megalomania, in short of *fanaticism*. But this critique begs the question: if paranoia is a product of fanaticism, what explains the attractions of fanaticism? Moreover, are there not situations of absolute injustice in which radical political commitment -- "fanaticism" -- might be called for?⁴⁵ Finally, Hoefstaedter's total dismissal of conspiracy theories represses the fact that real conspiracies do exist. Its publication in the aftermath of the murder of John F. Kennedy, and its recurrent return to popularity every time the United States has been shocked by a *real conspiracy*, might tell us something about the ideological functions of his argument.⁴⁶

If, on the other hand, we understand the affective and ideological atmosphere of the anti-mask protests in terms of anxiety, we understand the problem not merely as one of opposed ideologies - one sensible and rational, the other fanatic - but as relating to the deeper crises/desires that give rise to anxiety, by challenging the symbolic order with events, problems and antagonisms it cannot represent, and so with its own contingency. In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan made clear that anxiety, as an affect, is not repressed. What is repressed are the signifiers that might moor it.⁴⁷ Thus between the real and symbolization, anxiety can be thought from two sides: The trauma or desire that brings signification into crisis, or the incapacity of signification and practice to deal with them.

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44 Hofstadter 1964.

45 For a critique of the concept of fanaticism in political thought, see Toscano 2010.

46 Google Ngrams, which counts how often a word or phrase has been used in Google's digitalized text corpus, shows a market uptick in the phrase in 1973 (Watergate Scandal), 1986 (Iran Contra), and 2001 (September 11).

47 Lacan 2014, p. 14

8. The ideology of possessive individualism

The anti-mask protests may best be understood as an symbolic failure to deal with the real catastrophe of the pandemic, provoking a sometimes breathless anxiety that finds its unstable resolution in the rejection of the mask, as a literal object of suffocation as well as a metonym of the perceived oppressiveness of the social order that prescribes it. The precise reason that covid-19 causes such phobic expressions of anxiety, is that anti-mask protesters exist within a symbolic order that cannot think the networked, invisible pathways of contagion. More precisely, the anti-mask protests cannot be understood without attending to the ideological form of possessive individualism.

With form, I refer to the structural isomorphism of the different aspects of possessive individualism as ideology: as a system of beliefs and knowledges, as inscribed into material institutions (property law, the regulation of citizenship, etc.), and as an apparently “non-ideological” everyday practice of individuals “going about their business”.⁴⁸ As belief, institutionality and everyday practice, possessive individualism allows individuals to imagine and orientate themselves as self-interested, independent, separate from others. Pragmatically speaking, from the point of view of certain subjects (property owning male citizens), possessive individualism is an indispensable mode of orientation in the age of separation, so much so that a whole pedagogy was built up around the figure of Robinson Crusoe.⁴⁹

In this ideology, knowledge of interdependencies is strictly reduced to a game of self-interests in the genre of commercial exchange. Ideas, knowledges and affects, are described as something one “has”, rather than as something that either contributes to or challenges the individuation of the self. For the possessive individualist, one either “possesses” objects and beliefs - perhaps in joint ownership with one’s family, community, or nation — in which case they are no threat to one’s independence, but rather its extension and guarantee. If not, or objects and knowledges are “possessed” by others, in which case they are a threat. Characteristic of this ideology is a combination of naive empiricism and faith in what one already believes. This is a kind of truncated and twisted Spinozism, in which there is no nature/God, but only the embrace of the ideas that bring joy and a refusal of those that

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48 I am extending the argument in Zizek’s essay “The Spectre of Ideology”, in *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, 1994. These distinctions broadly correspond to three Marxist theories of ideology as “false consciousness”, “ideological state apparatuses” and “commodity fetishism”. These are matters of ideology and not just of subjectivity, in so far as they participate in the reproduction of a wider social order. However, rather than uphold an “objective”, “scientific” standpoint from which ideology can be judged, I posit two extra-ideological standpoints within ideology itself: first, it’s constitutive problem (for possessive individualism, legitimating self-interest and orientating separated subjects), and second, it’s constitutive exclusion (the repression of interdependency).

49 Hansen 2018.

bring sadness. “I only believe what I see with my own eyes” mingles easily with belief in conspiracy theories, nationalism, pseudo-science, or religion. These beliefs function as imaginary supplements to the inconsistencies of naive empiricism. Beliefs in personal completion, or in communities of blood and identity compensate for the foreclosure of the thought of networked interdependencies.

