

Toward Integrating Conflicting Views of Capitalism in Economics and English

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Abstract: It is well known that it is harder to integrate conflicting insights across disparate disciplines than similar ones. In this article, I focus on the relation between economics, which is dominated by views that one could characterize as “pro-capitalist,” and English, which is dominated by views that one could characterize as “anti-capitalist.” It is crucial to examine this specific pair of disciplines because each has recently shown an apparent increased interest in the other, but without seriously challenging their own dominant views. I consider why current attempts at interdisciplinarity between economics and English have been inadequate. Whereas one might attribute this conflict mainly to the gap between economics’ quantitative methods and English’s traditionally qualitative ones, I find instead that differing assumptions are more important than differing methods in explaining conflicting insights between those in these two fields. Each discipline’s interest in the other’s concepts or methods remains superficial, falling short of deep engagement with the other in a way that truly challenges its own assumptions. To chart a possible way out of this impasse, I identify four key areas in which those in economics and English harbor conflicting assumptions about capitalism that undergird each discipline’s internal consensus and suggest how to apply Allen F. Repko’s and Rick Szostak’s (2021) tools of integration to those assumptions. I find that different combinations of integrative techniques such as redefinition, transformation, organization, and extension are likely to work better at yielding common ground on some sets of assumptions than others. My goal is not to accomplish full integration, nor do I take it for granted that such integration is ultimately possible. Rather, I want to set an agenda and hone a toolset for integration without preconceptions about how this effort at integration will turn out. I conclude with a reflection on obstacles to integration and how researchers might try to overcome them.

Keywords: integration, conflicting insights, capitalism, economics, English, literary studies, organization, transformation, assumptions, methods

Introduction

What are the effects of capitalism on human well-being? This broad, much-studied question has taken on new urgency in the twenty-first century in light of the 2007 financial crisis, rising inequality, and ongoing globalization. Many disciplines already study capitalism or various facets of it, clear evidence that capitalism is too complex to be understood by one discipline alone (Repko & Szostak, 2021, pp. 12–14). So far, no consensus across disciplines about capitalism’s human impacts has emerged.

Finding answers to this question ideally calls for interdisciplinary research that can integrate the insights of multiple fields into newer, more adequate, more capacious understandings (Repko et al., 2020, pp. 235, 239). Yet even research on capitalism that incorporates multiple disciplines still generally reinforces ideological siloing. There is an abundance of scholarship that might be characterized as “pro-capitalist” in economics, business, and law, while scholarship that might be characterized as “anti-capitalist” predominates in sociology, anthropology, geography, communications, area studies, and English.¹ Accordingly, interdisciplinary research in broad fields such as law or area studies tends to draw from closely related disciplines with similar ideological orientations, neglecting disciplines that have yielded conflicting findings (Cao, 2016; Classical Liberal Institute, 2022; Race and Capitalism Project, 2022; Association for Asian American Studies, 2022).

This situation is an example of what leading interdisciplinarians Allen F. Repko and Rick Szostak (2021) call “narrow interdisciplinarity,” where those in multiple disciplines work together fairly seamlessly because they are close in their epistemology, assumptions, and approaches (p. 273). But research that does not seriously engage with conflicting findings from other fields is not as rigorous, valuable, or insightful as it could be. When it comes to diverging

1 If readers object that I am painting with too broad a brush, especially with respect to economics, I note that I take my cue from leading contemporary economists such as Deirdre McCloskey and Edmund Phelps. McCloskey defines capitalism as “private property and free labor without central planning. . . . Above all *modern* capitalism encourages innovation” (2006, p. 14, italics in original; see also Phelps, 2013, pp. 25–26). When McCloskey argues that “most people after capitalism [arose] are more fulfilled as humans” (p. 25), it makes sense to call such a view, which is widely shared by the economists I cite in this article, “pro-capitalist” (see also Rodrik, 2015, pp. 149–150). As for literary studies, as subsequent quotations will show, many leading English scholars are not shy about declaring broadly anti-capitalist positions in ways that accept something like McCloskey’s definition of capitalism, but with an unfavorable instead of favorable evaluation. In an effort to seek interdisciplinary terminological common ground, and to follow Allen F. Repko’s and Rick Szostak’s (2021) interdisciplinary principle of least action (pp. 278–279), I therefore use the terms “pro-capitalist” and “anti-capitalist” as useful shorthand for closely related sets of conflicting insights between economists and literary scholars, respectively. I naturally expect that more nuance will emerge from discussions of more specific points, as suggested in later sections of this article.

views of capitalism between economists and English scholars, an economist might say that this situation offers a poorly functioning marketplace of ideas. And an English scholar might say that such estrangement shows a lack of empathy. Either way, narrow interdisciplinarity can only take us so far. To try to break out of these disciplinary silos, we should attempt to fashion a much more deliberately “wide interdisciplinarity” in studies of capitalism that would involve genuine, sustained confrontations between those with divergent theories and assumptions (Repko & Szostak, 2021, p. 273).

To consider how such wide interdisciplinarity might be practiced, I will focus on the theoretically fecund but troubled relationship between two very different disciplines: English (my own discipline) and economics. There are some outlier views and debates about capitalism within each discipline. However, as economist Dani Rodrik (2015) explains, there is broad agreement among economists about “the benefits of markets and capitalism” (p. 48; see also pp. 149–150), an assertion I gloss as “pro-capitalist.”² By contrast, according to literary scholar Paul Crosthwaite (2019), English is dominated by more radical views derived from “primarily Marxist” theories (p. 7), leading to positions that I gloss as “anti-capitalist,” following prominent literary scholar Walter Benn Michaels (2015).³

Although many disciplines such as business and sociology have similar ideological divides, recent developments make English and economics especially important fields to consider together. As I will soon discuss, those in English and economics have shown a dramatically increased interest in one another, with more literary scholars writing about economic topics and more economists writing about literature than at any time in recent memory. However, this seemingly interdisciplinary turn between those in English and economics has thus far only reinforced the dominant views of capitalism among those in each discipline rather than challenged them. I will analyze the reasons for this phenomenon and propose some ways out of this impasse, including methods for working toward potential common ground in the thinking of those in economics and English.

I come to this project as a literary scholar who cares about economics. The qualitative methods that literary scholars traditionally use, such as

2 Rodrik (2015) acknowledges that “[c]ontemporary economics is often criticized for not taking on [the] ‘big questions’” of capitalism’s overall merits and demerits (p. 116), even though some prominent economists such as Phelps and McCloskey do just that, as mentioned in the previous footnote. I agree with Rodrik that one may think of most economists as generally, and often implicitly, “pro-capitalist” even when economists are discussing the finer points of interest rates, welfare cliffs, principal-agent problems, and other narrowly technical topics, without making explicit pronouncements about “capitalism” in general.

3 I intend the labels “pro-capitalist” and “anti-capitalist” to be descriptive rather than evaluative at this preliminary stage. Calling a certain view “pro-” or “anti-” capitalist need not entail an assumption about the validity of such a view.

identifying implicit assumptions and applying theories to new texts and situations, are well suited for this undertaking. These techniques are an integral part of the highly interdisciplinary history of literary studies itself: Since literature is representational, to better understand literary texts, literary scholars habitually draw upon knowledge from disciplines that study the phenomena that literature represents. Accordingly, the diffuse body of work known as literary theory involves adaptations of many ideas from psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, and beyond. While there are recent developments within English that incorporate quantitative methods, such as digital humanities and the history of the book, when I discuss the methods of literary studies, I mean its historically more qualitative emphasis.

