

DEPENDENCIES

Issue Editors: Joe Jackson & Claire Westall

To be dependent is to be reliant upon something or someone, potentially vulnerable, and typically in a position of 'need'. We might imagine dependency as a child's dependence on the care and protection of adults; as the relationship between a benefits claimant and their government; or even a nation-state's reliance upon the multinationals reaping huge rewards from the devastating resource extraction that underpins the world economy. Dependencies are, for all of us, worlded patterns of systemic organisation, exploitation and corruption, as well as intimate, affective and everyday experiences. To think about dependency, then, means thinking in broad, economic terms, in systemic and ecological forms, and in ways that make sense of our encounters with the ongoing neoliberalisation of daily life. It also means thinking about uneven relationships, and especially where such relationships are negotiated through need.

Foregrounded in this issue are a range of key neoliberal modes of dependency, moving through energy, resource, substance, and subsidy or welfare. All mark dependency as a form of *addiction*: as a morally charged and usually substance-mediated condition that is simultaneously chronic, enervating, and degenerative, and which is embodied either within individual human bodies or national/communal bodies. In this context, this *Dependencies* issue carries forward Gerry Canavan's sense of the 'medicalisation of the material conditions of oil capitalism', as seen particularly in oil's status as an addictive substance abused internationally.¹ The issue is also framed by Imogen Tyler's reading of the abjection of welfare recipients, those she terms 'figurative scapegoats', whose role in neoliberal society is to ensure that our 'dependency culture' elides substance addictions into addiction to state subsidy.² Such disciplining excoriation of dependency has played an instrumental role in fostering the competitive subject of neoliberalism, and in the creation of a culture of individualised helplessness. The natural recourse in dependency discourse to a diagnosis of addiction, whether to fossil fuels, to state support, or to psychotropic substances, is a mixed prescription of self-discipline, recalibration, and entrepreneurial zeal. Such narratives typically seek to mask the socio-economic drivers behind addictive and endangering forms of environmental, psycho-social and physiological contamination and collapse. Hence, across multiple scales – global, national, communal, individual – dependency is consistently narrated through pathologisation. Uneven relationships of reliance are cast as failures of will, of agency, or of resilience – as if the pathology at work is greater than, and always obstructs, any desire for change, improvement or escape.

1. Gerry Canavan, 'Addiction', in Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger (eds.) *Fuelling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2017, pp25-27, p25.

2. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London, Zed Books, 2013, p9.

Understanding dependency as a structural condition generated and maintained via political and socio-economic drivers rather than (only) a pathology of addiction is thus key to the approaches taken across this issue. Dependency has already been used to name world economic relations, as part of efforts to decode a global economics of inequality, or capitalism's logic of perpetual and uneven gain and growth – as in both dependency theory and world-systems analysis. Indeed, Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems work maintains dependency as determining the relationship between core and periphery, and his approach underpins some of the thinking seen in this issue.³ The central thesis of an uneven world split according to the distribution of surplus value retains the crucial recognition of dependency as a structural feature of the world economy. In a similar fashion, the discourses of welfare and substance dependency are part of the economically necessary *production* of such dependencies. This is true not only in social security relations, but also in the pharmacological necessities of contemporary labour, in petro-dependency and other extractive addictions unfolding with capitalist modernity. And it is important to see the most psychological and biophysical forms of dependency as endemic to capitalist modernity itself, such as when Bernard Stiegler talks of an 'addictogenic society', resulting from a 'drive-based capitalism in which the addictive and drive-based behaviour of consumers forms a system with that of speculators, whose behaviour is just as drive-based, that is, ultra-short-termist'.⁴

3. Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Theory: An Introduction*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, pp11-14.

4. Bernard Stiegler, 'Pharmacology of Desire: Drive-Based Capitalism and Libidinal Dis-Economy', (trans.) Daniel Ross, *New Formations* 72, 2011, pp150-161, p159.

