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One of the most striking aspects of Ross Zucker's *Democratic Distributive Justice* is how he turns the abstraction of the market into the basis for claims about social justice and material equality, while never seriously considering the physical and biological phenomena which production and consumption in the market affect.[[1]](#footnote-1) He uses 'nature' almost exclusively to mean 'character', as in "the nature of economic justice", never refers to 'resources' or 'raw materials' in the sense of things taken from nature, and never considers the waste arising from production. The few references to physical features of the economy are notable for their inadequacy. Zucker makes reference to Locke's prohibition against spoilage (41), but doesn't consider the implications at length. Similarly, he refers to "mere biological subsistence afforded by nature" (258) without acknowledging that no production or consumption at all can happen without ecological services provided by nature, along with its ability to furnish raw materials and absorb wastes. Just as a marginal productivity view (criticized on 161-4) misses the importance of cooperation in production, a theory based on an abstracted view of production with no material basis misses key ethical dimensions associated with economic activity.

A general ecological critique of much economic analysis, and of political analysis of economics, is that it fails to accept how all the activities that constitute 'the economy' necessarily fall within the physical set of processes that define the functioning of life and of physical and chemical changes on Earth. This oversight is relevant for several reasons. While Zucker's claim that both production and consumption are necessary for a functioning market economy is very plausible, it does not follow that the limitless increase in both is morally desirable.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, if production of certain kinds or beyond certain thresholds impacts too heavily on the functioning of the natural systems which provide valuable services for people, over-exploitation may leave people worse off. Generally speaking, the idea that economic interactions can be interpreted normatively without reference to their material inputs and outputs risks generating a theory of distributive justice that is deeply divorced from a comprehensive appreciation of the effects of markets. Zucker's brief reference to a "market for externalities" (300) doesn't adequately respond to this criticism.

Zucker may also take an overly broad view of the consumer economy as a fraction of all productive activity, even within capitalist societies. Capitalist societies which prioritize economic expansion and trade have a history of extensive military involvement, as did the main communist societies of the 20th century. It's not clear how these forms of production would fit into Zucker's framework. Does creating demand for armaments serve an equivalent social purpose to creating demand for consumer goods? If so, does the global military industrial complex just represent another dimension of collaborative productive activity? Does it matter if we are producing washing machines, hydrogen bombs, or organic vegetables?

Another important dimension of global capitalism is its ability to conceal the destruction associated with resource extraction, as well as the waste arising from consumption. The process of 'fishing out' into ever-more-remote waters conceals the mass decline of fisheries in places like the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Similarly, the environmental damage associated with imports is concealed and not counted in things like national greenhouse gas emission registries. Treating national communities as self-contained cooperative systems is manifestly unjustified in a globalized world.

Zucker discusses "reality intrud[ing]" in the context of a poker game (165), but never seems to allow the material realities associated with production and consumption to affect his analysis.

1. Zucker, Ross. *Democratic Distributive Justice*. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge. 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zucker writes at length about the socially-formed nature of preferences (ch. 9), but doesn't give much consideration to the constructed character of consumerism itself (except perhaps in the context of advertising, which may be "excessive" or "dominating"), which he views as an essential part of an ever-expanding capitalist economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)