September 2022. Zalik response to *What Comes Next?*

Given After Oil's 3 focus on *method and politics* I employ three methodological features - features which I consider substantively political - in response to *What Comes Next?* While this approach clearly departs from the angle of the humanities that the After Oil prompt centres, it reflects the way I think through the material at hand. The methodological features I identify require that we:*"(1) attend to the institutions and firms that control knowledge on resources-in-the-making; (2) undertake geo-juridical analyses with regard to how overlapping and competing multilateral, bilateral, and state legislation shape exploitation and regulation of emerging resources; and (3) examine how financial practices and venture capital influence ongoing and future development of (more-than- human nature derived) resources in the contemporary period"*. In advancing these methodological features of a 'critical resource geography', I employ the resource-making/world-making frame employed by Valdivia, Havice and Himley in the volume where I discuss them.

Following the After Oil convenors, below I employ these three methodological features to "(take) up or (refute) or (avoid) or (transform) terms and concepts and questions and ideas so as to probe the edges and limits of (the) offering." A number of frames raised in *What Comes Next?* are the subject of interrogation: that of *transition as linear*; *solarity* as an implied ecological improvement (here we should note that Szeman, 2020 offers a more skeptical account in other writing); as well as each of the *tragedy of the commons* and *democracy* as actual conditions (rather than (neo)liberal diversions). I close the discussion with a consideration of *What Comes Next?s'* point of departure- which assumes that *the next* arises from smaller, more specific changes.

In the interests of space, I employ one of the methodological features in relation to each of the frames under interrogation. We begin with the two frames *tragedy of the commons* and *democracy* and adopt the first methodological feature – concerning the institutions that control knowledge - to examine them. *What Comes Next?* reads "The tragedy of the commons is a fiction become reality. Can words remind us of the pain and suffering which has accompanied this transfiguration, and do so with a force that will turn solid back into gas?" The notion of 'the tragedy of the commons' is a frame that I must actively reject due to both the causal attribution, and the form of solution to environmental crises, that it implies. Here I am informed by, and teach in my courses, Susan Buck (Cox's) critique of Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' as well as Hartmann's genealogy of the concept. Socio-ecological degradation arises *not* from human collective harvesting of nature as per Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' (the 'more than human') but from precisely the opposite – the privatization of nature via commodification of land/nature and, more explicitly, the law of value. Rather than the commons, *private property*, as opposed to collective tenure, is at the root of ecological degradation; such a reading arises from the teachings of Indigenous epistemology and ontology – expressed practically in Andean *buen vivir* political programs, and explicitly theorized in the anglophone debate on the Anthropocene vs. the Capitalocene. Here it is apt to return also to the contemporary critique of neo-Malthusianism that animated policy debates on 'environmental conflict' in the early 1990s (as per Peluso and Watts eds 2001). We must center our analysis instead on how readings that assume a 'tragedy of the commons' (including Homer -Dixon's treatise on ecoviolence that was so highly influential in policy circles), draw attention away from the privatization of nature as a means to extract from labour/nature, and justify vicious dispossession of Indigenous territory and non-capitalist use values.

After Oil 3 appears to adopt *democracy* as an uncontested term. *What Comes Next?* reads "What about democracy isn't working right now? Is there anything about democracy that is working?". Here I must ask, also informed by methodological feature 1 on the control of knowledge, how the term democracy is to be defined and what markers ('indicators' to use the terminology of positivist social science) are employed to distinguish so-called democratic structures/systems/states? On the question of labeling countries (il)liberal undemocratic - which I have written about in relation to the securing of hydrocarbon energy - one must draw a clear distinction between formal and substantive uses of the term *democracy* if it is to hold meaning. The title illiberal/undemocratic is a powerful label employed by policy elites whose interpretations/ knowledge production weigh heavily on international geopolitics and financial speculation on currency values (methodological features 2 & 3). Under circumstances of where energy options are subject to selection, certain states and their resources may be labeled more or less 'clean/democratic' by Northern elites (as per Levant's *Ethical Oil*), and thus more or less attractive to investors seeking either security or open to risk, in either case advancing the interests of imperial capital. So-called 'liberal democratic states' implement legal systems (the institutionalization of organized crime following Tilly and others) to allow for the appropriation of power/resources. Via such "formal democracy" organized protest is open to criminalization, and both social justice advocates and welfarist branches of state institutions made vulnerable to 'lawfare'.

