Infectious Liberty

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In his lecture courses from the mid-1970s, Michel Foucault suggested that the simultaneous emergence of biopolitics and liberalism in the mid-to-late eighteenth century depended upon, among other things, the discovery of self-regulation as a principle of social relations. He noted that for eighteenth-century authors, the self-regulation of social relations was something that happened naturally—that is, was a “natural” dynamic that governed human relationships—and yet, at the same time, something that had to be actively enabled by human institutions. One of Foucault’s primary examples was the French physiocrats, who contended that humans naturally hoard grain when they think lean times are ahead and naturally sell grain at the highest price they can find. The job of government was thus, for the physiocrats, to develop policies that respected these natural dynamics but also channeled these into a self-regulating form that ensured social stability and prosperity. The aspiration of self-regulation revealed for Foucault the intrinsic connection between biopolitics and liberalism, for both depend upon using legislation to allow some social dynamics, understood as natural, to follow their “own” path, with the overall goal of creating a self-regulating system.

The link that the concept of self-regulation establishes between biopolitics and liberalism has implications for our understanding of Romanticism. Foucault’s account helps explain, for example, the centrality of the term “regulation” in a wide variety of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century authors. The French chemists Antoine Lavoisier and Armand Seguin contended that there were three “principal regulators” (régulateurs principaux) of the “animal machine” (la machine animale)—namely, respiration,
perspiration, and digestion—and argued that the moral order (l’ordre moral) must also have regulators, or else human society would long ago have ceased to exist. In British North America, a first step toward the American Revolution was taken by members of the “Regulator” movement in the Carolina colonies, who sought greater self-governance. In Germany, Immanuel Kant contended that the “Ideas” of reason, such as the concept of an uncaused cause (God), must play a regulative, rather than constitutive, role in human experience. In Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft hoped to “regulate the passions”; the political economist Thomas Malthus argued against the Poor Laws by outlining a natural logic of population regulation; and Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein begins with Robert Walton’s dream that his arctic voyage will produce a discovery capable of “regulat[ing] a thousand celestial observations, that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent for ever.”

And, with less positive valence, Jane Austen’s Lady Catherine in Pride and Prejudice is an object of critique in part because of her desire to determine “how every thing ought to be regulated.”

Foucault’s account of self-regulation also gives us new insight into the role of concepts of nature in works by Romantic-era authors. Within both biopolitics and liberalism, “nature” names both an autonomous dynamic within human relations but also a malleable force that can be shaped by human institutions of self-regulation. Liberalism is a particular way of seeking to produce social order by adjusting and channeling these natural dynamics, though I will argue that we can also locate and theorize a non-liberal version of that same aspiration. As a consequence, the concept of self-regulation allows us to understand the biopolitical, liberal nature of Romanticism not solely through the lens of critique—that is, not simply as another way of exposing the ideologies of Romantic texts—but also as a means of illuminating the potential for positive and more just Romantic forms of biopolitics.

I make this argument in five parts. I begin by distinguishing between two different eighteenth-century models of regulation. One model presumed the existence of what I describe as invariable standards and was linked to a traditional concept of political sovereignty. The other model, by contrast, sought to explain self-regulation, which operated by means of variable standards and a distributed population. While the first section focuses primarily on the importance of this debate for economic questions, such as coinage standards, in the second section I stress that the tension between these two models of regulation was also central to the development of the modern concept of “taste” and especially the debate about
whether an invariable “standard of taste” could regulate aesthetic judgments within large populations. In the third and fourth sections, I argue that some of the ambiguities of the model of distributed self-regulation were a focus of Romantic-era interest. The third section explores Malthus’s understanding of the population as the subject of self-regulation, and the fourth focuses on Kant’s account of the ambiguous relationship between intellect and collective self-regulation and the importance of questions of standards of aesthetic judgment for his account. In the fifth and sixth sections, I outline several legacies of Romantic reflections on regulation in the twentieth century, focusing first on the role of this term within systems ecology and neoliberal economics and then on the uncanny convergence of these two fields within contemporary revivals of the concept of the commons. I conclude by considering how Romantic reflections on the relationship of self-regulation to populations, intellect, and nature help us understand contemporary attempts to produce self-regulation in our era of the Anthropocene.

Though my account of regulation in Romantic literature is primarily intended to help us better understand relationships among Romanticism, liberalism, and biopolitics, I also aim to illuminate the ambiguous nature of this concept in Foucault’s work on liberalism and biopolitics. Foucault used the term “regulation” frequently, but in two different senses. In connection with what Foucault called “discipline,” regulation meant a process in which every detail of individual behavior is planned and only what is so planned is allowed. For example, in Security, Territory, Population, Foucault contended that “by definition, discipline regulates everything [réglemente tout]. Discipline allows nothing to escape. Not only does it not allow things to run their course, its principle is that things, the smallest things, must not be abandoned to themselves” (67–68). This sense of regulation underwrites Lady Catherine’s desire in Austen’s Pride and Prejudice and also underwrites important works of Romantic and Victorian literary criticism such as John Mee’s Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation and D. A. Miller’s The Novel and the Police.6 However, when Foucault used the term “regulation” in connection with his concept of biopolitics, he referred to processes of governance in which individual subjects are largely left to their own devices so long as population-level events can be steered in certain ways. Thus, in Society Must Be Defended, Foucault contended that biopolitics requires the development of “regulatory mechanisms” (mécanismes régulateurs) that “establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its
aleatory field” (246). This latter sense of biopolitical regulation is opposed to disciplinary regulation, as Foucault stressed in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*: “The disciplines of the body and the regulations [les régulations] of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed” (139). When Foucault connected the term “regulation” to discipline, it functioned as a synonym for the sovereign-like control of every aspect of individual behavior; when he used the term in connection with biopolitics, it denoted the use of individual freedom to create regularity at the level of a large aggregate (population). The question raised by these accounts is whether Foucault believed that there were two different modes of regulation—and if so, what was the common operation or term that connected them?—or whether these were two completely different kinds of operations that should have been given two different names.

These ambiguities of Foucault’s use of the term “regulation” are not new; they express a long-standing difficulty that has plagued efforts to understand the nature of regulation. Since at least Gottfried Leibniz and Samuel Clarke’s debate over the nature of God’s regulation of the universe, efforts to distinguish between two models of regulation—regulation by means of invariable standards versus regulation by means of variable standards and a distributed population—have been continually frustrated by what we might think of as the gravitational pull of the schema of regulation as an irresistible sovereign command. The schema receives its emblematic form in the image of the machine that functions necessarily, automatically, and without the intervention of consciousness or choice. The gravitational pull of this schema is such that attempts to think the second model of regulation—which include Foucault’s account as well as the efforts of twentieth-century cyberneticians, ecologists, and antiregulation economists—tend to find themselves pulled back toward the first model, with the location of the automatic mechanism simply shifted from one place to another. From this perspective, the virtue of the Romantic authors I consider here is that they make significant progress in thinking through more fully the second model of regulation and, hence, provide us with resources for furthering this process of thought in our own moment.

**Regulation and Standards in the Eighteenth Century**

There is surprisingly little work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts of regulation. Or rather, there is fabulous work on specific concepts
of regulation, such as the historian of medicine Georges Canguilhem’s pre-history of the concept of biological regulation, the legal theorist Randy Barnett’s account of the term “regulation” in American Revolution-era periodical debates, and Michael Friedman’s account of the role of the concept of regulation in Kant’s critical philosophy. But no account brings these separate histories together so that we can understand why this term appeared in so many eighteenth-century discourses, including medicine, political theory, law, philosophy, and political economy. What follows is a necessarily provisional and schematic attempt at such a synthetic account.

The English term “regulation,” like its French and German counterparts, comes from the Latin noun “regula,” which meant, among other things, “a rod for drawing straight lines or measuring” or a “basic principle” (OED). And whenever the term “regulation” was used, from the seventeenth century to the Romantic era, it meant a technique that makes something else regular or consistent. A political regulation, for example, was intended to produce conformity among political subjects; Descartes’s Regulae—usually translated into English as “rules”—for the Direction of the Mind were intended to bring consistency to philosophy; and the “regulator” of a late-seventeenth-century watch was a mechanical part that employed spring tension to make the time-keeping device run more precisely.8 In all these cases, as well as the examples with which I opened this chapter, “regulation” means a process or technique that makes something regular. Yet beginning in the late seventeenth century, we find two different models for how a specific realm of experience can be made regular. Each model bound together theological, political, and economic concepts, but in different ways.

The first model proposed that regulation is possible only if all individuals or objects in the relevant area of experience conformed to an invariable standard determined by a sovereign imperative. Legal regulations concerning commodities provide a concrete example of this first model. The 1225 Magna Carta required the creation of standard, invariable measures.9 In the case of the yard, this demand could be answered via a physical standard, with which individual pieces of commerce were compared.10 To regulate by means of an invariable standard made a specific kind of social activity regular through activities of comparison and alignment with the standard, which latter was determined by a sovereign political entity.11

Though the act of comparing an invariable metal rod with a piece of cloth may seem straightforward, it is worth considering the metaphysical and theological premises of such an activity. In the realm of human affairs,
the invariable standard is understood as a source of illumination, for it—and it alone—brings into visibility the measure that leads to justice, peace, and stable commerce. The illumination of the invariable standard reaches each individual equally, in that both official and layperson can engage in the activities of comparison, acceptance, and rejection, and these acts of comparison disseminate illumination outward to the polity as a whole. The function of law is to ensure that all individuals remain true to the invariable standard.

Yet even as the invariable standard provides regulating illumination in the realm of human affairs, the basic schema that gives this model its intelligibility—namely, that of the sovereign command that is obeyed universally and automatically—has a more ambiguous relationship with “illumination” (and this ambiguity will be especially important when I consider Malthus). The early eighteenth-century dispute between Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton’s disciple Samuel Clarke concerning the nature of God’s regulation of the universe exemplifies this ambiguity. Leibniz claimed that God “regulated everything in advance” (”réglant par avance toutes les choses à la fois”) and then left his creation to unfold itself automatically, while Clarke contended (in Georges Canguilhem’s gloss) that “God, after creating the world, continued to watch over it and interfere providentially.”

Yet both understood the nature of regulation in the same manner, namely, as the enactment of a sovereign command. Moreover, because both were concerned in this debate with law-like processes of nature, each proposed that divine commands were “obeyed” automatically by matter, without any need for consciousness or illumination, at least on the part of matter itself. Hence, even if regulation in human affairs seems to require a passage of the sovereign command into illumination and through human consciousness, the aspiration of this first model of regulation is an automatic, unilluminated, and consciousness-free enactment of divine imperatives.

