

Introduction

Totalization and Judgment in Continental Political Theory

The most terrifying thing would be for The Human to exist.

—*Technics and Time 2*, 162

The great question of the twenty-first century will be finding the way . . . to invent new modalities of non-inhuman existence.

—*Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 183

Continental political theory is commonly defined by its commitment to the overcoming of totalization. This is particularly true of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism, which, while often conflated and misrepresented, are all defined by some version of a now familiar argument against totalizing theories. Enlightenment and humanist attempts to provide exhaustive, all-encompassing, and unifying accounts of social and political phenomena founded on the figures of reason, rationality, and nature fall at the hurdle of accounting for unpredictability, novelty, and difference. It is difficult to discern such differences from the viewpoint of a universal theory that applies to all, and therefore attempts to develop such frameworks inevitably exclude some individuals, groups, or ways of living. Criticisms of totalization are animated by the attempt to come to terms with the fallibility of reason in the face of otherness and often seek to account for how universal theories can support the domination of those who do not fit within their categories. This critical project is characterized by a move away from, or at least a tentative relationship with, explicit political judgments that might express or perpetuate unwarranted hierarchies and exclusions.

As a tradition, continental political theory consists of attempts to develop concepts that do not rely on judgments that legitimate domination by overlooking the innumerable, micro-political ways in which individuals differ from prevailing norms.

Before his untimely death in August 2020, Bernard Stiegler was a central figure in contemporary engagements with the legacy of this critique of totalization (James 2012). A student of Jacques Derrida and a reader of many figures within the continental canon, he was one of the first to develop a substantive continental philosophy of technology.¹ Technology is not so much a topic addressed by Stiegler's philosophy as the central organizing principle of his version of the non-totalizing project. This philosophy rests on the claim that the human is shaped by a constitutive relationship to technicity. Technics, in the form of material supports of memory, develops through interactions with human activity and, because it is subject to local interpretation and differentiation, acts as the source of human diversity. Neither the human nor the political can be totalized by universal concepts that apply to all because both are defined by their changing relationship to technicity, which differs historically, geographically, and culturally. Totalization is a problem for Stiegler because our perceptions of the human are tied to the historically and locally contingent way that technicity shapes our existence.

Understood in this way, Stiegler's philosophy is congruent with the continental critique of totality. He associates singular concepts of "The Human" that ignore technical differentiation with totalizing narratives that can lead to domination and endanger the diversity of forms of human existence. However, Stiegler's relationship to his precursors is more complicated than it first appears. He also breaks with the established continental legacy insofar as he claims that the political challenge incumbent upon denizens of the twenty-first century is precisely the task of making judgments on desirable forms of human existence, understood as the "non-inhuman." As technology changes, it poses challenges and problems that require solutions in the form of clear political judgments. These judgments can reasonably be considered as totalizing insofar as they stipulate ways of thinking and acting that might guide the future of humanity. Inevitably, this entails a shift from the micro-political to the macro-political level of general forms of political decision-making. If one finds value in the continental critique of totality, how should one make sense of the apparent inconsistency between Stiegler's critique of totalization, associated with universal conceptions of "The Human," and his advocacy of totalizing judgments regarding its future?

Rather than a contradiction, this book makes the case that Stiegler's simultaneous commitment to the critique of totalization and the advocacy of totalizing judgment marks his importance for contemporary continental political theory. He contends that it is politically necessary to make judgments on the nature of the human while also recognizing that its openness eludes totalization. Failure to do so relinquishes the task of defining the human to those less concerned with its pluralistic, contingent, and open nature. Totalization is not just a vehicle for the constraint of diverse forms of thought and the perpetuation of exclusion and domination, but also a tool for articulating judgments that defend plurality from these ills. Stiegler advocates that we grapple with the problem of the necessity of totalization in political judgment rather than attempting to move beyond it. I claim that this issue motivates Stiegler's entire philosophy of technicity and argue that it presents a significant challenge to contemporary, ontological versions of the critique of totality in continental political thought.

The Critique of Totalization and the Legacy of Continental Political Theory

Why has totalization posed such a pressing and persistent problem for political theory in the continental tradition? Critical approaches to humanism represent a central example of this concern. For Judith Butler, "Universal conceptions of the human" characteristic of humanism "assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and nonessential attributes" (Butler 1999, 14). While such attributes are intended to provide a clear rationale for political action, both radical and conservative, not all social and cultural forms line up neatly with them. One such attribute is the capacity of the human to exercise reason. Within enlightenment and modern conceptions of the human, the capacity for rational action has been deemed as a definitional, and therefore totalizing, element of human nature. Nevertheless, it has not always been seen as shared equally by women and non-European peoples. Totalization harms, in this instance, as it establishes a conceptual norm that justifies the ill-treatment of those perceived not to measure up to this standard (e.g., Butler 1999, 14–15; Eze 1997). Humanism totalizes insofar as it explicitly or implicitly demarcates those who are deemed to be more or less human along the lines of attributes that include (but are not limited to) race, gender, sexuality, ability, criminality, and intellectual

capacity, justifying the domination of those who fall on the wrong sides of such categorizations.