On the question of *solarit*y raised in the prompt, there are clearly significant geo-juridical interests (the second methodological feature) at play in the extraction of minerals and the exploitation of labour required to make this energy form globally viable. While perhaps in the longer-term solar energy could be 'fuel-less' as suggested in *What Comes Next?* this is most certainly not the case in the short-term; mammoth amounts of energy/mass and extracted minerals are required to bring a renewable system to fruition under a growth economy (see Victor & Sers). Under actually existing conditions, a solar energy future is extremely human-labour intensive (denoting a high organic composition of capital). Even in the medium term, it most certainly does not entail 'an end of history' as per Fukuyama, who has – one must note – distanced himself from his earlier thesis on neoliberalism. States heavily invested in solar technologies would hold certain advantages in the context of a broader crisis of capitalism associated not only with environmental disasters, but from a declining rate of profit, given the higher value that accrues through labour exploitation. Here the inter-imperial rivalry of the US and China is clearly salient. As pointed out by various Global South political economists in their assessment of the future of energy and the geopolitics of imperial power, China leads in all areas of renewable technologies. The US, in contrast, hopes to entrench itself as an energy superpower through extraction and export of a hydrocarbon that it markets as 'green', yet is extremely carbon intensive - namely (fracked) shale gas.

On the question of transition-as-linear, critical development scholars have long taken issue with divergent ideological branches of Eurocentric teleology that assume linearity/'progress'– whether stage theory as per Rostow, or an orthodox Marxist view of phases en route to communism. Our convenors write in the opening section of the prompt, "if the time of transition is linear, progressive, and measured, then what is the time of the next? Will the pandemic's telescoping of time help get us there, or push us further away?" Perhaps the assumption of linearity is not the convenors intention, but at a time when the promotion of circularity in economic systems is all the rage (from research funding agencies in so-called-Canada, to private capital), the term is surprising. I would argue that the *time of the transition* – one in which we presumably find ourselves - is neither linear nor necessarily progressive, nor would linearity imply socially equitable conditions. This is perhaps the key dilemma that faces advocates of an energetic shift - change does not advance in a 'linear'

fashion. Empirically, various forms of production/reproduction exist simultaneously and underwrite one another – with capitalists, for instance, benefiting from concurrent subsistence agriculture so as to reduce requisite wages for social reproduction. But more centrally, I raise the question of linearity because any moves that presume it are undermined by the volatility - whether in socio-political conditions or commodity prices and commodity futures – that dominate the global landscape upon which finance capital clearly profits (methodological feature 3). It is has become increasingly apparent over the past two decades, and certainly since 2008, that volatility in global markets - particularly in energy and hydrocarbons - allows for considerable profiteering by finance capital. While two years ago advocates of an energy transition were divided on whether plummeting oil and gas prices (a) marked the death knell of hydrocarbons or (b) made renewables relatively more costly/less viable and thus less attractive to investors, war in Europe has led to a complete about face in conditions. In this finance (fictitious) capital and global oil firms are major profiteers, 'making a killing' from fear, violence, and risk-laden investment, - indeed fostering the opposite of linearity and predictability.

On a related note, finally, I question the overall presumption ventured on page 3 of the document "that a liveable, sustainable, and just *world-historical* transformation can only occur through many smaller, more specific changes in being, thinking, working, consuming, relaxing, recharging, relating, and moving". It is not that a world historical transformation does not by necessity entail many small changes in beings, of course it must. My concern arises from the ordering and organization of this transformation and the reference to consumption and leisure in the phrase. Under actually existing historical conditions such a presumption, I fear, caters to a market-based approach to transition, offering so-many openings for profit-making through the commercialization of so-many individualized consumption and preference-oriented routes to change. It is this sort of fragmentation and individuation of systems and beings, in the absence of coherent planning and regulation, that has brought us everything from carbon-trading, which has most certainly failed, to COVID 19. As an illustration, in front of me on the counter is a slime squish ball (see image) - which came in kit form – that my 7-year old received for his birthday. On the same day we 'made' the ball, adding water to slime powder, and plastic pellets and sparkly stars to a silicone balloon, it began to ooze after my son pushed too much of the balloon through a hole in the netting. Haphazard management of complex infrastructure and systems, as organizations such as TUED (Trade Unions for Energy Democracy) have stressed, cannot bring us the kind of overhaul to energy arrangements currently required and is, I would venture, a multi-bubbled recipe for disaster. Organizing an energetic transition as a resource making/world-making project requires a coordinated, synchronized effort; under existing conditions the institutions available for such efforts are states and international organizations. That is why taking sweeping, *substantively-democratic* control over such state and multilateral institutions remains among the essential tasks facing those who seek a just, ecologically-sound transition from the political economic & energy/resource-intensive system (read global capitalism) in which we - like the squish ball - are enmeshed.