Beginning at the end of the seventeenth century, a second model of regulation emerged, which differed significantly in its metaphysical assumptions. A different set of commercial standards—legal standards for gold and silver coinage and rates of interest on loans—illuminate this second model. As late-seventeenth-century commentators such as John Locke noted, monetary standards were vexing because they were often ignored by many of the large population of individuals (only some of whom resided in England) who used English coins and made or took loans. For example, individuals shaved bits of gold or silver from coins, such that they no longer
corresponded to the legal standard, or made under-the-table agreements that exceeded legal rates of interest.

For Locke, these practical problems could be resolved if one understood regulation as a form of order that occurred partially beyond the reach of law. In Some Considerations of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest, and Raising the Value of Money (1696), he questioned “whether the Price of the Hire of Money [i.e., the interest rate] can be regulated by Law” and responded that “generally speaking, one may say, 'tis manifest it cannot.” Instead, Locke claimed, “that alone which regulates” the price of money is “the want of Money” (214). The “rate of Money does not follow the Standard of the Law, but the price of the Market; and Men not observing the legal and forced, but the Natural and Current Interest of Money, regulate their Affairs by that” (253). There was thus a kind of standard operating in separate economic interactions among individuals and by which each regulated his or her behavior. However, this standard was not determined by legislators but by “the Market,” which produced what Locke called a “natural” standard, which was regulated by want (that is, the desire for loans). And since want changes over time, the market’s standard, though natural, was not invariable but changed frequently.

How could individuals collectively “regulate their Affairs” by means of this fluctuating natural standard? In a superficial sense, regulation still meant comparing something with an external standard. Yet unlike a physical yard standard, the market standard was not located in a specific place, could not be specified by an authority, and did not remain stable over time. Rather, each individual had to try to locate the standard on the basis of his or her knowledge and best guesses. Where the invariable standard was a positive source of illumination for the polity as a whole, the variable standard could only be intuited negatively, as a sort of limit within the activities of other individuals. Locke invoked the term “regulation,” though, in order to stress that the variability and inscrutability of market standards for individuals not only did not prevent but in fact enabled order and regularity at the level of the market as a whole.

Though both of these models of regulation employed the elements of standards, knowledge, and automaticity, they distributed these elements differently. In the first model, an omniscient sovereign freely and knowingly determined a standard, which resulted in an imperative, or law, that then ought to be obeyed universally and automatically. In the second model, by contrast, knowledge is not located in an omniscient sovereign but in large collections of fallible individuals, with the result that knowledge
of the standard by any one individual is always partial. However, provided that each individual does not act automatically but rather employs his or her limited knowledge to make judgments and act, a natural standard—of interest rates, for example—will then emerge automatically within what Locke calls the market. For Locke, automatic collective self-regulation is possible only when each individual focuses narrowly on his or her own limited sphere of needs, desires, and knowledge.18

Locke’s concept of extrajudicial collective self-regulation valorized differences among individuals with respect to knowledge, ability, and temperament that were, within the first model of regulation, either of no interest or were understood as limitations to regularity. The first model of regulation presumed that the knowledge necessary to regulate a given realm, whether this is God’s knowledge of how best to construct the universe or the human legislator’s knowledge of the proper standard for coinage, can be gathered at one time and place in the consciousness of the sovereign, who then translates this knowledge into a corresponding imperative. Locke’s model of self-regulation, by contrast, presumed that the relevant knowledge cannot be gathered together at one point but is instead distributed across the limited perspectives of many individuals, who must be linked together through the market for something like knowledge to emerge. Locke’s point was not simply that there is no practical way for any human to determine, for example, what he calls the “natural interest rate.” To understand this limitation as merely practical would imply that the natural interest rate is a relation such as gravitational attraction between two bodies, which is both independent of human needs and wants and presumably could be known by God, at least. For Locke, though, realities such as the natural interest rate for loans do not preexist but only come into being through the mechanism of the market. In this sense, “the market” names certain kinds of linkages among individuals that validate the limited perspective of each market participant, in the sense that each individual makes decisions about needs and desires based on his or her limited perspective and whatever knowledge he or she can obtain about the limited perspectives of others.19 The schema of the market establishes a conceptual link between limited, individual perspectives; the automatic emergence of a standard; and what would later become the key liberal aspiration of “freedom.” Freedom here names the fact that a variable standard and collective order emerge automatically precisely because each individual connected by the market limits himself to his own perspective, inclinations, and interests.20 (Table 1 summarizes the differences between the first and second models of regulation.)
Locke’s account of self-regulation exemplifies the beginnings of a form of reasoning that seeks out decentralized processes in large “apolitical” bodies—what will eventually be called populations—and often eventuates in the liberal position that political laws should be framed to allow the standards of these autonomous collective movements to express themselves freely. Locke’s specific focus on economic self-regulation was picked up, for example, in mid-eighteenth-century British political economy by authors such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and James Steuart and by French physiocrats such as François Quesnay and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot. In *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* (1767), for example, Steuart reflected at length on what regulated prices and connected this to reflections on “the principles which regulate the distribution of inhabitants into farms, hamlets, villages, towns, and cities” as well as natural and social factors, such as the fertility of soil, which “regulate the multiplication of man, and determine his employment.” Smith continued these reflections in his even more influential *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), considering, for example, how the price of corn is regulated by factors relating to silver production and how that form of natural regulation relates to political regulations concerning coinage standards. Yet even as subsequent political economists consistently understood political economy as the search for the laws or principles that “regulated” the variability of the

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**Table 1. Two models of regulation**

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<tr>
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<th>First model of regulation</th>
<th>Second model of regulation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>figure of nature</strong></td>
<td>sovereign imperative</td>
<td>variable forces that humans can partially shift/alter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>nature of the standard</strong></td>
<td>invariable, visible standard</td>
<td>variable, obscure standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>premise about the relationship of the standard to knowledge</strong></td>
<td>standard can be determined only after relevant knowledge is assembled at central, univocal point</td>
<td>standard emerges and persists only through linkage of individual, limited perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>role of the individual</strong></td>
<td>automatic submission</td>
<td>exercise of (fallible) individual judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>role of government</strong></td>
<td>determining and enforcing invariable standards</td>
<td>empowering individuals to exercise (fallible) individual judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>key example</strong></td>
<td>machine</td>
<td>market</td>
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market standards, they also consistently contended that knowledge of such laws could never eliminate the need for the individuals to make their own estimations of variable market standards.  

Self-Regulation and the Standard of Taste

While the second model of regulation—that is, a form of immanent regulation enabled by individual perceptions of a variable standard—initially developed around topics over which the state had some power to create and enforce standards, such as interest rates and coinage, the logic and paradoxes of self-regulation were further developed in debates about standards that seemed intrinsically free from government control. For example, mid-eighteenth-century discussions about the existence and nature of a “standard of taste” in texts such as David Hume’s essay “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757) and Edmund Burke’s “Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste” in A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) further consolidated interest in determining the role of invariable and variable standards in realms of experience in which diversity of opinion was the rule rather than the exception. In the context of this chapter, Burke’s and Hume’s texts are important because they exemplify two different strategies for dealing with the relationship of invariable and variable standards, and variants of these strategies will appear again in my discussions of Malthus and Kant. Where Burke sought to contain the diversity of judgments of taste by appealing to an invariable standard that was, paradoxically, hidden within the body, Hume suggested that the invariable standard of taste was more like what Kant would later call a regulative ideal, that is, a point of orientation for individuals that, though it could not be instantiated in reality, enabled social unity precisely by providing individuals with a collective point of orientation.

Both Burke and Hume began their texts by noting that if (in Burke’s words) taste was understood as “that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts,” there was a seemingly irreconcilable diversity of judgments of taste within large groups of people. Burke noted that in other realms of experience, differences of opinion are resolved by appeal to an invariable standard: “We find people in their disputes continually appealing to certain tests and standards which are allowed on all sides, and are supposed to be established in our common nature.” Yet there “is not the same obvious concurrence in any uniform or settled principles which relate to Taste. It is then commonly supposed that this delicate and aerial
faculty . . . cannot be properly tried by any test, nor regulated by any standard” (2). Hume, for his part, contended that “the great variety of Tastes, as well as of opinion, which prevail in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one’s observation” and then argued that, when we consider past periods and distant places, this variety of opinion is “still greater in reality than in appearance.”26 However, from the fact of the diversity of taste, Burke and Hume drew different consequences concerning a standard of taste.

In accordance with the first model of regulation, Burke sought to lead the diversity of taste back to an understanding of regulation as conformity to an inflexible standard. Burke argued that, despite the diversity of taste, the latter is in fact grounded in “natural causes of pleasure” that “enable [all humans] to bring all things offered to their senses to that standard, and to regulate their feelings and opinions by it.”27 Burke claimed, for example, that everyone would prefer butter or honey to a “bolus of squills” (15). However, Burke continued, taste—in the sense of aesthetic judgment—is only partly grounded in these “primary pleasures of sense” that are regulated by an invariable standard. In addition to being grounded in these primary pleasures of sense, taste is also grounded in “the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty” (30). These latter differ among people and are partly dependent upon experience. Thus, concluded Burke, “whilst we consider Taste, merely according to its nature and species, we shall find its principles entirely uniform; but the degree in which these principles prevail in the several individuals of mankind, is altogether as different as the principles themselves are similar” (31).

Burke thus ended up with a curious hybrid of the first and second models of regulation. On the one hand, he argued for invariable, universal standards at the base of taste, which seemed to hold out the possibility of achieving social consensus in judgments about “the works of imagination and the elegant arts.” On the other hand, he claimed that these invariable standards were so diffracted and dispersed by individual capacities and experience that they effectively become variable standards, in the sense that each individual possessed his or her own idiosyncratic standard (which, moreover, changes with an increase in both experience and “proper and well-directed exercise” of the capacities of judgment [33]). Yet Burke gave no indication that these variable standards of individuals could lead to any sort of immanent self-regulation in the mode described by Locke for monetary phenomena. He simply asserted a distinction between ”good
Taste” and “wrong Taste” and claimed that the latter was attributable to a “defect of judgment” arising from either “a natural weakness of understanding” or “a want of proper and well-directed exercise” of this faculty (33). This in turn implied that the only process by means of which one could achieve consensus about objects of taste would be for those possessed of a “wrong Taste” to submit to the judgment of those possessed of “good Taste.” What is unfortunately lacking in Burke’s account is any standard for deciding among the many claimants to the latter category.