My interdisciplinary analysis relies on Repko and Szostak's (2021) well-known guidelines for interdisciplinary research as developed in *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* (4th edition). My goal here is not to accomplish integration of English and economic insights, but rather to set the agenda for further integrative work between those in the two fields. Ultimately, I argue that English scholars and economists need to do a better job of talking about and to one another in a more open-minded and authentically interdisciplinary way. To do so, they should engage with theories and assumptions from the other field that challenge dominant views in their own field.

This case study carries broader implications for interdisciplinary studies. According to Repko and Szostak's (2021) leading account of interdisciplinary practice and theory, "[a] discipline's preferred methods correlate to its preferred theories" (p. 172). However, my analysis of conflicting insights between economics and English has revealed that differences in methods do not correlate as strongly to differences in theories as Repko and Szostak's guidelines would predict. It is not simply that economics' quantitative focus makes it more pro-capitalist and English's qualitative focus makes it more anti-capitalist. In debates among economists, different assumptions can yield conclusions that go against prevalent pro-capitalist views in the discipline while they're still using the same basic mathematical modeling methods (Rodrik, 2015, pp. 150–152). Similarly, literary scholars proceeding from libertarian assumptions rather than Marxist ones have reached pro-capitalist conclusions while still using the same literary tools of close reading and historical contextualization as their far more numerous disciplinary colleagues on the left (Cantor & Cox, 2009). Moreover, in cases where economic and literary methods converge rather than diverge, the conclusions still differ starkly. I find that these differences reflect the disciplines' different assumptions. In English and economics, the assumptions that underlie the thinking of most of their practitioners seem to matter even more than methods in shaping the drifts of their conclusions. This case study thus emphasizes the importance of identifying and interrogating assumptions.

Committed interdisciplinarians will not need much persuading that the goals and approaches of this article are worthwhile, since interdisciplinary studies is inherently devoted to developing more capacious understandings. But disciplinarians firmly within English or economics will need more convincing, since the assumptions I seek to unsettle are ones that economists and English scholars tend to care greatly about and would thus resist questioning. Pursuing this article's agenda will mean stepping outside of their disciplinary comfort zones, practicing some possibly unwelcome and resentment-inducing epistemological humility, and resisting institutional and cultural obstacles. There had better be extraordinary payoffs to justify work this hard.

The first such payoff worth emphasizing is one that I hope academics across disciplines care about: truth. While disciplinary perspectives differ greatly, all scholars ideally seek to create knowledge and pursue truth to the best of their ability. If the status quo means scholars are not doing this as well as they should, then that status quo should change. So what can those in English learn from those in economics, and vice versa? For my field of English, I propose that interdisciplinary work more receptive to economics would generate new and exciting ways of reading literature, breathing even more life into a field that has traditionally been highly receptive to new theories. This approach would also complement and stimulate existing disciplinary trends such as postcritique (Felski, 2016), economic criticism (Seybold & Chihara, 2019), and literary epistemology (Kley & Merten, 2018; Peels, 2020; Stahl, 2018). Furthermore, taking economics more seriously would allow literary scholars to generate ideas that would reach more persuasively and more broadly beyond the silo of academic humanists. This interdisciplinary endeavor could also potentially help English scholars improve their engagement with those in other disciplines of ongoing relevance to the field, such as psychology, data science, and medicine.

Shifting to economics, it is worth noting that many economists have already argued for what those in their field have to learn from English and the humanities. By attending better to the human side of economics, as exemplified in the uniquely deep perspective-taking of literature, economists can learn to recommend better policies based on more nuanced and realistic assumptions and thereby promote a happier, more flourishing society (Morson & Schapiro, 2017; Phelps, 2020; Shiller, 2019). Below, I offer a map for more rigorous interdisciplinarity between economists and English scholars by identifying specific assumptions that divide the fields and offering preliminary suggestions for how experts can engage them. I speculate on how such engagements might lead to the generation of "interdisciplinary common ground" (Repko & Szostak, 2021, p. 270), an essential step toward integration that requires scrutinizing the basis of conflicts between insights and developing ways of relating them that are mutually illuminating rather than purely adversarial.

Recent Shared Qualitative-Subjective Methods in English and Economics

One might assume that English's qualitative methods would make it difficult for those in the field to find common ground with economists' quantitative methods. However, economists and English scholars have recently used surprisingly similar qualitative methods to approach questions of how to assess capitalism's impacts on human beings through literature. A key point of recent convergence between English scholars and economists is that subjective experience matters, and therefore that literary representations have epistemological value in helping us understand and evaluate capitalism. On the English side, this is not a surprising approach. As prominent literary scholar Rita Felski (2008) writes, literature can "expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are" (p. 83). Literature can therefore provide "sources of epistemic insight" (p. 84). One may experience a sense of recognition where "a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader," and "[t]hrough this experience of affiliation" feel oneself "acknowledged" (p. 33). Similarly, the literary theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) asserts that "history is . . . in atmospheres (an aesthetic genre). This tradition of the novel points to something barely apprehensible in ordinary life and consciousness" (p. 66). Applying literature's ability to capture "atmospheres" to its depictions of capitalism in particular, Berlant writes, "this tradition of reading the historical through its affective resonance" lets us see that "in a regime of affective labor, structural relations of alienation [under capitalism] are . . . saturating the sensorium while yet monetized, disciplinary, and exploitative" (p. 69). We can see through many such texts that "the good life . . . that . . . capitalism promised goes awry in front of one" (p. 69).

The current wave of literary studies about fiction with capitalist themes is part of a long history of economic-themed criticism by English scholars (Adorno, 1967; Williams, 1978; Benn Michaels, 2018; Jameson, 1991). This body of work is largely built on Marxist or otherwise anti-capitalist theoretical frameworks drawn from disciplines such as philosophy and sociology (Leitch, 2001, pp. 759, 1135, 1477). But the volume of literary scholarship on representations of capitalism has increased sharply in the aftermath of the 2007 financial crisis and the Occupy Wall Street movement. A database search in the MLA International Bibliography on April 20, 2022 for the subject terms "economics" and "literature" yielded a healthy 1,639 results from 1991 to 2006. But the next fifteen-year period from 2007 to 2022 yielded 4,341 results using the same search terms, a more-than-threifold increase.