5. See Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, New York, Verso Books, 2015.

Dependencies, then, examines a set of globally critical and interlinked dependencies. It holds together macro-visions of worlded petro-dependence, debates about empire, resource cultures and dependency theory, and more local, even personal, explorations of state welfare dependencies as imagined and challenged through narratives of substance abuse and housing activism. In this way, it takes some inspiration from Jason Moore's world-ecological mode of thinking, and his sense of the 'web of life', that is the interconnectivity of world-systemic structural relations and the environment (re)shaping of everyday life, as well as all the multi-scalar dependencies that constitute this complex web.⁵

The opening three essays here deal with the implications and limitations of conceptualising global oil dependency: its mass ramifications; our (in)ability to comprehend its scale and scope; its potential end; and its ties with other essential resources. These opening articles also come from scholars working at the forefront of the development of 'petroculture' as a critical field, one which holds that energy regimes dominated by fossil fuel consumption are fundamental to the 'culture of being and imagining in world', a world in which oil actors including both multinationals and states exercise enormous representational power. First, sitting within recent debates about oil, ecology, and what Timothy Mitchell has called 'carbon democracy', Michael Watts' article draws on Gregory Bateson and William Burroughs to investigate the implications of reading oil in terms of addiction. This pathology of addiction

is familiar from medical discourse, ‘a primary, chronic, neuro-biologic disease, with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors’, that entails ‘compulsion, craving, chronic, a recurrent condition of dependence’. Locating this discourse in classical political economy and in the liberal governance of the nineteenth century, Watts’ article rethinks what is at stake in such a casting of political economy in terms of ‘symptomology’. For Watts, the explanatory power of oil-as-addiction provides some limited purchase on behaviours, but has also obscured the role of oil in ‘forms of rule and capitalist accumulation’ – a role he explains via an interrogation of governance, and the determinism of an ‘oil curse’ logic of underdevelopment. Next, Jeff Diamanti tracks the neoliberal emergence of oil’s abstracted market form, from the 1970s to the present, through the ‘scenarios planning’ of Shell’s Pierre Wack during the energy crises of the 1970s. Wack’s emphasis on foresight not only presaged a transformation in oil economics towards futures trading, but initiated a new narrative structure to ‘anticipate and emplot planetary and economic futures’. Diamanti argues that understanding the drivers of an energy-intensive future necessitates a critique of scenarios as their most readable and rendered form, to frame the ‘structural forms of dependency’ determining our present and future lifeworlds.

Also looking to the future, Imre Szeman writes of the need to transition from petro-dependency to renewables. Szeman outlines the terrain of fossil fuel ‘habit’, which simultaneously describes embedded day-to-day practices on a human scale, and presents these practices as the performance of a substance addiction, with oil the *drug* of habit. Indeed, habits of consumption seem to offer a site of possible intervention in fossil fuel dependency, either through individual action or governmentality, but Szeman suggests that the framing of habit evades the ‘larger, more challenging structural and political interventions’ entailed by energy transition. Instead, it is necessary to understand and to alter the ‘energy habitus’ – a new term that draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus* to convey the bodily dispositions and mental attitudes that encode a long history of petroculture – thereby revealing the possibility of a ‘socio-energetic transition’.

In their articulation of the limitations of addiction homologies on a world scale, these oil critiques dovetail with articles by Sharae Deckard and Michael Niblett. Both Deckard and Niblett read capitalist modernity’s systemic unevenness through the relationship between literary texts and specific resource cultures. Deckard unpacks the way oil and water have become interlinked through excessive and endangering modes of reliance, visible in the rise of ‘extreme water’, or intensive extraction techniques. ‘Extreme water’, Deckard argues, produces a hydro-dependency beyond straightforward demand through an ‘addictive culturing’, which obscures the socio-ecological relations underlying ‘modes of hydro-extraction and distribution that are fundamentally undemocratic, inequitable, and non-renewable’. To make clear the operations of this hydro-dependency, Deckard reads the ‘water

insurgent' work of writers – Rita Wong, Fred Wah, Cindy Mochizuki, Emma Ruby-Sachs, Karen Jayes, and Isidore Okpewho – from comparative world contexts in Canada, South Africa, and Nigeria, with a particular focus on the mediation of 'riparian' infrastructure. For Deckard, the work of such authors registers the 'deepening political unconscious within world-literature of the crisis of the neoliberal hydrological regime', and explores an imaginary of the 'decommodification and re-commoning of free-flowing water'.