Though Hume also developed a hybrid of the invariable and variable models of regulation, his approach was to employ a consensus about the inaccessibility of an invariable standard of taste as itself the impetus for self-regulation. Burke and Hume each implied that their texts would answer the question of whether there was an invariable standard of taste, yet only Burke in fact answered this question. Hume’s essay, by contrast, oscillates between the possibilities that there is or is not an invariable standard of taste and never conclusively commits itself to one of these positions. Rather, Hume’s essay is designed to produce a consensus among its readers that there is likely such an invariable standard but also that there is no pressing need to determine what that standard might be. This approach to the question is signaled by the essay’s first sentence: “The great variety of Tastes, as well as of opinions, which prevail in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one’s observation.”

Though this sentence is apparently a statement of fact, it cannily asserts a solution to the problem of difference announced in the sentence itself. In stressing that the great variety in taste is something we have all noticed, the sentence makes explicit a previously only implicit collective agreement (namely, our collective agreement that judgments of taste differ). The rest of the essay is designed not to disturb this consensus that has just been brought into consciousness but rather to present sufficient evidence both for and against the possibility that there is an invariable standard of taste so that the reader can conclude that the question is likely undecidable. This is not intended to be a discouraging conclusion but rather a productive form of skepticism that convinces us that we have achieved a sufficient form of social unity when we acknowledge that our differences of taste occur within a general frame of agreement concerning the desirability, even if not attainability, of an invariable standard of taste. A collective, invariable standard of taste is in this sense an imaginary orientation point for each individual and the collective as a whole, that is, a point that, when it is understood as virtual rather than actual, enables collective unity.
Malthus and the Subject of Self-Regulation

Whereas the model of regulation by invariable standard posed relatively few conceptual problems—disagreements concerned simply what ought to play the role of standard or which individual had the right to determine that standard—the idea of self-regulation by means of variable standards and large collectives was less straightforward and posed at least three key questions. First: What, specifically, is the nature of the collective within which the activity of self-regulation purportedly occurs? Second: If self-regulation occurs when members of that collective orient themselves toward a standard both variable and impossible to perceive directly, how should we understand this form of mental activity that never grasps its object but that, through the effort to grasp it, produces regularity at a collective level? And, finally: If the variable standard that enables self-regulation is, as Locke claimed, “natural”—and if self-regulation is hence a sort of channeling of a natural movement—what concept of nature does self-regulation imply?

We can understand the work of many Romantic authors as attempts to answer at least one of these questions. I suggest in this section that Malthus isolated and named the collective subject of self-regulation by reformulating the concept of population, and I argue in the following section that Kant delimited the peculiar kind of thinking required of self-regulation through his concept of a “regulative” use of reason.

First, then, Malthus, and his determination of “population” as the entity within which self-regulation occurs. Locke had proposed “the market” as the arena in which self-regulation occurred but had not clarified the agent of that self-regulation. However, as I have noted in earlier chapters, by the mid-eighteenth century, the physiocrats in France had connected market activities to the term “population” and did so in part by discussing economic issues, such as food hoarding and famine, which were more clearly biopolitical in nature than Locke’s examples of coinage and interest rates. Inoculation debates in France and Britain had also suggested links between the concept of population and diseases such as smallpox, which could not be commanded away by legal decree. Building implicitly on these earlier discussions, Malthus successfully pinned the thought of self-regulation to the term “population,” convincing many of his peers (and subsequent commentators and critics) that self-regulation occurs primarily, or perhaps exclusively, within populations, rather than within alternative terms such as “the people” or “the multitude.” Each of these terms—“population,” “people,” “multitude”—had been used since at
least the seventeenth century, but Malthus sought to grasp the logic of self-regulation by relocating regulation to the site of populations.

Malthus argued that populations were characterized by two linked modes of self-regulation. He first claimed that the tendency of populations to expand infinitely was naturally regulated by the death of that portion of the population for which no food was available (1992: 21). However, this first form of natural regulation could itself be regulated—that is, made more regular and less acute in its effects—through rigorous commitment to a second form of self-regulation, namely, economic self-regulation of supply and demand.32 Malthus hoped to convince his readers that these two dimensions of human existence—the biological and the economic—described completely the self-regulatory potential of populations.

Malthus’s difficulty, though, was that the natural regulation of population growth by starvation is different in kind than the natural regulation of economic supply and demand, since the latter requires specific human institutions for its operation, such as private property. Malthus was aware of this issue, and it is not necessarily a problem for his account, since his book was intended to intervene in—that is, to help regulate—the natural regulation of population growth. But the difference in kind between these two modes of population regulation required that Malthus clarify how human awareness of regulatory processes—an awareness his book was intended to encourage—related to self-regulation.

As Malthus grappled with this question in each subsequent edition of his book, his account became increasingly self-reflexive—that is, increasingly “Romantic” in its poetics (though sadly not in its prose)—as he found his account of the natural self-regulation of human populations more and more bound up with the question of the effect of his text itself on legislators and the more general population of readers.33 Not surprisingly, this self-reflexivity revolves around the term “regulation.” In the first edition of 1798, “regulation” serves Malthus as both a synonym for human legislation—that is, political directives that seek to enforce behavior among legal subjects according to an invariable standard—and for the natural and inflexible relationship between population and food growth that is the central point of his text.34 However, in subsequent editions, “regulation” increasingly comes to refer to the effects of his text on various kinds of readers. For example, Malthus suggested in the Appendix to the 1806 edition that if British legislators did not think it “advisable” at this point to abolish the poor laws, it cannot be doubted that a knowledge of those general principles, which render them [the poor laws] inefficient in their
humane interventions, might be so applied so far to modify them and regulate their execution, as to remove many of the evils with which they are accompanied, and make them less objectionable. (1992: 360)

That is, Malthus’s text itself should regulate the relation between political regulation and natural regulation, with the goal of making the natural regulatory movements between populations and food operate in a more regular—less unpredictably catastrophic—fashion.

Yet not all of Malthus’s readers were legislators, and he also used the concept of regulation to consider the effects of his account on other kinds of readers. Malthus implied in the 1803 edition, for example, that his text might encourage in readers what he called “moral restraint” (1992: 43–44, 71–42). By this Malthus meant that a reader’s knowledge of the natural regulatory relation between population and food should encourage the reader to delay sexual reproduction. Yet as William Hazlitt noted, the possibility of widespread moral restraint threatens Malthus’s account of the “natural” law regulating population growth, since that account presumes that population automatically tends to expand beyond the food base. Hazlitt noted that the point of Malthus’s 1798 text was to convince his readers that “excessive population” was an evil . . . infinitely greater and more to be dreaded than all others [i.e., evils] put together; and that its approach could only be checked by vice and misery . . . and that in proportion as we attempted to improve the condition of mankind, and lessened the restraints of vice and misery, we threw down the only barriers that could protect us from this most formidable scourge of the species, population. 35

Yet Malthus then “comes forward again with a large quarto, in which he is at great pains both to say and unsay all that he had said in his former volume, that population is in itself a good thing . . . and that the most effectual as well as desirable check to excessive population is moral restraint” (45–46). 36

Malthus could have responded that whereas Hazlitt’s critique assumed that Malthus meant that every member of society could regulate him- or herself according to an invariable standard of moral restraint, the concept of a self-regulating population presumed variable and imperceptible standards, which will be differently grasped by members of a population. Malthus may not have fully grasped that implication of his concept of population, but he did stress differences of interpretation—or rather, differences of interpretative paradigms—among his readers. He considered, for
example, those readers who found it difficult to coordinate knowledge and affect (that is, readers unable to “regulate their belief or disbelief by their likes or dislikes”). Malthus suggested that many of these readers were convinced “of the truth of the general principles contained in the Essay” but “lamented this conviction, as throwing a darker shade over our views of human nature, and tending particularly to narrow our prospects of future improvement” (1992: 360). Because such readers felt sincerely that the only impediment to social progress was “the perverseness and wickedness of those who influence human institutions,” they found themselves “in a constant state of irritation and disappointment,” and so were unable to perceive the “regular progress” in fact made by society (361). Malthus encouraged these readers to understand human society as more akin to a state of probation, in which collective human improvement over time is uncertain or even unlikely. Embracing this lack of certainty of future improvement would allow this class of readers to understand our condition as a challenge that calls forth human powers of creativity and perhaps then leads to human improvement after all:

If . . . [it is] impossible to feel such a confidence [in future improvement], I confess, that I had much rather believe that some real and deeply-seated difficulty existed, the constant struggle with which was calculated to rouse the natural inactivity of man, to call forth his faculties, and invigorate and improve his mind; a species of difficulty which it must be allowed is most eminently and peculiarly suited to a state of probation. (361)

This is a strange moment in the text, for it opens up the possibility that Malthus has painted such a gloomy portrait of the natural regulatory relation between population and food not because he believes it is true but instead for what he hopes the effects of such a representation on his readers will be. By implying that future improvement requires, paradoxically, the absence of certainty that such improvement will occur, Malthus opened up the possibility that the real goal of his text was the destruction of overweening optimism, rather than the transmission of scientific truths.

This is presumably not what Malthus wanted to say, for he otherwise seems committed to the truth value of his propositions about natural population regulation. Yet Malthus’s efforts to understand the natural movements of populations in terms of regulation encouraged, seemingly despite his intentions, an increasingly self-reflexive consideration of which representation of natural regulation would best regulate human thinking about regulation. Malthus’s examples of different kinds of readers using the Essay to regulate their relations to natural population regulation highlight that
the more he considered the role of conscious thought in the operation of self-regulation, the more complicated and problematic his account of natural population regulation became. Or, to put this another way, though Malthus isolated the population as the subject of self-regulation, he found it difficult to grasp what roles consciousness, self-reflection, and thinking could play in a human population’s self-regulation. The result, Hazlitt suggested, was a “vibrating backwards and forwards with a dexterity of self-contradiction which it is wonderful to behold.”