The research has increased not just in quantity, but also in sophistication. For one thing, recent literary scholarship has paid increased attention to literature as a commodity as well as an aesthetic object. Current research sometimes analyzes how literature not only comments on economic issues, but

also is an ambivalent participant in the system that it critiques, with authors often compromising artistic autonomy to serve the marketplace (Crosthwaite, 2019; Rosen, 2016; Shonkweiler, 2017; Worden, 2020). More to the point here, literary studies related to representations of capitalism have become more ambitious and detailed in their interdisciplinarity, “with rigorous attention to the disciplinary vocabulary, methodological assumptions, and intellectual history of economics” (Seybold & Chihara, 2019, p. 3). Consequently, rather than dealing in sweeping generalities implicit in vague terms such as “late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991, pp. xviii-xix), recent literary criticism increasingly focuses on particular research topics in economics, such as asymmetric information (Kopeck, 2019), secular stagnation (McClanahan, 2019), and financialization (Haines, 2019). Recent studies also often use the term “neoliberalism,” a disparaging word for post-1970 capitalism that increasingly relies on state power to favor large businesses, applying economic logic to traditionally non-economic spheres of life. Literary scholars have adopted “neoliberalism” and related loaded terms from disciplines including political science (Brown, 2015), philosophy (Hardt & Negri, 2001), and geography (Harvey, 2005).

One would not necessarily expect literary criticism—with its focus on the qualitative—to turn up in economics, given economics’ quantitative focus. And yet, many economists have read literature about capitalism like literary scholars have done, regarding literature as an archive revealing how people experience capitalism—with the important difference that the economists often make inferences about these experiences at odds with the inferences of literary scholars. And, remarkably, the economists who analyze literature in this way describe a method very similar to that of Berlant or Felski without being aware of those scholars and their views.

For instance, economist and Nobel Laureate Edmund Phelps (2013) resembles Felski when he writes that “literature and the arts in the age of the modern economy” can spark readers’ sense of recognition: “‘Yes,’ we say in response to the more resonant works, ‘that’s how it feels’” (p. 62). Another Nobel Prize-winning economist, Robert Shiller (2019), echoes Berlant when he writes that “the historical novel and historical movie stand outside of mainstream history, but they excel in helping us understand feelings in history and appreciate some of the narratives that drive history” (p. 79). Thomas Piketty (2020), the only prominent economist on the contemporary left who has written substantially about fiction’s value in depicting economic realities, likewise says that literature offers “matchless insight” in its “unique ability to capture the relations of power and domination” as well as to “detect the way inequalities are experienced by individuals” (p. 15). And Harvard finance professor Mihir Desai (2017) proposes that “viewing finance through the prism of the humanities” can help us realize that rejecting the finance industry altogether as a soulless affront to our humanity would be a mistake, as “finance is deeply connected to our humanity” (pp. 2, 6).

This turn to qualitative material and analysis among economists represents a dissatisfaction with the limits of the abstract mathematical modeling that dominates the field. Phelps (2020) explains that the quantitative, utility-maximizing “standard theory” of neoclassical economics “omits the *experiential* dimension central to a modern economy” (p. 3) that Phelps turns to literature and art to explore. Likewise, literary scholar Gary Saul Morson and economist Morton Shapiro (2017) jointly complain that the economic modeling in both “traditional rational choice theory” and more recent “behavioral economics” involves “abstract monads shaped by no particular culture” (p. 5). Along similar lines, Chicago School economist Deirdre McCloskey (2006) mockingly observes that “[t]he economist’s Maximum-Utility Man, Mr. Max U, . . . seems to be empirically false” (pp. 114–115). And yet, in making this turn to the experiential and qualitative, economists are not doing something entirely new, but are rediscovering something of economics’ older interdisciplinary roots. In the vast scope, qualitative emphasis, and prescriptive judgments of their writings, Adam Smith and Karl Marx have more in common with today’s philosophers or political theorists than with most of today’s economists (Rodrik, 2015, p. 116). Daniel Defoe, who helped establish the modern novel with *Robinson Crusoe*, was an economic journalist (Knight, 2019, pp. 348–349). Polymath John Maynard Keynes (1924) was steeped in Modernist literature and social circles and explicitly valued interdisciplinarity in economics (Chihara & Seybold, 2019, pp. 1–2), famously writing that “the master-economist must possess a rare combination of gifts. He must reach a high standard in several different directions and must combine talents not often found together. He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher—in some degree.” But while attention to the humanities does have precedent within economics, there is novelty in some current economists independently converging on the same method literary scholars use: reading creative literature for qualitative data on experiences of life under capitalism.

Similar Methods, Contrasting Conclusions

Still, in spite of economists’ renewed attention to literature, and literary scholars’ converse interest in economics, the consensus views of those in either discipline have not changed. Instead, recent trends have become an avenue for reinforcing the dominant views of capitalism of those in each field. Representing economics, Phelps (2020) asserts that a modern capitalist economy has “invaluable *nonmaterial* rewards” including a “sense of *agency*,” “succeeding” in one’s efforts to achieve or innovate, “the gratification of overcoming obstacles,” “making a difference,” and “*self-expression*” (pp. 8–9, original emphases). Phelps (2020) further asserts that literature and art attest to these nonmaterial rewards: During the late 18th and 19th centuries, when capitalism became

dominant in the West, Phelps writes, “the arts . . . were positive about the modern life and celebrated the new dimensions of living” that were “wrought by the modern [capitalist] economy” (p. 76). If recent literature has grown more critical of capitalism, Phelps argues, this is because the literature itself is not as good, and therefore not worth taking as seriously. The rise of anti-capitalist literature coincides, Phelps asserts, with a “decline of modern art and music during the 1960s” which “signaled a loss of commitment to the ideals of exploration and innovation” (p. 75). Phelps concludes that overall, “A modern-capitalist economy is outstanding in the prospects it offers ordinary people for the good life,” understood in an explicitly pro-capitalist sense to mean “the good life through innovation and innovation through dynamism” (Phelps, 2013, p. 301; 2020, p. 15). Mihir Desai (2017) also finds that literature attests to such nonmaterial rewards operating in today’s finance industry, declaring that many people “love finance, business, and marketing, and find them life-affirming. . . . [T]hey derive real joy from what they do” (p. 4). McCloskey (2006) similarly contends, often referencing literary works, that “[m]ost people after capitalism [arose] are more fulfilled as humans. They have more lives available” (p. 25).

The conclusions of economically-minded literary scholars could not be more different. In diametrical opposition to Phelps’s ideas, Berlant (2011) writes that the texts they study suggest “the good life promised by capitalist culture” is actually “a fantasy bribe that justifies so much exploitation” (pp. 167, 105). Berlant (2011) explains that “[u]nder capitalism, money is power. . . . But what usually gets returned in the exchange of desire embedded in things is merely, disappointingly, a brief episode . . . and not the actualization of desire” (p. 42). As a result, there is an overall “process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism” (p. 42). In general, Berlant says, literature shows that capitalism causes “structural conditions of existence that militate against the flourishing of workers and consumers” (p. 115). Literary scholar Jodi Melamed (2011), aligning herself with a theory she calls “race radicalism” that she uses to interpret literature, says that, rather than increasing agency, capitalism makes it inevitable that there will be “differential and racialized violences” because of “the insufficiency and nongeneralizability of human value under . . . capitalism” (p. 47). Alan Liu (2004), a Marxist scholar of digital humanities, uses a combination of fiction, internet artefacts, and empirical sociology research to describe modern capitalist work as characterized primarily by alienation (pp. 81–88). In short, according to multimedia scholar Walter Benn Michaels (2018), literature offers frameworks through which it can be seen that we should stop trying to reform capitalism and see “capitalism as itself the problem” (p. 42).