Here totalization forms the central problem for continental political thought for theoretical and political reasons. Theoretically, totalization places strict limits on sociological and political concepts that stratify and constrain marginal ways of thinking (James 2012, 3; Watkin 2016, 3). Such concepts divert our attention from unforeseen and novel ideas that may be of significant theoretical importance, leading us to neglect other traditions and modes of thought. This theoretical perspective underpins the political critique of the ways concepts that guide action may be bound up with relationships of power and domination (Owen 2016). Without attention to the outside of the norms we take for granted, we might not comprehend the extent to which those norms legitimate unjust political situations. The continental critique of humanism rests on these two broader points about totalizing concepts: they direct us away from creativity and novelty in theoretical work and can justify the harm of those who fall into the cracks of the narratives that theories of totality establish. While it typically has focused on the philosophical content of such totalizing concepts, continental political thought is also motivated by the need to identify these malign influences within social and political life so that it can undermine the forms of authority that naturalize them (White 2011). In the wake of such developments, continental thinkers have been drawn to the advocacy of forms of local and small-scale micro-politics to avoid legislating for social life with judgments that might repeat the problems of totalization.

Paradigmatic continental methods and concepts developed by thinkers such as Butler, H el ene Cixous, Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jean-Fran ois Lyotard, spanning performativity, deconstruction, difference in-itself, genealogy, and the differend, are all products of the attempt to uncover the contingency of these malign social structures and their susceptibility to critique, change, and transformation. Within the work of these thinkers and others, metaphysics, humanism, and universalism have been subject to continued scrutiny on account of their role in stymieing creative theorizing and within exclusionary conceptions of politics that underpin domination. In turn, they have been replaced with non-totalizing accounts of the political that attempt to do justice to the complexities and aporias of political concepts. Totalization must be challenged because these aporias demonstrate that, in Gavin Rae’s words, “structure itself must be radically ever-changing and open-ended. All unity, consistency and stability must be questioned and undermined whenever and wherever it arises” (Rae

2020, 3). The methodological position shared across work that holds to this claim—particularly in the poststructuralist tradition—is that these complexities cannot be dissolved by conceptual rigor.² Political theory's task is not to provide definitions of concepts that would overcome the contradictions underlying them, but to press these problems further to account for how complexity, paradox, and impossibility act as underlying conditions of the political. Tidy gardening of its conceptual boundaries constrains and excludes other ways of thinking and acting politically, for no concept can fully exhaust the potentials of politics or escape the possibility of perpetuating relations of power, exclusion, and domination.³

Those who have followed in the wake of this critique of totalization have attempted to reconcile it with more substantive accounts of the nature of being. These approaches are committed to a post-foundational variant of ontological reasoning. This form of political ontology does not provide concrete foundations for social and political life but instead posits ontological conditions that do not act as a ground in a traditional sense. Being is not characterized by stable laws or structures, but is differing, in flux, or in constant becoming. Not only do totalizing political concepts lead to undesirable theoretical and political consequences, but they also misrepresent the very “nature” of being. If being is changeable, then our conceptions of politics must be adjusted to match this contingent, shifting, and non-totalizable understanding of reality. A variety of pluralist political projects have been based on these claims, which draw on the integration of critical reflexivity and the horizontalization of agency with the nature of being.⁴ A question regarding the status of these post-foundational ontological claims lingers, however. To what extent does ontology, even if it is intended to be post-foundational, totalize the space of the political in the same way as the much-maligned categories of humanism, metaphysics, or universalism?

Stiegler's philosophy of technics allows us to formulate this question and provides an opportunity to rethink totalization as both a limit to political ontology and a necessary component of political theory. While he shares some of the motivations of those who develop the continental tradition's critique of totalization into more concrete political gestures, the turn to ontology for this task is complicated by two consequences of his philosophy of technics. First, because human existence is an effect of technicity, philosophical speculation is constrained by its technical context. At first glance this is not new. Post-Heideggerian continental philosophy has been committed to providing accounts of the finitude of thought that underpins the critique of totalization.⁵ Stiegler's account of technical finitude is unique because he refuses to grant

ontological speculation a privileged methodological position with respect to the diversity of ways that technicity shapes thought. Ontological reasoning occurs within a particular technical horizon and is therefore totalizing, as it cannot account for the diversity of thought that may occur in other such horizons. In this sense his work is “post-ontological” (Barthélémy 2012). Second, because of Stiegler’s commitment to this post-ontological version of non-totalization within his philosophy of technicity, he is also concerned with the capacity of humans to judge, give meaning to, and totalize their circumstances. Totalization is not simply a constraint on the possibilities represented by the aporias, contradictions, and complexities that underpin concepts. It is also necessary to give meaning to human existence precisely because the technical condition renders humanity without essence, understood in either metaphysical or ontological terms.