This vibration within Malthus’s efforts to understand the operation of self-regulation resulted from the disjunction between the site to which Malthus had relocated regulation—the population—and the model of regulation to which he was committed. Malthus’s stress on the aggregate entity of population seemed to commit him to the second model of regulation. That is, Malthus’s population seemed analogous to Locke’s aggregate of investors, each of whom actively, consciously, and through the application of rational capacities sought to intuit the variable standard of “want” and through the collective effect of these individual actions produced a regular and coherent market. Yet Malthus employed the concept of population precisely because its biological reference countered the claims of reformers such as Godwin that the regulation of human affairs ought—or even could—pass through human capacities for reason and self-reflection. Despite relocating the site of regulation from the realm of political subjects to a decentralized population, Malthus still understood regulation as a sovereign imperative of nature that required submission to an invariable standard. What submitted to this standard was not the self-consciousness of legal, political, or economic subjects but biological drives that operated like machines, in that they functioned automatically and apart from self-consciousness, thought, and foresight. Malthus and Godwin thus mirrored each other: Where Godwin claimed we must submit to the sovereign dictates of reason, Malthus asserted that our bodies necessarily obey the natural sovereign dictates of biological generation and political economy. Except, of course, that Malthus recognized that these sovereign imperatives of nature were often ignored by humans, and so his text was intended to supplement the sovereign imperatives of nature. This supplemental status of the text kept Malthus oscillating between the two models of regulation, producing that vibration discerned by Hazlitt.

If Malthus’s text exemplifies the difficulty of thinking regulation beyond the schema of sovereign command, even when the site of regulation no longer corresponded to this schema, his text also underscored the dangerous conceptual means by which one could attempt to eliminate this vibration.
between the two models of regulation, namely, what the political theorist Roberto Esposito has called the modern immunitary paradigm. Esposito introduced his concept of immunity in order to clarify both Foucault’s account of the emergence of biopolitics in the eighteenth century and its dark trajectory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He contends that the centrality of the immunitary paradigm for biopolitics allows us to distinguish its programs, such as smallpox inoculation and political economy, from, for example, ancient “Egyptian agrarian politics or the politics of hygiene and health of [ancient] Rome.”

The immunitary paradigm also allows us to understand why biopolitical management of populations increasingly led, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to what he calls “thanatopolitics,” that is, the safeguarding of the life of a “good” part of the population by means of the death of “bad” parts of the population. Esposito asserts that the immunitary paradigm “functions precisely through the use of what it opposes. It reproduces in a controlled form exactly what it is meant to protect us from.” As a consequence, the immunitary paradigm aims not for “the good” but for security, understood as the limitation of damage: “Instead of something good being acquired, something bad has been taken away.” One of the inherent problems with this approach is that “this self-protective syndrome ends up relegating all other interests to the background, including ‘interest’ itself as a form of life-in-common; the effect it creates is actually the opposite of what is desired. Instead of adapting the protection to the actual level of risk, it tends to adapt the perception of risk to the growing need for protection—making protection itself one of the major risks” (15–16).

While Esposito does not consider Malthus in his accounts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ development of the immunitary paradigm, his description illuminates both the source of Hazlitt’s perplexity about Malthus’s text and the mechanism by means of which Malthus sought to eliminate the conceptual vibration that Hazlitt noted. Hazlitt contended that where previous writers on the topic of population had assumed that “life is a blessing” and that “the object both of the moralist and the politician was to diminish as much as possible the quantity of vice and misery existing in the world,” Malthus distanced himself from this framework by linking population to the question of survival. Malthus claimed that the tendency of populations to increase exponentially led to the potential destruction of the population itself. Malthus also asserted, in a rather clear example of Esposito’s immunitary paradigm, that this threat could only be countered through the active introduction of a small and controlled amount of death, such as the elimination of the safety net of the
Poor Laws. By focusing attention on the survival of the populace and by drawing on what was becoming an increasingly common immunitary logic that bound survival to the necessity of moderated small doses of death, Malthus could shift attention away from the conceptual dissonance between his claim that regulation occurs in the differential dynamics of population, on the one hand, and his commitment to the model of regulation as sovereign command, on the other.

Kant, Self-Regulation, and Thinking

If Malthus's slide into the immunitary paradigm resulted from his attempt to eliminate the dissonance between his site of regulation (population) and his model of regulation (sovereign imperative), what would it mean to reconceptualize regulation itself from the perspective of populations? While Kant did not address this question directly, he contributed to an answer by considering more rigorously than Malthus what it might mean to regulate thinking and behavior through the thought of regulation itself. The concept of regulation is central to Kant's critical philosophy, which is premised on a distinction between the “constitutive” principles and concepts of the faculty of the understanding and the “regulative” principles and concepts of the faculty of reason.42 “Constitutive” means, for Kant, subjective principles, concepts, and categories to which experience must conform. For example, a category of the understanding such as “substance” makes experience possible, and we can investigate specific kinds of substances. “Regulative,” by contrast, means for Kant a rule or principle that cannot be given in experience but that can guide the investigation of experience. Heuristic rules such as “always seek to create unity” or “see every cause as itself an effect until you find an uncaused cause” exemplify regulative principles.43

Kant stressed that humans tend, in a sense unavoidably, to mistake reason's regulative principles for possible objects of experience. The concept of God as an actual entity who created everything else, for example, is the mistaken projection onto the field of experience of the regulative principle of seeking an uncaused cause behind every proximate cause. The concept of God emerges from a capacity of reason essential for the investigation of experience, for without reason's regulative urgings, we would remain benumbed by an unconnected manifold of sensations. Yet for Kant, the progress of science is hindered when we mistake a regulative principle for an object of possible experience. The recognition of regulative principles as such—that is, as principles that guide our thinking rather than as possible
objects of experience—is thus essential to making the progress of knowledge more regular. As Gilles Deleuze stressed, Kant linked the concept of regulation to the human ability to see the world in terms of “problems” to be solved. If human reason sometimes “pose[s] false problems”—for example, asking what attributes God has—this is only because reason “is a faculty of posing problems in general.” Though the concepts and principles of the faculty of the understanding allow us to find ourselves embedded in a world of specific objects, the regulative principles of reason enable humans to see the world in terms of problems and their possible solutions.

Kant’s understanding of regulation in terms of posing problems isolates a key reason for the ambiguities of Malthus’s account of regulation. Malthus recognized the relationship between problem solving and regulation but oscillated between attributing this problem-solving capacity to nature and to humans. In the 1798 Essay, Malthus suggested that whenever a human population outstrips its food supply, nature approaches this as a problem, which it solves through a variety of techniques, including human vices, disease, and, finally, famine:

The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man that, unless arrested by the preventative check, premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success still be incomplete, gigantic famine stalks in the rear and, with one mighty blow, levels the population with the food of the world. (1992: 42–43)

Yet Malthus published his Essay precisely because this natural mode of problem solving itself poses a problem for humans, which the latter seek to solve through measures such as the Poor Laws. This implies that problems and problem solving are specifically human activities, rather than processes that occur within nature.

Kant’s approach to regulation also clarifies the extent to which Malthus’s account of population as a threat requires that readers confuse the mental process of projecting population expansion to its infinite limit with the possibility of such expansion actually occurring in experience. Hazlitt intuited this confusion in Malthus’s account and sought to expose it through the following thought experiment:
Let us also suppose that these checks [to population growth] are for a time removed, and that mankind become perfectly virtuous and happy. Well, then, according to the former supposition, this would necessarily lead to an excessive increase of population. Now the question is, to what degree of excess it would lead, and where it would naturally stop. Mr. Malthus, to make good his reasoning, must suppose a miracle to take place; that after population has begun to increase excessively, no inconvenience is felt from it, that in the midst of the “immanent and immediate” evils which follow from it, people continue virtuous and happy and unconscious of the dangers with which they are surrounded; till of a sudden Mr. Malthus opens the floodgates of vice and misery and they are overwhelmed by them, all at once. In short he must suppose either that this extraordinary race of men, in proportion as population increases, are gradually reduced in size, “and less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room, throng numberless, like that pygmean race beyond the Indian mount, or fairy elves;” or that they have some new world assigned them as a breeding-place, from which attempting to return they are immediately squeezed to death, like people rushing into a crowded theatre.

Hazlitt’s spatial images of rapid transformation—a population of people who slowly grow smaller as their numbers increase, until suddenly, after a certain number, they swiftly grow large, or a population swiftly relocated from one site to another—expose the ways that Malthus encouraged readers to confuse the logical terminus of a regulative rule (a population growing toward an infinite number of members) with that of the actual time-and-space-based process of population expansion (which, according to Malthus’s own account, could never reach that logical limit). Kant’s account of the regulative ideals and principles of reason outlines the more general possibilities for this kind of confusion, of which Malthus’s account is one example.

Kant’s understanding of regulation as “problematic” keeps the concept of regulation helpfully balanced at the intersection of human creative potential and those natural movements that the sciences reveal. The sciences may provide elements of provisional solutions to human problems by developing figures through which to understand the natural world: for example, the figure of pressure that underwrites much of Malthus’s account of the relationship between population growth and food. But Kant’s understanding of regulation demands careful attention to possible confusions of regulative principles with objects of experience and stresses that any particular solution to a problem, such as Malthus’s claim that the Poor Laws must be eliminated, can never be warranted by nature, since problems and their solutions
by their very nature emerge from the faculty of reason and not directly from nature in its phenomenally given sense. Or, to put this another way, there can be for Kant no purely natural self-regulation; rather, self-regulation always names a collective human effort to solve a problem.

However, beyond providing grounds for criticizing Malthus’s account of regulation, Kant’s account of the regulative principles of reason also helps us think more clearly about what it could mean to think population by means of the second model of regulation. This may seem like a strange claim, since “population” was not a concept that Kant employed explicitly in either his critical works or essays. Moreover, Kant’s tendency to understand reason as a univocal, invariable standard that speaks in the same voice through every individual seems to preclude any positive appraisal of the diversity of opinions and capacities with which concepts of population had been connected in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet by drawing on Hannah Arendt’s reading of Kant, we can see that his basic assumptions about the nature of philosophy, his reflections on the principle of purposiveness that he understood as the foundation of judgment, and his approach to the question of a standard of taste oriented him—albeit tentatively—toward a model of self-regulation as a process that took place among the members of populations and did so by means of variable, and hence only partially illuminated, standards.

Arendt stressed that Kant was unusual among philosophers in understanding philosophy not as a discipline for “the few” who would, through its practice, achieve that highest form of life traditionally called the vita contemplativa (life of the mind) but rather as a basic human need. Arendt noted that “philosophizing, or the thinking of reason, which transcends the limitations of what can be known, the boundaries of human cognition, is for Kant a human ‘need,’ the need of reason as a human faculty. It does not oppose the few to the many.”47 For Kant, this basic human need for philosophy resulted from the fact that humans were characterized by an “unsocial sociability” but, as inhabitants of a globe, could not escape from one another. The “unsocial sociability” of humans means that they have an innate “tendency to come together in society,” “coupled . . . with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up.”48 For Kant, as for Malthus, the difficulties presented by unsocial sociability could not be solved by emigration, for humans have “common possession of the earth,” and since “the earth is a globe, they cannot disperse over an infinite area, but must necessarily tolerate one another’s company.”49 Though Kant’s critical philosophy was oriented toward an understanding of “man” as (in Arendt’s gloss) a “reasonable being, subject to the laws of
practical reason which he gives to himself, autonomous, an end in himself, [and] belonging to a Geisterreich, [i.e., a] realm of intelligible beings,” Kant also intended his texts for human beings understood as “earthbound creatures, living in communities, endowed with common sense, sensus commu-nis, [i.e.,] a community sense,” and who were “not autonomous” but rather required “each other’s company.”