Overall, as the co-editors of the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics* put it, “[c]ontemporary econo-literary criticism is, paradoxically, energetically engaged with the history of economic thought and methods

of economic analysis *and* openly hostile toward economics' prevailing disciplinary hegemony and its perceived program of institutional and cultural imperialism" (Seybold & Chihara, 2019, pp. 2–3). The editors share this hostility by asserting that "the existing Anglo-American brand [of capitalism] shames all those who attempt to defend it on its merits" (Seybold & Chihara, 2019, p. 3). All in all, even though many English scholars and economists have converged in valuing and analyzing literature about capitalism, the results of their analyses remain ideologically at odds.

Interdisciplinary Inadequacy

Why, in light of all this seemingly interdisciplinary work, do such stark disagreements between those in these disciplines persist? It turns out that, despite the apparent interest of economists in literature and literature scholars in economics, neither are practicing real interdisciplinarity. Lacking a solid basis in multidisciplinary citations and deep engagement, their newly shared view of literature as a source of subjective knowledge about capitalism appears to be a coincidental convergence, not an outgrowth of truly interdisciplinary effort. As a result, these scholars address the subject matter of the other discipline while still relying on the theories and assumptions of their own fields. Most of the scholars I have cited have not done the work requisite to gain "disciplinary adequacy" in their target discipline (Repko & Szostak, 2021, p. 151). Even when literary scholars, such as many of the contributors to the *Routledge Companion*, do gain this interdisciplinary adequacy, they still do not really engage with the views of the economists who are pro-capitalist readers of literature. Examples of truly interdisciplinary engagements between scholars in economics and English are noteworthy for their rarity (Clune, 2021, pp. 50–57; McCloskey, 2000; Morson & Schapiro, 2017). As a result, the hallmark of truly interdisciplinary research—the patient establishment of common ground, followed by an eventual integration of divergent insights (Repko & Szostak, 2021, p. 12)—is generally absent from the bodies of work I have analyzed.

It is especially problematic that, for the most part, neither discipline can claim representatives who seriously engage with important scholarship from the other that would directly challenge their arguments. For instance, while Edmund Phelps is a leader in economics, he is on shaky ground when he ventures into the humanities fields of literature, art, and philosophy. As noted above, Phelps (2013) argues that literature and art from the 18th and 19th centuries generally "celebrated the new dimensions of living" that were "wrought by the modern [capitalist] economy" (p. 76). The fundamental flaws in this claim, which relies on thinly-sourced and unrigorous readings of tentatively-selected primary texts, would be obvious to an English scholar. If Phelps had gained more disciplinary adequacy by responding to established

scholarship on the anti-capitalist thrust of much Romantic and Realist literature (Kaplan, 1988; Löwy, 1987), Phelps's unorthodox claims about literary history would either be quite different or be much better-defended against objections than they are in their current forms.

Other economists commit similar oversights in presenting their understandings of literature. Mihir Desai (2017), to give another example, describes treating literature with what amounts to a hobbyist's armchair method: "I had always enjoyed stories. . . . Soon I began to find finance in literature, in philosophy, in history, and even in popular culture" (p. 6). Like Phelps, Desai (2017) offers pro-capitalist readings of literary texts but cites almost no literary scholarship in support of his view—except for one renegade literature professor and one pro-capitalist essay collection that is edited not by an English scholar, but by a business professor (pp. 170, 213). Tyler Cowen (1998) shows immense erudition in his book *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, which analyzes a great deal of literature, music, and visual art, but his glosses on anti-capitalist schools of cultural theory such as the Frankfort School and the New Cultural Studies contain inaccuracies and hasty assumptions (pp. 9–12), and he does not engage with these theories in specific moments of argumentation where their theories would challenge his. Of all economists to write extensively about literature, Deirdre McCloskey is by far the most credible, often citing relevant literary scholarship in her discussions of Jane Austen and other writers. And McCloskey (2006), unlike Phelps, Desai, and Cowen, acknowledges the anti-capitalist thrust of much literature from the 19th century onward (p. 9). But McCloskey's claim that Western writers turned decisively against capitalism only after 1848 (pp. 9–10) overlooks a great deal of counterevidence that is not hard to find in literature itself and in associated literary scholarship (Löwy, 1987).

While English scholars tend to cite economists more often than the reverse, they could also benefit from more disciplinary adequacy in that field. For example, literary scholar Michelle Chihara (2015) complains that economists' defenses of finance "hide behind a rhetoric of complexity," asserting that "we don't have to know the equations to see that complexity is part of a ruse that bankers find convenient to wave in front of reformers." The problem with this statement is that one cannot rightly say whether "know[ing] the equations" would challenge one's perspective without first actually knowing the equations, or at least the reasoning and methods behind them. Chihara relies on a kind of circular reasoning here, and the statement self-righteously encourages, rather than seeking to overcome, interdisciplinary ignorance. Furthermore, Chihara's (2015) proud rejection of economists' views leads to a caricature of economics as asserting that "it's just not realistic to imagine a system where [fictional ruthless investor] Gordon Gekko doesn't get all of the money." Noting that economists don't take literary scholars' critiques of contemporary financial capitalism seriously, Chihara (2015) defiantly counters

that “it might be the scholarship that neoclassical economists dismiss most forcefully that we should look to for help in questioning the self-interested models that the financial sector asserts are real.” But again, Chihara puts the cart before the horse, not wanting to admit that one would have to know something significant about economics to “evaluate the insights produced” by that discipline, as Repko and Szostak (2021, p. 192) advise any interdisciplinarian to do.

Here are a few more examples of literary scholars showing the limits in their understanding of economics. Berlant (2011) explains that she uses literature to critique “relations of hypervigilance, unreliable agency, and dissipated subjectivity under contemporary capitalism, but what ‘capitalism’ means varies a lot” (p. 9). This explicit lack of precision would not satisfy an economist. Along slightly more empirical lines, Alan Liu (2004, pp. 76–78) cites some sociology research on alienation in the workplace and contends that capitalist work is fundamentally cruel, but does not engage with other survey data that report relatively high levels of job satisfaction that would challenge, or at least complicate, the argument that capitalist work is alienating (Phelps, 2013, p. 62). The *Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics* cites many economists, but does not talk about the way pro-capitalist economists read literature. There are several mentions, for instance, of Deirdre McCloskey, but they are mainly about her use of qualitative (specifically rhetorical) methods and do not involve sustained engagement with her pro-capitalist readings of literary texts (2019, pp. 7, 281, 336, 343). True, an article in *American Literary History* points out that literary scholars should do more “[e]ngaging with neoliberals’ own writings” (La Berge & Slobodian, 2017, p. 611). But the article recommends reading more “neoliberal” economists mainly to learn what to avoid (p. 612). The possibility of leftist assumptions being seriously challenged on an intellectual level by these “neoliberal” scholars never comes up. Accordingly, when English scholars on the left do cite “neoliberal” economists, it is usually to dismiss them, as does Walter Benn Michaels (2018, p. 23), who approvingly cites economists on the left such as Emmanuel Saez, but skeptically cites those on the right like Milton Friedman and Gary Becker (pp. 25, 37–38). Benn Michaels essentially takes sides on debates within economics without giving compelling economic reasons why Saez is right and Becker is wrong. Such citations invite the charge that a literary scholar’s theoretical framework or interdisciplinary borrowings are arbitrary and biased.