We may say that possessive individualism is only capable of signifying systems through imaginaries of identity and completeness. Even those New Age anti-mask protestors who reject possessive individualism live in its shadow: with romantic ideas of natural harmony and personal wholeness. In either case, there is an incapacity to signify any constitutively incomplete system characterized by interdependencies, such as “atmospheres”, “ecologies” or “climates”, or of accepting their constitutive incompleteness. What is blocked is *ecological thought*.⁵⁰ The ideology of possessive individualism constitutes an epistemological and ontological obstacle to imagining and representing oppressive atmospheres, changing climates, faltering ecologies. In other words, it can only signify imaginary crises - of the nation, the family, etc. - and not real crisis. It cannot signify, indeed it must repress, any polymorphic perversions and queer desires that stir its unconscious, and any crisis that disturb identity.

The wearing of masks, which cannot be recognized as a matter of public health and mutual care, is transformed into a state infringement on the individual’s “right to breathe”. And so, the obscene comparison with the police murder of George Floyd becomes possible. Instead of structural racism, fever dreams of a conspiracy to suffocate good white law-abiding citizens. Instead of a struggle to unbind and multiply sexuality, kinship, and gender, it sees protesting perverts -- and a conspiracy to destroy the family. Instead of rising greenhouse gas concentrations, it sees weather or fire -- and “the climate hoax”. Instead of paths of viral transmission and relations of mutual care, it sees sick and healthy people — and oppressive lockdowns and “muzzles”. Instead of institutional racism it sees a specific knee on a specific neck — and a black, migrant and liberal conspiracy to bring down America or Western Civilization.

When it comes to the interest of breathing, the invisible-yet-real always returns, for there is always an atmosphere and an interdependence of breathing. So, the ostensibly empiricist ideology of possessive individualism has to imagine the breath of others as conspiracy. Those who do not respire with others see others conspire, and those who do not partake in the spirit, see spirits.

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50 Fritjof Capra defines ecologies as networks of interdependence, not only of different life-forms dependent on one another, but also on material and energetic flows (nutrient cycles, water and carbon cycles, sunshine, etc.). Capra 1997, p. 11.

9. A single garment of destiny

While the ideology of possessive individualism is pervasive, it is not all. Discourses do exist that do not repress the signifiers needed to come to terms with disaster. Most people can symbolize covid-19 as a public health disaster resultant from the spread of SARS-CoV-2 particles by air and direct contact with contaminated surfaces. Most Black people in the United States can inscribe acts of police brutality within a wider cognitive mapping of the institutional character of American racialism. To more and more, forest fires, droughts and floods are incontrovertible symptoms of an unfolding climate emergency. Such signification enables a community of the affected. Instead of fear of the object, they worry about police brutality, public health ecology, or global warming. Worry opens to concern, and concern to care and struggle.

COVID-19 has taught us the interdependence of breath by making us fearful of breathing together. Just as we have to learn to think ecologically, we have to distance ourselves within our social ecologies. Thinking ecologically means understanding that the pandemic isn't just a matter of a dangerous object - the submicroscopic virus - but of the relations, exchanges of our everyday life, of our modes of inhabitation (density, proximity), of the organisation of worklife. As the leading German epidemiologist Christian Drosten explains, the foundational science of epidemiology is ecology.⁵¹ And finally, at the source of the pandemic, it means understanding our relations to other species and how the encroachment of dense, interconnected human ecologies upon stressed natural ecologies multiply the risks of zoonotic transfer of disease, with factory farms functioning as accelerators of viral evolution.⁵² COVID-19 teaches us the importance of our breathing-with-and-within social and natural ecologies, and constitutes, at the very same time, a blockage of breathing together, truly.

But many, untouched by solidarity outside kinship, find themselves in the scenario of the frontispiece of Hobbes' Leviathan: recognizing through crisis our interdependencies, we rush to the protection of a sovereign through which we may survive in-and-through our separation, the streets cleared by police and purified by plague doctors.⁵³ The pandemic reveals ecology as negativity, as conduits of contagion, and calls forth the anti-ecology of the state and social distancing as its apparent solutions. Anxiety, and its transformation into a game of fear and security, continues along.

Starting in late May 2020, an uprising swept across the United States after the police suffocation of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a storm

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⁵¹ NDR Coronavirusupdate, <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/info/podcast4684.html>

⁵² Wallace 2020.

⁵³ Poole 2020.

lasting into August. "I can't breathe", said George Floyd, echoing the last words of Eric Garner, Javier Ambler, Manuel Ellis, Elijah McClain, and we must imagine, the unheard thoughts of thousands in the Mediterranean. Most were killed for the victimless legal infringements needed to survive as surplus population. Garner was arrested for cigarettes without tax stamps, Floyd for allegedly passing on a counterfeit \$20 bill. Migrants for trying to cross into Europe while unpropertied non-citizens – which many do because they cannot breathe in the futureless stifling atmospheres of their home countries. The uprising after the killing of George Floyd quickly spread to Europe, showing the insurgent force of *black lives matter*, against the global colour line. It wasn't just individual people who were grasping for air, but thousands and thousands of Black people, disproportionately affected not just by police violence against the poor, but by Covid-19, living and working in cramped and stale environments, and then disproportionately thrown into unemployment by workplace closures, and evicted as insolvent.