The importance of implicit concepts of population, variable standards, and self-regulation for Kant’s interpretation of humans as “earthbound creatures, living in communities, [and] endowed with common sense” emerged in several places, including his reflections in the Critique of Judgment on the origins of the standards that individuals employ to make judgments of beauty. Kant asked how an individual comes to have a “standard idea” (Normalidee) of the various entities that he or she frequently encounters in the world, and answered that the individual produces this standard by abstracting from a population of perceptions. He exemplified this process through the example of a population of human beings:

When the mind wants to make comparisons, [it] can actually proceed as follows, though this process does not reach consciousness: the imagination projects, as it were, one image onto another, and from the congruence of most images of the same kind it arrives at an average that serves as the common standard for all of them. For instance: Someone has seen a thousand adult men. If now he wishes to make a judgment about their standard size, to be estimated by way of a comparison, then (in my opinion) the imagination projects a large number of the images (perhaps the entire thousand) onto one another. . . . Now if in a similar way we try to find for this average man the average head, for it the average nose, etc., then it is this shape which underlies the standard idea of a beautiful man in the country where this comparison is made. That is why, given these empirical conditions, a Negro’s standard idea of the beauty of the [human] figure necessarily differs from that of a white man, that of a Chinese from that of a European. (CJ 82 [234])

Against the background of Burke’s and Hume’s earlier reflections on aesthetics and standards, two aspects of Kant’s claims about standards are important. First, though Kant, like Burke, posited an unconscious dimension for the standard of beauty—for Kant, the process of imaginative projection and abstraction “does not reach consciousness”—unconscious activity plays a role opposite that which it played in Burke’s account. For Burke, the foundation of the standard of taste is unconscious because it is located in the register of the body, which renders it both universal (everyone has the same standard) and possessed of a sovereign-like imperative (one
cannot help but to prefer honey to squills). For Kant, by contrast, a standard idea is generated by means of an unconscious activity. The unconscious nature of this activity underscores the dependence of a particular individual’s standard of beauty upon his or her experience, which in turn implies that this standard can—and should—be revised by means of additional experience. Though Kant distinguished among the standards of beauty of different groups (Negro, white man, Chinese person, European), his point is that each human individual has a unique standard of beauty generated from, and hence limited to, his or her individual experience with that subpopulation of the human species with whom he or she has come into contact. Given Kant’s assertions about the inescapable unsocial sociability of humans who are bound to a globe, his account of the genesis of the standard idea of beauty suggests that an individual ought to understand his or her judgments of beauty as provisional and always open to revision upon the basis of a wider experience of the globe and its inhabitants.  

The individual and dynamic nature of the standard in Kant’s account also underscores—again, contra Burke—that the standard idea operates not as a sovereign imperative that compels individuals to judge in a certain way but rather as an inherently open movement between instance and class. Thus, Kant wrote that

this standard idea is not derived from proportions that are taken from experience as determinate rules. Rather, it is in accordance with this idea that rules for judging become possible in the first place. It is the image for the entire kind, hovering between all the singular and multiply varied intuitions of the individuals, the image that nature used as the archetype on which it based its productions within any one species, but which it does not seem to have attained completely in any individual. (CJ 82–83 [234–35])

For an individual, the standard idea emerges within experience, and thus though it may “dictate” rules for judging (for example, “individuals who look like this are beautiful, while individuals who look like that are not”), these rules will change on the basis of greater experience with the multitudes of humans who populate the globe.

Even more significant than Kant’s hypotheses about the genesis of individual aesthetic standards are his reflections on the regulative “principle of purposiveness” at the heart of both the faculty of judgment and the diversity of aesthetic judgments one finds in a population. Kant takes more seriously than either Burke or Hume the fact of the diversity of judgments of beauty. However, Kant did not aspire, as did Burke, to discover a hidden natural standard that might in principle allow individuals to make identical
judgments of taste, nor did he follow Hume in sidestepping the diversity of judgments of taste in order to stress a shared agreement concerning that diversity. *Pace* Burke, Kant believed that the diversity of judgments of taste was unavoidable. *Pace* Hume, Kant contended that it is vital to recognize the claim for universality that every judgment of beauty implies. Kant contended that if the universal aspiration of every judgment of beauty was properly understood, it would, as Hume suggested, reveal to us why a *specific* universal standard of taste was beside the point but would do so because it revealed that our thoughts and even perceptions were collective in nature.53

Kant moved away from Burke’s and Hume’s emphasis on an invariable standard of taste by means of his “principle of purposiveness.” Kant asserted that whenever we are presented with a novel object or process and we must creatively discover the rule, principle, or law of which that particular is an instance, we are guided by judgment’s principle of “the *purposiveness of nature* in its diversity” (*CJ* 20 [Ak. 180]). This is the principle that the individual elements of nature form a unity of the kind that can be understood by our mental faculties (*CJ* 19 [Ak. 180]).54 Kant stressed that we have no warrant for concluding that nature actually has a coherent and meaningful unity that we can cognize; it might be the case, for example, that nature’s order is so complex and alien that it becomes incomprehensible after a certain point. The principle of purposiveness is simply the immanent (a priori) principle of our faculty of judging, rather than a principle of nature. However, this principle is also the only means by which we are able to move from a novel individual to a rule, principle, or law of which that individual would be an instance.

Kant asserted that judgments of taste result when, in the absence of any attempt to make use of or even gain specific knowledge about an object, the *form* of that object brings the faculties of imagination and understanding into harmony with each other. This produces pleasure because the object seems to confirm that harmony between nature’s order and our mental powers upon which the principle of purposiveness is premised.55 Because this harmony is discovered outside of any attempt to obtain knowledge about the object, the faculties relate to one another harmoniously, rather than in what Kant calls a “law-governed” (*gesetzlich*) relationship (*CJ* 162 [Ak. 295]).

Only where the imagination is free when it arouses the understanding, and the understanding, without using concepts, puts the imagination into a play that is regular [*ein regelmäßiges Spiel versetzt*], does the presentation
communicate itself not as a thought but as the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind. (CJ 162 [Ak. 296])

Judgments of beauty result, in other words, when an object facilitates “freedom” and “regular play”—which we might translate as “self-regulated play”—(regelmäßiges Spiel) between faculties.\(^5^6\) Kant’s stress on the regularity of this play turns his quasi-equation between freedom and play into an image of regulation. Yet it is an image of regulation divorced from the sovereign schema, for here each faculty can take on the rule of the other.

Because judgments of beauty depend for Kant upon this self-regulated play, the search for a standard of taste in Burke’s and Hume’s senses is beside the point, for such a search misunderstands the relationship of taste to universality. Burke understood the standard of taste as a set of determinate, universally valid rules that dictated the conditions under which an object would automatically cause a judgment of taste. For Kant, by contrast, a judgment of taste results when the schema of the sovereign imperative is displaced in favor of the schema of regulative play (for example, the specific form of a particular flower enables a self-regulating play between my faculties of imagination and understanding).

From this perspective, Burke’s hope to locate universality in a determinate standard of taste mistook the conditions under which judgments of taste are made. For Kant, universality characterizes the mode, rather than the content, of judgment. To judge that a flower is beautiful is, Kant claimed, implicitly to judge that the grounds for that judgment—the feeling of pleasure that results when this object allows my faculties to engage in free play—are available to every individual, though one knows from experience that many individuals will not in fact judge this object in the same way. For Kant, every time an individual makes a judgment of taste, she implicitly proposes that judgment to every human. This is true even when a judgment of taste is made in private and is not shared with anyone else, for the universality inherent in such a judgment necessarily orients it toward “everyone else.”\(^5^7\) For Kant, the “universality” of judgments of taste is their capacity to orient us toward one another. Kant captured this sense of orientation toward everyone else in his idea of the sensus communis, which is

the idea of a sense shared [by all of us], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting [something], in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general. . . . Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of
others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that [may] happen to attach to our own judging. \((CJ\ 160\ [AK\ 293–94])\)

Kant’s point was not that, in a judgment of taste, we in fact “compare our judgment” of an object “with the merely possible judgments of others” but rather that a judgment of taste requires our sense that we are judging on the basis of the regulative play of the faculties.

As Arendt—and following Arendt, Linda Zerilli—have noted, Kant’s account of the role of sensus communis in judgments of taste underscores his more general understanding of thinking as inherently social and hence also as capable of enabling collective human relations determined by something more like regulative play than determinate legislation.\(^58\) This social dimension of thinking is even more evident in what Kant called “common human understanding,” in which one explicitly seeks to “think from the standpoint of everyone else” \((CJ\ 160\ [Ak.\ 294])\), which means “transferring himself to the standpoint of others” \((CJ\ 161\ [Ak.\ 295])\). As Zerilli notes, this does not mean thinking from an abstract, “universal” position but instead denotes attempts to think from the position of concrete human beings, especially those who differ most significantly from me.\(^59\) This process of thinking from the position of other people is, in effect, the conscious, deliberative version of the unconscious, automatic process by means of which each individual’s standard idea of the human form emerges. Where the latter process automatically creates a standard idea by running through the specific corporeal particularities of that population of individuals that I have encountered, the former is the process by which a uniquely situated individual consciously attempts to think from the standpoints of many other unique individuals.

In ways that will become useful for my conclusion to this chapter, Arendt developed Kant’s reflections on the human plurality implicit in the sensus communis into a more general theory of plurality and the collective composition of the common world. As I noted at the end of Chapter 5, Arendt described “the common world” as what comes into being when the individual perspectives of concrete human beings, which cannot be subordinated to any common standard, are brought into connection with one another by means of common objects and institutions:

The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of
all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.  