These observations allow us to see that the apparent convergence between those in English and economics is asymmetrical. We see economists using the methods of English, but not its assumptions or theories. And English scholars may use theories and concepts from economics, but not its methods or assumptions. Also, economists’ engagement with literature is generally disconnected from literary scholarship, whereas English scholars who cite relevant economists are predominately hostile toward the economics

discipline. We can do better. Overall, there needs to be more sustained, good-faith engagement with economics scholarship by English scholars, and vice versa. I elaborate on the basis for this engagement, and the creation of common ground that might emerge from it, in what follows.

Loaded Terminology

It is a truism of interdisciplinary research that those in different disciplines may use the same term to mean different things, or that they might use different terms to frame the same phenomena. Therefore, an interdisciplinary researcher must be especially careful to learn the meanings of key terms in multiple disciplines. In the case of English and economics, the basic term “capitalism” actually turns out to be used with relative consistency. For example, one may compare the pro-capitalist output of economist Edmund Phelps’s Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University to the more humanities-indebted anti-capitalist output of the University of Chicago’s Race and Capitalism Project. Those in both organizations follow other economists and literary scholars in using “capitalism” to refer to the dominant economic system in the modern global economy that is characterized by private property, contractual relations, corporations, stock markets, and the proliferation of credit and debt.⁴

Where terminological issues come in is largely in loaded language used by one discipline but not the other. For example, people operating within capitalism are often described as “economic agents” in economics but “capitalist subjects” in English and other humanities fields (Juille & Jullien, 2017; Hanneken, 2011). Leaving aside for now the difference between the more general “economic” and more specific “capitalist,” the difference between “agent” and “subject” is especially salient. An “agent” has, well, agency, whereas a “subject” is subjected to outside forces. The former term emphasizes freedom and action while the latter stresses lack of freedom and being acted upon. Therefore, the largely disciplinary choice to call an entity an “agent” or a “subject” already frames the issue in an implicitly pro- or anti-capitalist way. If we call operators within capitalism “agents,” we imply that capitalism enables human freedom; if we call them “subjects,” we imply that capitalism diminishes human freedom.

4 While there is always room for disagreement about how exactly to define an expansive term like “capitalism,” a perusal of each organization’s publications shows that their research, while either pro- or anti-capitalist, addresses many of the same topics, including investments, entrepreneurship, unemployment, inequality, and more (The Center on Capitalism and Society, n.d.; Katzenstein, 2016; see also The Robert L. Heilbroner Center for Capitalism Studies, n.d.). These significant overlaps indicate that the general sense of capitalism between these two ideologically opposite organizations is consistent enough to use “capitalism” as a term shared by both camps.

To mention a few other examples of loaded terminology, English scholars often use terms like “late capitalism” (Jameson 1991, pp. xviii-xix) or “neoliberalism” (Karl, 2019, pp. 295–6) as Marxist slurs against capitalism, whereas economists are less likely to make such periodizing and value-laden generalizations. And whereas humanistic scholars write of a sinister “precarity” (Hogg & Simonsen, 2021), economists are more apt to use the more innocuous-sounding term “contingent employment” (Gallagher & Sverke, 2005). Additionally, to describe the economic transformations of formerly colonized nations, literary scholars often use “neocolonialism” as a pejorative whereas economists favor the more positive-sounding “developmental economics.” Economists frequently use “utility” interchangeably with “happiness” (Knight & Gunatilaka, 2019; Strulik, 2015; He et al., 2014; Clark et al., 2008; Charles-Leija et al., 2018), whereas the mechanistic connotations of “utility” deter humanists from using that word. These terminological disparities can be quantified. In a search on March 14, 2022, the English database MLA International Bibliography found 412 articles that used the term “neocolonialism,” while that term only came up 24 times in the Economics database EconLit. Conversely, “developmental economics” was mentioned only five times in the MLA International Bibliography, but a whopping 10,980 times in EconLit. Furthermore, a search on April 18, 2022 found that only three articles in the MLA International Bibliography referenced both “happiness” and “utility,” compared to 249 in EconLit.

Clearly, the conflicts between views that dominate in English and economics are baked into the disciplines’ accepted terminology, so working with disciplinary vocabulary will be crucial in any attempt to find common ground and eventually integrate the insights of those in each field. As Repko and Szostak (2021) crucially explain, “[w]hen insights between disciplines conflict because of differences in terminology, the technique of ‘redefinition,’ which strives for shared understandings of terminology, is recommended,” noting that “[t]his is the most common technique” in interdisciplinary research (p. 279). This approach is not without some support in literary studies, with Michele Chihara (2015) musing that “Perhaps a shared vocabulary combining literary theory and economic terms will acquire some new theoretical name.” To work toward building interdisciplinary common ground, as Repko and Szostak (2021, pp. 276–7) point out, interdisciplinarians will have to modify—that is, redefine—some terms and concepts to varying degrees. Moreover, redefining terms usually requires redefining concepts, and in turn, “Redefining a concept might also involve some modification of the assumption(s) underlying the concept” (p. 280). To work toward common ground, those in different disciplines should mediate opposing assumptions, often, as Repko and Szostak advise, through “transformation,” which means placing opposing assumptions on either end of a continuum rather than seeing them as fully incompatible (pp. 279, 285).

But as we will see, through an examination of four sets of conflicting assumptions that characterize work in economics and English, additional interdisciplinary engagement is necessary before one can determine whether or how to use transformation. It will become evident that those in one discipline have studied and supported certain of its assumptions more thoroughly than those in the other, and therefore that those in the other “may be too confident in their insights” (Repko & Szostak, 2021, p. 24). It will also become evident that seemingly conflicting terms may involve not only different assumptions but also different objects. In such cases, Repko and Szostak’s recommended technique of “organization,” which involves mapping seemingly conflicting insights onto different coexisting phenomena (p. 279), may be more applicable than transformation. Furthermore, Repko and Szostak are right that “[r]esearchers will often find that they need to combine techniques” (p. 279). Further study of the four sets of conflicting assumptions will help us understand how best to combine Repko and Szostak’s interdisciplinary techniques, and along what conceptual lines, to see to what extent it may be possible to create common ground and eventually integrate insights between economists and English scholars. I should note, though, that the final steps of integration, including actually “creating common ground among insights” on the more developed level of “theories,” (pp. 300–325), and ultimately “constructing a more comprehensive understanding or theory” (pp. 326–355), are outside the scope of this article, which aims only to provide a foundation for future work toward those culminating steps.

1. Conflicting Assumptions about Individualism and Freedom

Most fundamentally, pro-capitalist economists and anti-capitalist English scholars tend to have philosophically divergent assumptions about individualism. In economics, Deirdre McCloskey (2006) exemplifies a liberal-Enlightenment-individualist view by declaring that a “simple and obvious system of natural liberty” entitles individuals to the fruits of their own labor and the freedom to own private property and earn profits as they see fit (p. 53). Edmund Phelps (2013) too writes approvingly of “the social value of individual responsibility” and of an “‘individualism’ in which men and women have to carve out their own development” (pp. 26, 99).