The suffocation of colonialism, as the suffocation of Black people in the United States to which it gave birth to, is both literal and spiritual. It is an uprising of those whose life chances and freedom is choked, who suffer the breathlessness of oppression, poverty, and anxiety. Covid-19 reveals that the dwellings and workplaces of the poor still increase the risk of respiratory disease, as they did in the time of Engels.⁵⁴ This movement rebels against an anti-ecology which distributes suffocation downwards, and spacious quarantine homes upwards. Some rebel because they no longer expect anything from the system, others because they expect that riots can secure concessions – a confluence of realistic expectations.

The summer uprising, as many uprisings before it, made truth of Fanon's statement about anti-colonial uprisings in Indochina:

It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because "quite simply" it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe.⁵⁵

In the rhetorically sharpened version of the quote that normally circulates, there is a simple, implicitly black "we". Here, as in the French original, he speaks of the anti-colonial struggle in French Indochina, not as "other", but as part of the same, interdependent network of struggle to which the Martiniquan and adopted Algerian psychiatrist gave his life. Underlining the transversality of the struggle, he stresses that revolt does not arise out of the national culture of the oppressed, but out of a shared

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⁵⁴ Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace 2020.

⁵⁵ Fanon 2008, p.176

condition of suffocation and its refusal. If a common breath and spirit emerges, it is out of the struggle.

The summer uprising was black-led, but solidly diverse. Demanding not just justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others through the conviction of their murderers, it demanded the abolition of the police. This reveals an interest of breathing in the truest sense of the word, an interest in the abolition of the whole climate of oppression and anxiety in which Black people specifically, and surplus populations in general, live.⁵⁶ For Fanon suffocation was a global condition under colonialism that may lead to revolts anywhere. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke, similarly, of the “interrelatedness of all communities and states.”

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.⁵⁷

This garment is one of struggle, but also of care. The fear of breathing together is strong, not only during a pandemic. The June uprising proceeded with rage and care. Videos of de-arrests circulated widely, and masks were worn for double protection: against the virus and against identification. No spike in COVID-cases resulted from this intense, seditious breathing together, and fewer arrests than one would imagine from a storm that blew through more than 2000 towns and cities.

Care has lessened the fear of breathing together in many places, and especially among those who do not possess enough to feign independence. In Barcelona, where I was locked down in Spring 2020, chat groups organized mutual aid on a street by street level, while black and queer acquaintances in New Orleans organized the distribution of food and medicine.⁵⁸ Such initiatives demonstrated, once again, that in networks of survival and solidarity, bare life is not bare, surplus populations not surplus, the anxious not alone.

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10. Towards a theory and practice of the interest of breathing

The world inaugurated in the age of separation has reached an epochal crisis. The capitalist re-combination of land, machinery, and labour has pushed atmospheric CO2 concentrations higher than at any previous point in human history and prehistory. Catastrophic climate change is

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56 Gilmore 2007.

57 King 1963.

58 Gurba, 2020. Beltrame, 2020. For the importance of mutual aid and popular knowledge production in dealing with the ebola epidemic, see Richards, 2016.

already unfolding and accelerating. Having never fully recovered from the 2008 financial crash, COVID-19 has one again thrown the world economy into deep recession. Before those events: declining growth rates, broken social compacts, structural adjustment programs. After: more austerity and a financial economy propped up by low- or zero-interest rates, in a form of permanent life-support Keynesianism.⁵⁹

Worries and anxiety are ubiquitous, not only with regards to the pandemic, but in the intersecting crises of growth, social reproduction, liberal democracy, American hegemony, fossil capitalism. The expectational horizon of Progress, which allowed many to accept toil and deprivation in the present on the promise of future improvements, lies in tatters. Depending on class, some fear *déclassement* and the “migrant, criminal poor”, some fear unemployment and unpayable debts, and the unemployed fear means tests and austerity. Some, who survive by informal and illicit means, fear the police; and those who survive on the benevolence of relatives slowly suffocate in familial dependency.

The many crises of our time complicate calculations of self-interest and weaken the independence of the possessive individual. Some desperately cling on to their stakeholdership, fighting to repay loans, against migration’s imagined devaluation of citizenship, and work themselves into deep stress clinging to their work. Others struggle with new or old forms of dependency, on what remains of the welfare state, on charity or the family.