For Arendt, the common world must be actively created, in the sense that only by means of common objects and concrete common political practices and institutions can a “common meeting ground” be created, enabling those “innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself” to be brought together. This active and continued creation of the common world enables something like a quasi-immortality of human works and actions, connecting the works and actions of the past, present, and future generations. The common world is “what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die,” and as such, it

transcends our life-span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time. (55)  

Arendt’s theory of the common world takes even more seriously than either Malthus or Kant the fact of our common inhabitation of a globe. For Malthus, the fact that we share a world from which emigration is not possible led him to the conclusion that nature and political economy must regulate our relationships to one another; for example, we must “consider chiefly the mass of mankind and not individual instances,” which meant, in practical terms, that those who have access to food must steel themselves against the emotional pleas of those without.  

For Kant, the primary significance of our status as globe dwellers is that we are crowded together, which forces both sides of our contradictory nature—our unsociable sociability—into conflict. For Arendt, by contrast, the common world does not denote simply the fact of a crowded globe. Rather, the common world—or rather, a common world—emerges when concrete, embodied individuals who share a geographic location are connected to one another through specific objects and things, such as agriculture, buildings, and works of art, and employ this connection for the sake of individual and collective
judgments. For Arendt, the common world is not identical with the earth (that is, “the limited space for the movement of men”) or nature (“the general condition of organic life” and the realm of all processes that appear to us to be automatic). Rather, the common world depends upon “human artifacts”—objects that have been created by human hands, such as buildings—and those “affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it” (52). A group’s common world must take into account both what Arendt calls earth and nature: For example, buildings will be designed in order to endure the effects of weather and use. But because a common world is the place in which individuals show who (and not simply what) they are, the common world explicitly distinguishes itself from all natural and automatic processes. The common world is the site of collective regulation, which results in part from “transferring [oneself] to the standpoint of others” (CJ 161 [Ak. 295]).

Post-Romantic Self-Regulation in the Twentieth Century I: Systems Ecology and Neoliberalism

Though concepts of regulation were of widespread importance in the Romantic era, they have been even more central to twentieth- and twenty-first-century understandings of the interrelationships among nature, individuals, and collectives. Concepts of regulation have attained centrality in our own moment along at least three paths. First, since the early twentieth century, the physiological body has been understood in terms of self-regulative processes. Second, this image of physiological regulation was inspirational for population and ecosystem ecologists, who, beginning in the 1940s, used the concept of regulation both to denote circular natural processes, such as the carbon cycle, that linked living beings and the natural environment and to update versions of the population dynamics outlined by Malthus. Third, regulation, this time in the sense of explicitly framed political laws and government agencies, has been a persistent point of critique for an influential wing of Chicago School economists who have argued that the self-regulatory dynamics of economic processes render political regulation both unnecessary and counterproductive.

Though there are significant differences among these more recent concepts of self-regulation, they are nevertheless all characterized by that same oscillation that Hazlitt first isolated in Malthus. This oscillation results from the persisting difficulty of squaring the desire to locate a natural
mechanism that makes it possible to remove self-regulation from its passage through human self-consciousness with the fact that such accounts of self-regulation necessarily pass through that human consciousness and capacity for action. To underscore the extent to which Romantic approaches to regulation illuminate both the aporias and potentials of several of these twentieth-century reflections on self-regulation, I will briefly discuss two fields—namely, ecosystems ecology and Chicago School economics—in which this oscillation has been especially evident; both bear directly on the questions explored by Malthus and Kant.

Self-Regulation in Ecosystems Ecology

As the historian of ecology Sharon E. Kingsland has noted, up until the 1950s, “ecology had developed largely as a biological subject, in which plants and animals were studied, but humans were ignored.”65 Though nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ecologists were interested in the impact of human activity on natural environments, they generally understood human activity as an external influence on the internal dynamics of natural processes. Frederic E. Clements’s early-twentieth-century concept of “ ecological succession,” for example, proposed that, in a given region—and in the absence of human engagement—different species succeeded one another until they reached a stable “climax” community.66 The development of the ecosystem concept in the 1940s and 1950s was, in principle, a point at which this might have changed, for the ecosystem concept itself emerged in attempts to understand how radioactive isotopes such as strontium cycled through different living beings and their environments, and this question was bound up with concern over the potential impact on humans of nuclear weapons.67 Yet even ecosystem ecologists initially treated humans not as integral parts but primarily as potential disturbers of ecosystems. Given the history of regulation I have sketched here, this was, I suggest, a predictable consequence of the fact that the concept of ecosystem drew heavily both on a paradigm of automatic bodily regulation drawn from physiology and on machine-oriented concepts of systems and regulation drawn from cybernetics.

The link between cybernetics and what would become systems ecology was especially clear in the contribution of the Yale ecologist G. Evelyn Hutchinson to a conference on “Teleological Mechanisms.” The purpose of the conference was to reveal the ways that mechanistic processes produced the appearance of goal-directed behavior.68 Hutchinson’s paper, “Circular Causal Systems in Ecology,” used the terms “regulation” and
“self-regulation” to describe systems that “corrected” themselves by returning to a specific state when the system was disturbed by outside influences. Hutchinson outlined many ecological processes that could be described and quantified through this understanding of self-regulation, ranging from cases in which at least part of the self-regulatory mechanism depends on purely physical aspects of the structure of the earth, such as the disposition of oceans and continental masses, to cases where the self-regulatory mechanism depends on very elaborate behavior on the part of organisms or groups of organisms.\(^{69}\)

He considered the cycling of carbon and of methane through the biosphere, the cycling of phosphorus in lakes, and the ways that populations of living beings regulate themselves (with an explicit reference to Malthus: 236). In an intriguing final section, Hutchinson also described both the regulation of what he metaphorically called the “birth” and “death” rates of commodities in “nearly saturated capitalist communities” (243) and the growth of scientific knowledge (243–44). Though these final sentences of Hutchinson’s paper pointed toward the possibility that human knowledge is *not* bound by the same kinds of deterministic mechanisms he had sketched out in the rest of the paper, the vast majority of Hutchinson’s examples are intended to align the concept of self-regulation with automatic, nonconscious processes.

This latter approach guided influential ecosystem ecologists such as Eugene Odum, Howard T. Odum, and Francis Evans in their formulation of an ecosystem as a “self-regulating entity.”\(^{70}\) For these ecosystem ecologists, an ecosystem was a linkage of living beings and external environment that maintained its identity by means of automatic and nonconscious regulatory mechanisms and processes. As Kingsland notes, the ecosystem ecologist’s reassertion of this link between regulation and automaticity meant that though it was possible “to include humans as part of the environment . . . the ecosystem ecologist perceived those humans as operating mostly in opposition to nature’s strategy” (203). If ecosystem self-regulation was automatic and machine-like, humans could align themselves *with* nature’s strategy only by subordinating human activities to some natural standard or goal. In Tom Odum’s case, for example, this meant aligning human activity with what he described as the natural tendency of ecosystems to “maximize[e] ‘power,’ or the rate of flow of useful energy.”\(^{71}\)

What remained difficult to think within ecosystem ecology, in other words—and what has remained difficult to think even in much more
recent schools of ecological thought—was the role of human thought and deliberation in the self-regulation of ecosystems. Kingsland puts this point clearly:

Since humans affect the operation of ecosystems, understanding ecosystems must involve understanding humans, including how humans relate to nature and how societies function. The study of how societies function must include how science is perceived and used by societies. Therefore ideas, which influence behavior, are also part of ecosystems. (199)

As I will note in the penultimate section of this chapter, the recent concept of the “Anthropocene” is intended precisely to understand human activities as part of ecological processes. However, it is not always clear that even this concept rises to the challenge, suggested by Kingsland, of rethinking the very concept of the self-regulation of the global ecosystem in such a way as to include thought.

Self-Regulation, Markets, and Chicago School Economics

Chicago School neoclassical economics is another important twentieth-century field in which self-regulation emerged as a key reference, though in this case as an object of critique rather than embrace. Ecosystem ecologists relied on images of automatic, machine-like regulation, which had the effect of limiting the role of conscious human thought within ecosystems to that of disturbance. Chicago School economists, by contrast, argued that conscious reflection was necessarily part of social self-regulation but also argued that such reflection must be limited to those modes of thought that characterized the economic field. Or rather, the modes of cognition traditionally associated with the economic field—for example, viewing the world in terms of investments and profit—must be understood as so fundamental to human cognition that every kind of human judgment was fundamentally economic in nature. Hence, for these economists, human self-regulation would become possible when every human institution was reenvisioned through and reconfigured by an economic lens.

As historians of economics such as Philip Mirowski, Edward Nik-Khah, and Robert Van Horn document, the economic theory developed within the Chicago School of economics beginning in the 1950s was consciously linked to a broader neoliberal program for social transformation that found its focus in the Mont Pèlerin Society. For the founders of this society, such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, Western market-oriented society was under attack both from without, such as the threats
posed by Communist Russia and China, but equally from within by reformers who hoped to introduce more government planning and regulation to Western Europe and the United States. Hayek and his compatriots blamed this latter tendency in part on the failure of nineteenth-century liberals to understand that strong capitalist economies would not thrive simply because governments stepped back from intervention in markets; rather, they could thrive only if governments actively formulated law and policy in order to encourage market relations. Those associated with the Mont Pèlerin Society thus sought to formulate the principles of a new liberalism—a neoliberalism—that would guide the public and governments in creating this new liberal order.

Government regulation over industries such as electrical power utilities or interstate trucking was a particular point of dissatisfaction for many neoliberal economists, for such regulation represented for them an effort to “plan” market relations. The Chicago economist George Stigler, for example, sought to prove that government regulation had, at best, no positive effect on prices or supply within a given industry and often had the unintended effect of “artificially” increasing prices and decreasing supply. Stigler argued that regulation was in fact a means by which government favored one company over another, since regulation over an industry inevitably limited competition and determined prices. Businesses, recognizing this fact, worked to “capture” government regulation and regulatory bodies for their own ends. For Stigler, economic regulations and regulatory bodies such as the Food and Drug Administration never worked in the interest of the public but instead to the advantage of some companies—and hence against economic competition.