While also working in a world-systemic mode, Niblett situates cultural production in relation to dependency *theory*, specifically as it emerged in Latin American and the Caribbean in the 1960s and 1970s. Grounded in Enrique Dussel's 'methodological insistence on the international transfer of surplus-value as the essence of dependency', Niblett articulates the cultural dimension of that dependency through Caribbean author and intellectual Sylvia Wynter, and her critique of 'ideological schemas and knowledge practices' integral to the unequal distribution of value. Wynter's ideas provide a platform for Niblett to read the implicit critique of structural mechanisms of cultural dependency in Patrícia Galvão's *Parque Industrial* (1933) and Olive Senior's 'Boxed-In' (2015), fictions which make available for analysis 'the otherwise abstract forces and relations governing the worldwide law of value'.

Michael Gardiner and Joe Jackson continue the elaboration of structural dependency in their articles by emphasising the role played by psychotropic and addictive substances in national and global efforts to naturalise market subjectivities. Tracking a long historical trajectory, Gardiner charts the relationship between imperial history, managed addiction-production, and the binding together of liberalism, free trade and strategic underdevelopment within capitalist modernity. Gardiner's article traces the historical continuities evident in Britain's investment in opium dependency, initially via the Chinese Opium Wars, and later as manifest in the Thatcherite figure of the junkie-entrepreneur exploiting the welfare state during the 1980s heroin epidemic in Edinburgh. Gardiner sees a particular form of Edinburgh-based liberalism at the heart of the British state's economic thinking and suggests that the creation of a universalist British ethics of 'neutral' economic rule has itself worked as an addiction, a 'historiographical' addiction in which the 'condition of opiates [become] the condition of the cognitive economy'.

Jackson's article also works through some of the ways in which substance addiction has been managed in the toolkit of contemporary British governmentality, focusing explicitly on alcohol addiction. In Britain, specifically in the case of representing Scotland, alcohol dependency as the moral failure of individuals or collectives is a familiar shorthand encompassing sub-national relationships and welfare as much as actual substance addiction. Reading four novels that stretch out from the early phase of Thatcherism, Jackson contends that as the 'psychopathological therapy of first resort' under British neoliberalism, 'modulated' alcohol consumption stands as the marked edge of functionality and expresses something important about modern

work in a structural sense; namely that alcohol both palliates and naturalises the anti-social and embodied demands of such work. Unmodulated alcohol consumption that exceeds limits, both bodily and those of economic and literary ‘realism’, is consequently disruptive to the smooth functioning of the neoliberal subject in the new economy, and to the ameliorative purpose of the welfare state.

Finally, focusing on welfare dependency creation and resistance in the sphere of housing activism in London, Lisa Blackman’s article uses the examples of the Walterton and Elgin Action Group (WEAG) and Walterton and Elgin Community Homes (WECH) during the Homes for Votes scandal of the late 1980s to explore the possibility of political agency and solidarity within a community of housing benefit recipients. Examining cultural texts such as the documentary *Against the Odds*, alongside official and personal archives, Blackman’s article details the way that a community, discursively defined by its ‘dependent’ status, can mobilise, via inter-dependence as collective action, against the ‘protective’ exploitation of the state in the form of speculative housing development. Moreover, Blackman argues that the creation of a communally embedded ‘housing commons’ can and should be remembered as ‘forging relations of mutual dependence and interdependence’ with implications for proximate and contemporary organisation such as the Grenfell Action Group. Blackman’s proposal for a new ‘commons sense’ in the cultural imagination and affective politics of social housing is instructive for the broader slate of dependencies that is the critical object of this issue. Dependency, understood as the pathologisation of structural conditions inherent in an unequal world system, is a discursive mechanism which often acts to obscure or impede the comprehension of those structural features. Dependency, in the form of an activated *inter*-dependence described by Blackman, and in recognition of the ‘lifeworld’ of environment, economics, and daily living, is fundamental to political collectives and to a shared imaginary that help us formulate new and better futures for us all.

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