Under these conditions the interest of breathing re-emerges in forms both individual and collective. Even among those who claim their own right to breathe as purely personal freedom, we find traces of more-than-individual breath: the dangerous breathing together of anti-mask protests, the imagined conspiracies of others. Others find ways to affirm breathing together, with care, with anger and joy, like the Black Lives Matter protesters, who drew a placard with the following words by Audre Lorde: “Now is the time to conspire together - that is, to breathe together - filling our lungs to prepare for the work of singing anew”. Such joyful conspiracies require and proceed from the assemblage of a collective capacity to act, and requires forms of assembly and organisation, tactics and strategies, that make sense to their participants’ experiences and expectations, or provides them with the means to engage in an eventual leap into a collective practice of freedom.

When freed from the strictures of possessive individualism, the interest of breathing invites us to rethink interest formation more broadly. The interest in breathing is not an interest of the individual to consume and possess objects. The interest of breathing is not object-orientated, but ecological: it concerns the total arrangement of interdependencies, including those that are unequal, exploitative, or broken. Just as breath

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59 Hansen 2021.

is not just a function of an individual body and a photosynthesizing plant, but of the atmosphere which both share with billions of other organisms, the interest of breathing is more than subjective and inter-subjective, but atmospheric, or interstitial. As any interest, this interest emerges from the experience-based and expectational navigation of the in-between (inter-esse), between the passions and the world. Thus, we may say interest is not a property of the subject, but an aspect of its individuation (in-spiration) and transindividuation (con-spiration). Interest is not formed once and for all, but in a constant back-and-forth (re-spiration), within an atmosphere, both spiritual (affective, ideological,) and material (contagious or clear, oppressive or free, toxic or not).

In being guided by experience and expectation, interest formation is guided by the beliefs, knowledges, rationalities, through which the subject makes sense of the past and future, a form of “theoretical reason” that orientates “practical reason”, to speak with Kant.⁶⁰ Ecological thought is the name of the mode of orientation needed not only to practically navigate the unfolding present, but to avoid debilitating anxiety. Under conditions of atmospheric suffocation, the world reveals itself as a vast collection of interdependencies. This planetary system cannot be understood as environment, but only as ecology. Whereas the notion of environment grasps nature as other to man, ecology grasps this totality immanently, as process and infinite relation. In the ecological sciences, nature is totalized through the tracing of networks of interdependency, the circulations of energy and matter between the multitude of species which form the atmosphere and nutrient cycles in constant interaction with geology and solar radiation. Breath, in other words, is ecological and ultimately global. This universality is not abstract, but concrete. Animism and pantheism present us with these insights not only intuitively and speculatively, but as experience and expectation, shaping the way we see the world. But if such sciences and spiritualities help us symbolize and imagine the totality -- God or nature -- they're not enough to situate us and to articulate the interest of breathing through *specific, partisan demands* and in relation to the openings and cracks of the conjuncture.

In this epochal crisis of the age of separation, interstitial practices gain renewed importance. For Marx, such practices played a key role in the transition to the capitalist mode of production:

Usury lives in the pores of production, as it were, just as the gods of Epicurus lived in the space between worlds. Money is so much harder to obtain, the less the commodity-form constitutes the general form of products. Hence the usurer knows no other barrier but the capacity of those who need money to pay or to resist.⁶¹

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60 Kant 1991.

61 Marx, 1981, chapter 36.

Before the victory of the capitalist mode of production was assured, the Diggers developed their own interstitial practices, working in the interstices of the dispossessed and the land that wasn't cultivated by the lords, connecting the former to one another and the land. In a note written during the final years of decolonization, Althusser similarly imagined communists as working like Epicurean gods, in the interstices of the imperialist world system.⁶² Both for Marx and Althusser, such descriptions had a purpose besides the analytical, to help us imagine the overcoming of capitalism, and thus to premonition or sustain collective interests expectationally.

Between equal rights, force decides. The question of the “universal right to breathe” is meaningless, without the composition of a universalising struggle against suffocation: partisan and ecological. The ecological partisans work in the interstices, connect people with one another and natural ecologies, so that ecological interests may emerge or be strengthened. While repairing or creating connections of interdependency among the dispossessed, weaving natural and social ecologies, they seek for the weak links in the anti-ecological capitalist system.⁶³ The minimal starting point for such a politics is catching a breath with others. “Even “the ‘spiritual not religious,’ ... the agnostics, even the most militant of atheists” writes Catherine Keller, “are usually glad to catch a breath in shared silence—and so to stretch the moment”.⁶⁴ Stretching the moment together, we experience that in breathing there is no competition, only radical hostility to the forces of suffocation.

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62 Althusser 1986, unpublished manuscript. Thanks to Panagiotis Sotiris for providing me with a copy.

63 One of the best authors on this point is Andreas Malm, who runs far ahead of interest formation, drawing tactical and strategic lines for a collective subject that does not (yet?) exist, a pessimist with great expectations. Malm 2020.

64 Keller 2018, p. 361.

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