Though one might object that government regulation expressed the democratic will of voters, Stigler contended that democratic politics was simply not capable of directing economic activity in any virtuous way. Stigler presumed that individuals approached every aspect of life through an economic lens, in the sense of seeking out information in order to make choices that maximize individual interests. This worked well in explicitly economic life, for an individual could then “vote” by purchasing one item rather than another:

A consumer chooses between rail and air travel, for example, by voting with his pocketbook: he patronizes on a given day that mode of transportation he prefers. A similar form of economic voting occurs with decisions on where to work or where to invest one’s capital. The market accumulates these economic votes, predicts their future course, and invests accordingly.
Stigler argued that when it came to political life, though, an individual had no incentive to gather the relevant information concerning whether a particular proposed law regulating a given industry was in his or her interest. Moreover, regulatory measures and agencies were generally created by elected representatives, which further diluted the relationship between voters-cum-consumers and industry regulations (and made it possible for companies to “capture” regulatory bodies). Hence, as Nik-Khah notes,

Stigler denied that democratic results such as the public’s willingness to countenance an expansion of government regulation were an outcome of reasoned reflection, holding instead that they were the inevitable outcome of the poor instincts possessed by the vast majority of people. . . . Yet rather than call for the public to rethink its views and eliminate regulation (a prospect Stigler believed to be unrealistic in most cases), Stigler sought to immunize government policy from the public, for example, by developing for regulators a set of “intelligent guides” [namely, Chicago School–trained economists] and subjecting regulators to performance audits.78

Though Stigler would have preferred to eliminate government regulation of industry entirely, he believed that a more practical (albeit second-best) solution was to ensure that regulators were guided by those who understood the ultimate inefficacy of regulation itself and who could therefore hollow out regulatory bodies from within.

Seen in the context of the history of the concept of regulation that I have sketched in this chapter, the animus of Chicago School economists toward government regulation of industry is significant because these economists in fact opposed the view of regulation as sovereign imperative. Their opposition to this understanding of regulation was quite literal, for they presented contemporary government regulation of industry as essentially no different than the decisions of early modern sovereigns to grant royal licenses to specific guilds. In place of the view of regulation as sovereign imperative, they instead promoted a view of population-based collective decision making, which—like Locke—they called “the market.” However, for Chicago School economists, the market was the only possible site of self-regulation, and attempts to develop other sites—for example, within or by means of democratic politics—were bound to fail. Their solution was to transform all social relations into market relations, so that every aspect of human existence could partake of those virtues of self-regulation enabled by market relations.
Post-Romantic Self-Regulation in the Twentieth Century II: The Commons

While both ecosystem ecology and neoliberal economics largely recapitulate Romantic aporias of self-regulation—the former by cleaving to the schema of sovereign imperative and the latter by limiting the role of human consciousness in self-regulation to market relations—other commentators have sought to move beyond these conceptual problems by drawing on concepts of “the commons.” The commons is a concept familiar to scholars of Romantic literature, for multiple studies of Romanticism have underscored the relationship of many British eighteenth-century and Romantic aesthetic concepts (including the concept of the aesthetic itself) to the great process of enclosure of the commons in the name of “improvement” and “progress” that took off in the eighteenth century. More recently, left-leaning commentators, pointing to the ways that global capitalism has exacerbated class, racial, and gender inequities and encouraged environmental devastation, have advocated for recognition of the self-regulatory capacities of people committed to common resources. At the same time, and perhaps more surprising, the commons has also appealed to neoliberal authors, who see in studies of the commons empirical confirmation that government regulation cannot achieve its purported ends. Finally—and for my purposes here, most productive—Bruno Latour has recently oriented his science studies “actor-network” theory toward what he describes as “the progressive composition of the common world,” which has much in common with Arendt’s claims about the collective creation of the common world. For a wide variety of critics, ranging from neoliberals to those on the far left, the commons has emerged as the solution to the theoretical problems of the concept of self-regulation.

This unanimity may seem more superficial than real, for there are significant and relatively obvious differences in how each commentator understands “the commons.” The differences are often announced by the kinds of communities each employs to exemplify a virtuous commons. Left-leaning commentators tend to exemplify the commons with traditional societies (for example, the wild rice-harvesting practices of “the peoples of the Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation of Ontario”) or point to newer community groups that have organized in opposition to environmental threats such as “toxic dump sites and proposed nuclear plants.” Neoliberals, by contrast, illustrate the commons through examples such as “condominium associations and private (sometimes gated) communities that have spread rapidly over recent years across the USA and East Asia.”
Despite these differences, both left-leaning and neoliberal commentators use the concept of the commons to denote the same basic aspirations of local embeddedness within a specific geographic site, autonomy (understood as freedom from centralized control), and collective decision making, which is connected to the capacity for learning from experience over time. That is, commentators on both the right and left valorize the commons precisely because they see in this mode of social organization a form of self-regulation that is not “automatic”—that is, does not execute a sovereign imperative determined elsewhere—but rather requires the active deliberation of members of a human population. Where these commentators differ fundamentally is on the question of whether this kind of self-regulation can coexist with capitalism. Those on the left argue that the concept of the commons eliminates the distinction between “private” and “public” upon which capitalism relies, while neoliberals argue that commons are fundamentally compatible with the distinction between private and public uses of land and property (see Table 2).

From the perspective of the history of Romantic concepts of self-regulation I have developed here, perhaps the most intriguing and promising of these recent proposals for a renewed understanding of the commons is Bruno Latour’s project of “political ecology.” Latour’s political ecology is, I suggest, a fundamentally neo-Romantic rethinking of self-regulation, for he takes up and recombines all of the threads I have noted, including the progress of the sciences (Kant), the role of aesthetics (Burke, Hume, Table 2. Relationships of markets and commons in contemporary models of self-regulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Second model of regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>figure of nature</strong></td>
<td>variable forces that humans can partially shift/alter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>nature of the standard</strong></td>
<td>variable, obscure standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>premise about the relationship of the standard to knowledge</strong></td>
<td>standard emerges and persists only through dynamic and ongoing linkage of individual, limited perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>role of the individual</strong></td>
<td>exercise of (fallible) individual judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>role of government</strong></td>
<td>empowering individuals to exercise (fallible) individual judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>key example</strong></td>
<td>market + commons (neoliberals)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OR

| **market commons**              | commons (left-leaning commentators) |
Kant), the importance of an expanded notion of population (Malthus), the relationship between economics and the state (Locke, Hume, Smith, Steuart), the avoidance of the immunitary paradigm (Kant), and the relationship of all of these elements to human consciousness and intentional activity (Kant). However, though the commons also names for Latour the site of the reconfiguration of self-regulation, he provocatively suggests that the commons can be assembled only by rejecting the very concept of self-regulation.

Latour’s political ecology continues his long-standing attempt to develop an antimodern—or perhaps more accurately, amodern—understanding of the relationship between science and politics. For Latour, as for many other commentators, “modernity” begins in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but Latour argues that modernity should be understood as a fundamental contradiction between theoretical orientation and actual achievement. Modernizers past and present, Latour claims, are committed to the Enlightenment premise that human subjects face a natural world of objects, about which they can establish objective knowledge by means of the sciences, and that the telos of such knowledge is the emancipation of humans from any unchosen dependencies on the natural world. Yet Latour claims that this aspiration is belied by what modernizers in fact produce. Since the seventeenth century, the sciences have not emancipated humans from but rather multiplied attachments to the natural world. As Latour notes,

science, technology, markets, etc. have amplified, for at least the last two centuries, not only the scale at which humans and nonhumans are connecting with one another in larger and larger assemblies, but also the intimacy with which such connections are made. Whereas at the time of ploughs we could only scratch the surface of the soil, we can now begin to fold ourselves into the molecular machinery of soil bacteria. While three centuries back we could only dream, like Cyrano de Bergerac, of traveling to the Moon, we now run robots on Mars and entertain vast arrays of satellites to picture our own Earth. While in the past, my Gallic ancestors were afraid of nothing except that the “sky will fall on their heads,” metaphorically speaking, we are now afraid quite literally that the climate could destroy us.

This increasing entwinement of humans and nature is especially evident and unavoidable in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as “miracle” technologies such as asbestos or air conditioning, which developers hoped would emancipate humans from undesired changes in the external natural environment, turn out to have long-lasting detrimental
effects on both human health and the ecological cycles within which humans are embedded.⁸⁷

For Latour, examples such as asbestos and global warming reveal that we would be better off recognizing that “we have never been modern” and instead work to create a new, amodern form of political ecology. Giving up on the idea of modernity means abandoning the model of human subjects confronting an objective, external, stable nature (a model, Latour argues, shared by both resolute modernizers and their environmentalist opponents).⁸⁸ In place of this model, Latour argues, we must begin with the premise that there are many kinds of agents, or what he calls “actants”—individual human beings, human institutions, animals, microbes, gravity, and many others—which can be encouraged into alliances with one another, and that the sciences are a key method by which such alliances are created and maintained.⁸⁹ Such a premise, Latour argues, allows us to shift our interest from the modernist obsession with “matters of facts”—that is, purportedly neutral, objective scientific statements about the natural world upon which politicians would then base their moral and policy considerations—to “matters of concern,” which enable groups of humans and their nonhuman allies to trace out patiently their many and changing forms of connection.⁹⁰

Latour suggests that this shift in perspective makes possible a new political ecology, within which scientists, politicians, economists, and populations each have a role but that collectively enables a very specific kind of commons-creation, what Latour calls “the progressive composition of the common world.”⁹¹ This is not precisely a return to past forms of commons but rather a collective effort of “associations of humans and nonhumans” to decide, by means of “an explicit procedure . . . what collects them and what unifies them in one future common world” (41). The “explicit procedure” that Latour proposes is a modification of democratic representative parliamentary procedure, with scientific work “speaking for” the interests and effects of nonhuman actants. Our task, Latour contends, is “to find out what equipment has to be available to populations in order for them to assemble into a viable collective,” with “population” understood as an aggregate that includes both humans and nonhumans. Latour contends that the progressive composition of the common world is the only productive way for humans to engage our current era of the Anthropocene, for it is only through an intensification and amplification of our interconnections with the collectives of the world that groups of humans (and their nonhuman allies) will be able to address realities such as global warming.
Latour suggests, though, that the progressive composition of the common world requires that we abandon the concept of self-regulation. Though modernists sought to emancipate humans from natural constraints, Latour claims that they also always located a core “natural law”—what I have described as the schema of sovereign imperative—that purportedly commanded certain forms of behavior from human beings. Latour implies that the concept of self-regulation is completely dominated by this schema of sovereign command and hence cannot be salvaged. The “notion of self-regulating markets,” for example, encourages contemporary economists to believe that it “will be possible to do without the question of government altogether, since the relations that are internal to the collective are going to be similar to those which connect predators and their prey within ecosystems.”

Latour is equally critical of the concept of self-regulation employed within ecological theory, arguing that while we should embrace James Lovelock’s ecological “Gaia” theory, we must pry it loose from the concept of self-regulation that seemed to be so important to Lovelock himself. While the aim for political ecology—namely, the “art of governing without mastery”—sounds something like the Kantian sense of self-regulation that I outlined earlier, Latour suggests that a commanding God and his imperatives are always hidden in the “self” of self-regulation.