Whereas economists tend to accept individualist assumptions, literary scholars tend to deny them. Felski (2008), for one, rejects the notion of “unified, autonomous individuals” as a “misapprehension” (p. 25), as does Berlant (2011), who skeptically calls “individuality” a “monument of liberal fantasy” (p. 125). Berlant instead valorizes “impersonality” as an “optimistic concept for interfering with the march of individualities toward liberal freedoms” (p. 159). These assumptions lead to the differently loaded terms noted before,

as an “economic agent” is individually free whereas a “capitalist subject” is socially conditioned.

At first blush it is hard to think of a third term that would not reflect assumptions of either agency or subjection. The standard interdisciplinary move at this point would be to transform these opposing assumptions into a continuum from individual freedom on one end to constrained subjectivity on the other. But first, we need to further investigate assumptions about individuality from economists and English scholars to see how their frameworks might withstand one another’s critiques. The individualist assumptions in economics have a strong basis, implicitly if not explicitly, in philosophers such as Locke, Smith, and Mill. But literary scholars’ critiques of individualism acknowledge this foundation while incorporating more recent continental philosophy by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben, whose critiques of individualism are unaccounted for by economists. How might economists respond to these critiques? On the other hand, what might literary scholars’ critiques of individualism be missing? Getting these answers will require much further study, the result of which would, at the very least, bring the economic concept of the individual more up to date. It will also be important to consider if agency is more operative under some economic conditions and subjectivity in others. If so, it would be appropriate for interdisciplinarians to use organization, a technique Repko and Szostak (2021) advise using “[w]hen insights (appear to) conflict because authors are talking about different parts of a complex set of interactions” (p. 279). How wide or narrow the scope of agency or subjectivity turns out to be will then determine which disciplinary assumptions would need more modification to allow for some shared understanding of agency/subjectivity and possible integration of disparate insights about the same.

2. *Conflicting Assumptions about Flourishing, Fulfillment, and The Good Life*

Conflicting assumptions about human individuality and collectivism yield disagreements about what makes a good life, and therefore what kind of economy we should favor. Many prominent English scholars place a high value on stability. Berlant (2011) writes sympathetically of an intuitive sense that “one ought to be dealt with gently by the world” (p. 45). Such scholars see capitalism as incompatible with this gentleness; instead, capitalism leads to a general dynamic of “being torn and worn out by the labor of disappointment and the disappointment of labor” wherein “everyone now lives capitalism in proximity to risk” (pp. 45, 203). According to Alan Liu (2004), instead of the ruthless “‘global competition’” of capitalism, we need a “less fundamentally

cruel imagination of wealth in common” (p. 287), presumably a socialism which would curb capitalism’s cruelties and resultant insecurities.

By contrast, for many of the leading economists I have cited the values promoted by capitalism, such as ambition, risk-taking, and entrepreneurialism, are of central importance. Edmund Phelps writes that

It may seem paradoxical that a nation would countenance or even strive to make more effective a kind of economy in which the future is unknown and unknowable, an economy prone to huge failures, swings, and abuses in which people may feel “adrift,” or even “terrified.” Yet the satisfaction of having a new insight, the thrill of meeting a challenge, the sense of making your own way, and the gratification of having grown in the process—in short, the good life—require exactly that. (2013, p. xii)

Similarly, Deirdre McCloskey (2006) writes that “No striving [means] no identity . . . scarcity in your own life seems essential for a real human life” (pp. 124–5). I am not going out on a limb in saying that Berlant and Liu would not agree.

There need to be more in-depth discussions between English scholars and economists about why one version of the good life would be preferable to the other and whether there is any possible common ground between them. Can we cogently transform stability and risk into the ends of a continuum—with some middle position possible between them? Or would the technique of organization be a more relevant heuristic if stability is more important in some circumstances and risk more important in others, or if some groups of people prefer stability whereas others prefer risk? What map of society would such an analysis produce, and how would the common ground such a map might establish affect our view of the economy as a whole? These investigations could help participants in an interdisciplinary conversation in considering how to redefine contentious terms such as “precarity” and “contingent employment.”

3. Conflicting Assumptions: Fulfillment and Authenticity or False Consciousness

If economists and English scholars disagree about what a good life is, they also disagree about whether people in a capitalist society are living it. Economists often assert that the apparent fulfillment of many people living capitalist lives is authentic, whereas English scholars, drawing upon an extensive lineage of Marxist theory (and related literature), argue that what looks like fulfillment is actually “false consciousness” (Eyerman, 1981). As Felski (2008) notes, literary theory is steeped in theories of “misrecognition,” another word for “false consciousness,” by which “people deceive themselves as to their own desires or interests” (pp. 27, 28). Berlant (2011) accordingly

defines the signature phrase “cruel optimism” as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (p. 24). Capitalism is a large-scale purveyor of cruel optimism, Berlant argues, by tricking peopling into thinking it’s good for them when it’s not. Capitalism deceitfully “makes possible imagining living the *proper* life that capitalism offers as a route to the *good* life” (p. 164). Literary scholar Michael Clune (2021) gestures toward a similar point when he reflects that the preponderance of a certain consumer choice does not mean that consumers actually prefer the chosen option; it could be the least bad of a range of poor choices (pp. 51–52). Turning from consumption to production, Alan Liu (2004) says that for those who work under capitalism, “alienation is everywhere” (p. 123). Quoting the Marxist theorist Robert Blauner, Liu says that middle-class people have “aspirations for fulfillment and creativity” but maintains that, contra the views of Phelps and others, these aspirations are ultimately undermined by the modern technological capitalism where “anesthesia . . . [is] the white-collar structure of feeling” (pp. 86, 87–88). Liu reflects a view common in literary studies that capitalist alienation is universal.

Might interdisciplinarians use Repko’s and Szostak’s technique of transformation to posit a continuum of false consciousness at one end and genuine fulfillment at the other? How would one know if fulfillment were genuine or not? Might a more nuanced continuum include genuine fulfillment, false consciousness, and conscious alienation? Or, could one use the technique of organization to map out who among those living under capitalism is more or less fulfilled? If so, how might one assess the overall societal balance of fulfillment?

In this area, those in both disciplines have views those in the other have not substantively considered. The false consciousness critiques typically levied by English scholars deal mainly with the lives and literary portrayals of working-class people or technology-sector workers who are not high up in their companies’ organization charts (Althusser, 1970; Berlant, 2010; Gramsci, 1933; Liu, 2004). But what if such people’s false consciousness was not actually false, and they experienced some kind of authentic fulfillment in their work? Furthermore, it is not clear what English scholars would say about the fulfillment of capitalism’s biggest winners, such as wealthy entrepreneurs, investors, inventors, and CEOs—that is, people who are not in a clearly exploited or exploitable position. Here we may consider the value of adopting the interdisciplinary technique of “extension” (Repko & Szostak, 2021, p. 279). Could Marxist theories of false consciousness used in literary studies be plausibly extended to include such people? So far, literary scholars have not thought through the possibility of a fulfilled capitalist subject, whether working-class or wealthy, because they do not directly engage with economists’ arguments for fulfillment within capitalism.