As if to underscore that he is reconfiguring the conceptual matrix that I mapped in the first half of this chapter, Latour contends that pursuing the progressive composition of the common world by abandoning the concept and aspiration of self-regulation is equivalent to developing a more “radical” form of liberalism. “If it is true,” Latour writes,

that the word “economy” and the word “liberty” have been linked throughout history, then this liberty should be expanded—yes, radically expanded—to all the devices, experiments, instruments, voting mechanisms, shares and stocks that constitute the makeshift, artificial and constantly reengineered armamentarium of the economy. Liberalism means “not letting anything go, not letting anything pass.”

By rejecting the concept of self-regulation but retaining that of liberalism, we can link an expanded understanding of population with both the reflexivity of human thought and care for the ways that humans are attached to the nonhuman agencies of the earth and cosmos.

Latour’s political ecology–cum–liberalism seeks to prevent the elements previously gathered under the second model of regulation from being drawn back into the first model. Thus, in place of “the individual,” Latour employs the concept of “actants,” which expands the concept of population
beyond humans to include nonhuman agents and puts the stress on alliances between actants (rather than the simple exercise of individual human judgment). Convinced that the first concept of regulation will always embed itself within the elements of the second model, he seeks to detach his newly configured liberalism from the concept of regulation entirely: a liberalism without self-regulation, in effect. Where more traditional versions of the second model of regulation presumed that a virtuous form of collective automaticity resulted when individuals exercised “freedom” within a specific kind of institution (for example, the market or the commons), Latour extends this sense of virtuous automaticity to all semistable collectives of devices, humans, nonhumans, and knowledge. Yet because virtuous automaticity is not limited to one institution, such as the market, but takes place wherever new, stable alliances among actants emerge, there is no longer any need for the dimension of divine imperative and its implication of perpetual stability, which Latour implies underwrites the figure of self-regulation (see Table 3).

Despite the virtues of Latour’s proposal, there are nevertheless several difficulties inherent in his liberalism without self-regulation. The first is its extraordinary abstraction, which—despite the thousands of pages that he devotes to this topic across many books and articles—makes it very difficult to determine what, exactly, a “parliament of things” might mean in practice and what its “explicit procedures” would concretely entail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Bruno Latour’s liberalism without self-regulation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All models of regulation/ self-regulation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>figure of nature</strong></td>
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<td>nature of the standard</td>
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<tr>
<td>premise about the relationship of the standard to knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>role of actants</td>
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<td>role of government</td>
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<td>key example</td>
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Second, as Philip Mirowski notes, Latour’s “liberalism without self-regulation” is strikingly similar to plain old neoliberalism. Latour’s attack on the concept of “society,” for example, echoes Margaret Thatcher’s claim that “There is no such thing as Society.” Latour’s elimination of the “Nature/Society divide was characteristic” of ur-neoliberal Friedrich Hayek, and Hayek’s “doctrines of ‘spontaneous order’ and ‘complexity’ are trademark enthusiasms of the Latourist canon.” Mirowski makes a compelling case that these resonances “qualif[y] Latour to be considered a fellow traveler of the neoliberals, at minimum.”96 Given the closeness of Latour’s political ecology to neoliberal positions, his unwillingness to stake out a position on the question of the compatibility between capitalism and his version of the commons is especially unfortunate, since precisely this issue divides left-leaning and neoliberal advocates of the commons.97

Yet Latour’s unwillingness to stake out a position on this particular topic is emblematic of his unwillingness to stake out any concrete political position, which is arguably the most problematic aspect of his rejection of the concept of self-regulation.98 Latour objects to concepts of self-regulation because he believes that they always presume a “natural law” that dictates behaviors. Yet my survey of different Romantic theories of self-regulation and, particularly, my analysis of Arendt’s reading of Kant suggest that self-regulation can also denote collective processes of determining specific shared goals. From this perspective, self-regulation can function more in the spirit of a collectively posited Kantian regulative ideal, rather than as a natural law promulgated by a divine sovereign. This in turn would mean that the concept of self-regulation not only allows but in fact demands precisely that articulation of concrete political aspirations that Latour avoids.

Conclusion: Composing the Common World

Though Latour’s political ecology is troubled by both its proximity to neoliberalism and (perhaps as a consequence) his unwillingness to articulate concrete political goals, it remains a powerful analytical tool for understanding the possibilities for the concept of self-regulation in our era of neoliberalism and global warming. Our understanding of the threats that result from large-scale human transformation of the natural environment has emerged from ecosystems ecology and its successors, while many contemporary attempts to solve these problems through economic means—for example, cap-and-trade carbon emissions trading—are underwritten by the assumptions of Chicago School economics. Not surprisingly, then,
questions of self-regulation tend to dominate accounts of the relationship of neoliberalism and the Anthropocene, whether in the form of the critique of capitalism as committed to unregulatable growth or in the hope that capitalism can be transformed into a harmonious, self-regulating, and ecologically neutral system through carbon-offsetting mechanisms or through new forms of artificial intelligence, which seek to channel population-level differences algorithmically in “smart electrical grids” or “smart cities.”

While Latour’s attempt to reconfigure the elements associated with concepts of regulation—automaticity, standards, individuals, collectives, and government—remains ambiguous, his work underscores those aspects that must be engaged in any renewal, or elimination, of the concept of self-regulation.

We can build upon the strengths of Latour’s approach while avoiding its problems by linking his project with Arendt’s more Kantian-inspired emphasis on plurality, the common world, and what she calls the human condition. There are significant differences between Latour’s and Arendt’s projects, not least Latour’s emphasis on nonhuman actants, which seems in principle opposed to Arendt’s commitment to human exceptionality, and Latour’s embrace of the modern sciences, which contrasts with Arendt’s claim that the modern sciences are grounded in a suspicion about “given-ness” that effectively undermines belief in a common world. Yet several important commonalities trump those differences. Arendt and Latour each stress plurality, and for both, the common world is not something that emerges automatically but instead requires collective composition, care, and the materiality of bodies and things. Is it possible to mix Latour and Arendt in ways that point toward a new understanding of self-regulation?

We can begin by focusing on Arendt’s and Latour’s shared goal of isolating and delimiting the relationship of automaticity to the common world. For both Arendt and Latour, the common world enables what is in effect the “other” of automaticity. For Arendt, a common world enables what she calls action rather than the automaticity characteristic of behavior; for Latour, the common world enables parliamentary discussion rather than submission to natural law. Both thus agree that nature—whether understood as laws of physics, population dynamics, political economy, or any other automatic process—cannot “regulate” the activities enabled by the common world.

With that said, though, the common world can itself draw on forms of automaticity in order to ensure its persistence and stability. For Arendt, for example, the common world is composed primarily of human-made objects and institutions that persist through time, and they can do so only
because they exploit some “automatic” processes of nature at the expense of others (for example, the ability of stone to persist over long periods of time despite significant seasonal changes of temperature and humidity). Moreover, the objects of the common world—and hence, the common world itself—cannot persist if one ignores natural processes, including those instantiated in new contemporary realities such as global warming, and ensuring the persistence of common objects and institutions in the present requires coordination with these natural processes and realities. Such coordination is not “self-regulation” but rather a condition for enabling a common world within which the exchange of individual perspectives can occur. This exchange of perspectives is itself self-regulating, though only in the sense that it remains distinct from behavior and automaticity.

Latour, for his part, approaches the relationship of the common world and automaticity from the other side, arguing that what has traditionally been called nature is not the site of automatic processes but is rather composed of actants who collectively struggle and negotiate with one another. Hence, for Latour too, the common world cannot be understood in terms of automatism or self-regulation. At the same time, though, Latour stresses that these processes of struggle and negotiation can take place only on the basis of “habits.” Habits are not precisely automatisms, since habits require a mode of attention and can hence always be changed. Yet habits also provide sufficient “veiling” for projects to be undertaken and for things to occur. In short, for both Latour and Arendt, the common world (Latour) or a common world (Arendt) enables something other than “automatic” self-regulation, yet the (or a) common world itself also requires, in its composition, forms of habit or automaticity.

A key question is that of the telos or teloi that determine how the common world is composed. The implicit telos that underwrites Latour’s distinction between better and worse common worlds is the quasi-quantitative regulative ideal of “greatest possible composition”; that is, for Latour, one ought to create ever more inclusive common worlds. Latour stresses that political ecology does not aim, as does traditional ecological thinking, at “‘total connectivity,’ the global system, the catholicity that wants to embrace everything,” since political ecology is willing to exclude entities that threaten common worlds. Nevertheless, Latour locates what he calls “virtue” in the movement “from state $n$ to state $n + 1$ that takes into account a greater number of beings or that at least does not lose too many beings along the way” (199). He does not clarify, though, why an increase of connections among actants is virtuous. Is it because such an
increase better respects the independent rights of each actant to be acknowledged by and connected to the collective? Or is it because, as Arendt suggests, the common world itself necessarily embodies an aspiration of something like “immortality,” in the sense that every common world connects multiple generations?

Arendt’s emphasis on immortality is compatible with Latour’s emphasis on ever-greater inclusion of actants within the common world, if only because contemporary life and earth sciences suggest that without such inclusion, we risk the kind of ecological destruction that makes the collective composition of common worlds very difficult. However, Arendt’s perspective clarifies that the goal of the common world is not simply to include more actants but to do so for the sake of enabling “works” that can persist through generational time. Such an approach would in turn allow us to distinguish between neoliberalism and that common project at which Arendt and Latour aim but that Latour misrecognizes as a new form of liberalism.

An important issue on which Arendt and Latour diverge is the question of whether the common world is one or many. Modern science seems to provide for Latour a thread that is able to knit together an increasingly expansive common world and in this way enable linear progress in which a collective, presumably global “we” takes into account an ever-greater number of actants. For Arendt, by contrast, common worlds are always first and foremost local, since they depend on embodied presence in the same architecture and institutions and are best exemplified by the classical Greek city-states (for example, Athens), the ward system of the early US republic, and the briefly lived council and Räte systems of early-twentieth-century socialist revolutions. A key question is whether the fact that all locally based common worlds now face a common threat of global warming can itself be enough commonality to produce linkages—and perhaps even a meta-common world—among these common worlds. Drawing on Arendt, Latour, and Esposito, we can say that perhaps this is the case—but only if what unites these common worlds is not a threat but rather a promise (to each) of greater flourishing in the future.