On the other side of the divide under discussion, capitalism's economist defenders have not accounted for false consciousness critiques in the first place, often assuming that we should take people who respond favorably to job satisfaction surveys at their word. Neither Edmund Phelps (2020, pp. 8–9) nor Mihir Desai (2017, p. 4) questions the validity of the “agency” and “joy” they see in people, real or fictional, who live under capitalism, and Deirdre McCloskey (2006, p.70) only briefly acknowledges the existence of the false consciousness critique without actually trying to refute it. We need more in-depth interdisciplinary work to see what combination of Repko and Szostak's recommended integrative techniques, including redefinition, transformation, organization, and extension, would be most appropriate at helping would-be interdisciplinarians try to generate common ground between literary and economic theories of fulfillment (or its lack) in capitalism.

4. *Conflicting Assumptions about Creativity*

One key aspect of fulfillment is creativity, and here too English scholars and economists have competing views on the role of creativity in capitalism. While those in both fields claim to value creativity, what they mean by “creativity,” and related terms like “innovation” and “imagination,” tends to differ. Economists usually assume that artistic and commercial creativity are the same, while English scholars often treat the two as in conflict or tension with one another. Economist Tyler Cowen (1998) writes, “Most productivity improvements, whether in the arts or not, come from human creativity, the ‘performing art’ of the scientist, engineer, or inventor” (p. 22). For Cowen, artistic and commercial creativity are unproblematically interchangeable. The same is true for Robert Shiller (2012), who argues that “[w]e tend to think of the philosopher, artist, or poet as the polar opposite of the CEO, banker, or businessperson. But this is not really so” (p. 135), pointing out selected examples of figures who “combine or switch careers” between art and business, such as the self-promotional Walt Whitman (pp. 135–136). According to Phelps (2013), capitalism's innovation-based economy is itself “a vast *imaginarium*—a space for imagining new products and methods, imagining how they might be made, imagining how they might be used” (pp. 27–28). To contribute to this economy, “creativity and vision are resources” (p. 35). It follows that Phelps relies on literature, music, and visual art for qualitative evidence of the dynamism of capitalism (pp. 55–76). For Phelps, the same creativity an artist demonstrates animates the capitalist economy. Along similar lines, Richard Bronk (2009), an eclectic scholar drawing from philosophy, literature, and economics, adopts these economists' views of creativity: Capitalism is characterized by

the capacity for individual creativity and self-expression. Indeed, it is the desire of workers in their role as consumers to create themselves through

consumption (as well as the creativity of entrepreneurs and engineers) that gives the capitalist system both its extraordinary vitality and its social legitimacy (p. 147).

Bronk, along with the other thinkers cited here, does not engage with well-established humanistic critiques of this rosy view of capitalist creativity (Illouz, 1997).

These critiques are prominent among English scholars, where creativity is usually seen as a distinctly artistic prerogative that can be corrupted by commercialization with which it exists in a necessary but always uneasy relation. English scholar of creativity Christopher Martiniano (2016) argues that “[c]reativity driven by [commercial] innovation is . . . different in kind from the [artistic] type studied by the humanities” (p. 179). Why? As Benn Michaels (2018) explains, even though art may be bought and sold as commodities are, art still has profound, irreducible “meaning” that other purely economic commodities like metals or crops do not (pp. 102–3). Literary scholars would generally agree that poet Ezra Pound’s Modernist credo to “make it new” does not mean inventing new ways to design products or get more clicks, contrary to what Phelps thinks (2013, p. 75). Novelist William Faulkner’s (1950) Nobel Prize speech emphasizes that the purpose of art is “least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before.” Even though Faulkner made money as a novelist and as a Nobel Prize winner, that fact is ancillary to the motivation behind, and value of, his art. Another notable expression of tension between creativity and commerce comes from the narrator of the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, who acknowledges that “at Princeton, learning was imbued with an aura of creativity; at [the finance firm] Underwood Sampson, creativity was not excised—it was still present and valued—but it ceded its primacy to *efficiency*” (Hamid, 2007, p. 37). According to this literary view, creativity under capitalism is not really free when it has to serve an organization’s bottom line rather than people’s autonomous aesthetic inspirations.

Interdisciplinary work that attempts to integrate these contrasting views of creativity may require an especially complex combination of Repko and Szostak’s techniques for researchers from English and economics seeking common ground. One could imagine transforming the artistic/commercial binary into a continuum in which creativity may be more or less autonomous or subservient to other ends to varying degrees. But for this transformation to be meaningful, we would also need to use the technique of organization: Mapping could show how the results of putatively creative efforts tend to differ under more artistically autonomous or more commercially subservient circumstances—if they indeed differ in the first place. Spotting such differences would require closer comparative examination of more or less commercially oriented creative productions. It would further be important for economists to consider and respond to literary critiques of capitalism’s constraints on

creativity, which, as I have shown, most economists have not considered. In turn, those in literary and media studies have not done enough to consider if certain types of commercial creativity, such as product design, could yield productive interpretations through close reading in ways that could involve some measure of admiration and not simply critique.

Technical Practicality vs. Visionary Radicalism

Thus far I have focused on how conflicting assumptions more than divergent methods account for conflicting views of capitalism between economists and English scholars. But we should also acknowledge how disciplinary methods do shape the *scope* of scholars' ultimate beliefs about how society ought to change as a result of their findings. Today's economics is mostly a technical discipline, whereas English is mostly a visionary one. Thus, economics is geared toward making incremental adjustments in the existing system, whereas English scholarship is open to broader questionings of the fundamentals of society and suggestions for sweeping change. Economics has a great deal of political power, with much research yielding specific policy recommendations that are often implemented (Morson & Schapiro, 2017, p. 4). English scholarship lacks an equivalent pipeline to power and policy, freeing its practitioners from the obligation to specify how any changes they favor would actually be implemented. These considerations help explain why economists tend to accept much of what prevails, whereas literary scholars do not, especially where capitalism is concerned.

Economics researchers often ask technical policy questions like what the optimal interest rate should be, what the optimal tax rate should be, what a CEO's salary should be, or how long a copyright should last. But the basic capitalist frameworks of private property, corporate entities, and intellectual property rights are not questioned much even by economists who are the sharpest critics of the status quo, such as Thomas Piketty, Paul Krugman, or Dani Rodrik. By contrast, English scholarship is full of calls to dismantle the capitalist system as a whole. For instance, in response to current discourses about improving economic opportunities, Benn Michaels (2018) rhetorically asks, "Why should we prefer justifying inequality to eliminating it?" (p. 171). And Alan Liu (2004), as mentioned above, does not shy away from calling for a "less fundamentally cruel imagination of wealth in common" (p. 287). Berlant (2011) also wishes for a space "in which practices of politics might be invented that do not yet exist" (p. 229), though they, too, do not say what those might be.

The difference between economic practicality and literary radicalism contributes to the different views of capitalism that I have documented. Because of their practical focus, economists are more likely to judge capitalism

by comparing it to its antecedents or actually existing alternatives, whereas English scholars are more likely to judge capitalism by comparing it to an imaginary, alternative post-capitalist future. Tyler Cowen (1998) says that there is a “rightful pride that we ought to hold in modernity” (p. 210), thus framing his defense of capitalism chronologically as an improvement over what came before. Deirdre McCloskey (2006) makes the same move when she writes that “most people are more fulfilled after capitalism” (p. 25), assuming that capitalism should be measured against its predecessors rather than contemporary or future alternatives. Edmund Phelps (2020) also stakes his argument on distinguishing between the “modern values” of capitalism and the “traditional values” of agrarian collectivism, ultimately arguing that the capitalist kind of economy is far superior.

To humanistic thinkers on the left, such claims miss the point. As philosopher Mark Fisher says in *Reading Capitalist Realism*, a collection that draws upon literary scholarship as well as political theory, “what we’re struggling for is not a return to the pre-capitalist agrarian, but the emergence of something new, something that hasn’t taken shape yet” (Fisher & Dean, 2014, p. 38). If this vague reference to “something new” is open to the criticism that “there is no positive alternative to capitalism being articulated here,” Fisher says that’s because “we can’t be expected to be able to come up with this kind of vision immediately; we shouldn’t underestimate capitalist realism’s capacity to impede social imagination” (Fisher & Dean, 2014, p. 28). A similar thing is going on when Lauren Berlant (2011) refers to the possibility of “mapping out the better good life” beyond capitalism without saying what it would be (p. 262). Likewise, literature and media scholar Phillip Wegner (2009) says, unspecifically, that the purpose of his book on U.S. culture in the 1990s is to “keep faith with the original counterglobalization movement and other forms of cultural and political experimentation” (p. 37). One could read this characteristic vagueness as either visionary strength or unrigorous, impractical weakness. To help interdisciplinarians develop common ground among these ostensibly opposing perspectives of vision and practicality, organization is an especially promising technique; it may help to demonstrate that the basic ethical values and ideas of the good life generated by qualitative work can and should be expressed in policy analysis and recommendations developed through quantitative work.

Possible Ways Forward

There are some promising—and, too often, under-utilized—approaches to teaching and research that might foster a more thorough and fruitful integration of insights from economics and English. For teaching, it would be of great value to teach the conflicts across disciplines in disciplinary courses and

not just interdisciplinary ones. Teachers of literature courses on economic themes should assign more qualitative pro-capitalist scholarship and texts supporting such views. For instance, assigning some Edmund Phelps to contrast with Lauren Berlant, as I did in my Spring 2021 course, *Literature and Social Issues: Capitalism and Happiness*, would create the basis for salutary debates. On the economics side, economics teachers should do more than use literature to *illustrate* pro-capitalist concepts in economics, as some now do (Robek, n.d.; Ruder, 2010; Zygmunt, 2014); it would be even more valuable and provocative to assign short literary or theoretical texts that *challenge* dominant pro-capitalist concepts (Morson & Schapiro, 2017, pp. 16–17), like individualism or rationality, such as novelist Don DeLillo’s (2010) short story about stock market bubbles and white-collar financial crime, “Hammer and Sickle.”

In terms of research, to allow for a more rigorous integration of insights from English and economics, there should be more interdisciplinary work that is co-authored by English scholars and economists. To date, the only such publication I know of is *Cents and Sensibility* (Morson & Schapiro, 2017), and it would be terrific to see more books, as well as articles, with a similar collaborative pedigree. Such collaboration would also help English scholars publish humanistically-informed articles in economics journals and vice versa.

Teachers and researchers interested in promoting real interdisciplinarity among English scholars and economists should also note that the sphere of campus life affords opportunities for interdisciplinary programming in terms of events and clubs. For example, in 2021 I organized a virtual panel at my school on *Capitalism and Happiness Across Disciplines* that featured an economist, two historians, and a communications scholar, who offered contrasting insights on capitalism from their respective disciplines. Others might similarly organize a campus event with in-house faculty speakers and/or one or more invited speakers from elsewhere. Student organizations can play a role in advancing interdisciplinary exchange, as well; one might even imagine students with an enthusiastic faculty sponsor starting an economics and English club, or at least an interdisciplinary dialogues club or book club.

While there are multiple intellectual and practical upsides to integrating the insights of those in economics and English in their treatments of capitalism, there are obstacles to this and other interdisciplinary undertakings that would need long-term, deep, structural changes for academics to address them adequately. There would need to be more institutional support for interdisciplinary publications and conference presentations, and for interdisciplinary teaching and research. Presently, most junior scholars are under pressure to publish exclusively in their own disciplines in order to earn tenure, thus limiting more collaborative interdisciplinary scholarship to more established faculty. Also discouraging for would-be interdisciplinarians, the most prestigious academic journals are either single-discipline journals or only narrowly interdisciplinary (as in area studies or psychology). And academic publications

that frequently feature examples of wide interdisciplinarity are usually not read much by the larger communities of scholars in any of the individual disciplines represented.

While some of these obstacles derive from the structure of academia as a whole, others grow out of the estrangement between English and economics specifically. These fields relate to one another on a highly uneven playing field, as economics is a vastly more prestigious and politically influential discipline than English in most countries. It is not surprising, then, that English scholars who cite economists largely do so to critique them, whereas economists mostly ignore literary scholarship without a second thought. For this to change, committed scholars would have to see members of the other discipline as equals even when the larger structure of academia does not. For economists, this would mean taking the time to read more representative literary scholarship (and more literature itself) and making the effort to engage with the different assumptions that come with that material. And for those in English, this would mean adopting an uncharacteristic willingness to incorporate, not just critique, the views of economists.

As a literary scholar, I recognize that this last point deserves a special note. Many of my fellow disciplinarians, especially those on the left, will recoil at my approach, fearing that attempts to integrate views that differ so sharply from those in the mainstream of our discipline would involve ceding authority to a harmful, technocratic discourse that deserves to be critiqued. They might argue that engaging in this way with economists would mean trading critical interdisciplinarity for instrumental interdisciplinarity and thereby capitulating to the dreaded “neoliberalism.” But this need not be so. I am not saying that literary criticism of capitalism should go away; rather, I suggest that it should become more sophisticated by interrogating the various assumptions and related views of others more systematically before deciding whether to adopt, adapt, or reject them. If the process should confirm your disciplinary leanings, very well; and if ideas in your discipline need some adjustments, so be it; it’s more important to learn and move forward than to save face by refusing to adjust. After all, the integrative process may also yield wholly new ideas, including ones that cannot be anticipated or described simply in terms of confirming or challenging ideas from the disciplines undergoing integration.

Or, it may turn out that a satisfactory integration of English and economic insights is not possible. As Repko and Szostak (2021) acknowledge, “[c]reating common ground” may work toward “making integration possible[,]” but it cannot be “guaranteed” (p. 290). And even if English and economic interdisciplinarians do accomplish substantial integration of views about capitalism, it may be an uphill battle for those findings to win acceptance in the broader communities of other English scholars and economists. Even so, a project this ambitious is still likely to yield valuable insights as participants wrestle with important ideas in new combinations; the process

may bring estranged factions into, if not communion per se, at least enlightening conversation. Ultimately, in all its exciting and vertiginous openness, this very uncertainty about the outcomes of the interdisciplinary integrative process is what scholars of all stripes should embrace.

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