Stiegler balances these two gestures by introducing the concept of the a-transcendental to continental philosophy as a new modality of totalization. The a-transcendental refers to the need to give meaning to the ever-changing technical foundations of social and political systems with totalizing judgments, on the condition that the “transcendental” ideas on which such judgments rest are inextricably tied to the contingent, empirical, technological horizons that act as their conditions. This modality of totalization substantially reorients continental political theory’s critique of totality. The a-transcendental facilitates the exercise of totalizing judgment on the nature of social and political life without falling into the trap of articulating exclusionary claims about the timelessness of those judgments. Moreover, it leads Stiegler to stipulate that totalization is an unavoidable element of political judgment, as it responds to problems posed by the open and contingent human condition. Totalizing judgments need not be politically dominating if they are recognized as locally, historically, and geographically conditioned rather than universal. The a-transcendental radically situates philosophical judgment, curtailing the explanatory powers of ontology, while also necessitating the articulation of totalizing judgments in the absence of a-historical principles that might ground responses to problems posed by technological change.

I argue that the development of this position unifies the entirety of Stiegler’s philosophy of technics. For Stiegler, the significance of the legacy of continental political theory lies in the need for an account of what it means to critically assess totalization in the absence of human essence. Totalizing judgments are compatible with the critique of totalization when they are understood as a-transcendental because they are both necessary, as they give meaning to the technical condition, and contingent, as their necessity is

derived from their locality. Because of the necessity of these judgments in the face of the contingency of the technical condition, totalization is inevitable. Whether one is cognizant of it or not, judgment is always tied up with totalizing images of the human and of the nature of reality. Despite a reticence toward totalization inherited from the rejection of judgment in twentieth-century continental philosophy, political ontology, even in the form of post-foundationalism, cannot avoid these gestures.⁶ Political ontology's limit, as seen from Stiegler's perspective, lies in its attempt to relinquish totalizing judgment and its simultaneous failure to recognize that ontological claims require totalization that short-circuit its pluralist intentions. The primary problem of political ontology, then, is the absence of a critical architecture to assess the degree to which it engages in totalizing judgment despite itself. Rather than avoiding totalization and falling into this trap, Stiegler's philosophy provides a set of tools for considering whether particular totalizing judgments maintain space for openness, critique, and diversity, or whether they totalize the political in a way that does not.

Totalization, Judgment, and Capitalism

Stiegler articulates his interest in the capacity of humans to judge, totalize, and give meaning to their technical contexts most clearly within his analysis of automation, machine learning, and algorithms under capitalism. An illustrative version of this concern is his critique of Chris Anderson's arguments regarding "the end of theory." In 2008, Anderson, then editor of tech magazine *Wired*, argued that data science has rendered the need for the posing and testing of hypotheses obsolete, and consequently that we can do away with "every theory of human behavior." Anderson advocated jettisoning the question of "why people do what they do?" and replacing it with the recognition that "the point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves" (Anderson 2008). Out with human judgment and in with automated processing of data and the generation of correlations that predict behavior. Stiegler argued that this perspective poses a significant threat to the human capacity to judge, but also to the diversity of human life more broadly. The viewpoint that Anderson represents is responsible for a collapse in "noodiversity." If human behavior can be reduced to correlations among data points, then there is no need for originality, creativity, or independent judgment to give meaning to existence—it is simply fodder for the predictive machine.

Totalizing automated systems, Stiegler claimed, eliminate the space for the unpredictable and incalculable forms of critical judgment necessary for distinguishing a future that is actively desired from one generated from the mere “facts” of correlation. An increasingly global, complex, and integrated technological system facilitates this “*systemic* elimination of diversity,” which “has everything to do, on the one hand, with *technology*, and, on the other hand, with *calculability*—technology being rationalized and through that inherently tied to calculation.” According to Stiegler, the effects of this rationalization are exacerbated by capitalism. Computational capitalism rests on the assumption that certainty can be reduced to “instruments of statistics, measurement, simulation, modelling, observation, production, logistics, mobility, guidance, bibliometrics, scientometrics, marketing, self-quantification (the ‘quantified self’), and so on” (Stiegler 2020b, 72). These metrics can then be deployed in the anticipation and prediction of human behavior in the name of profit. Calculation and capitalism are totalizing, insofar as all is calculable, but they do not provide meaning beyond the profit motive. Totalization here operates without critique, judgment, or a vision of the future.

The problem with capitalism in its algorithmic form is that “*industrial* fiction *overcodes* any question of ends” (Stiegler 2020c, 90). Capitalism systematically eliminates any local generation of meaning that might elude the profit motive while simultaneously totalizing the ends that humans might pursue, pushing out any purpose that doesn’t fall within the boundaries of profitable calculation. It is in the context of Stiegler’s response to capitalist totalization that the a-transcendental appears most starkly as a modality of totalization that can be reconciled with the contingency and plurality of technicity. That this mode of totalization is seen most starkly in contrast to capitalism should not detract from the extensive consideration of the relationship between technics, totalization, and judgment across his writings. Stiegler’s political judgment on capitalism and automation is the fruit of a career-long attempt to rethink the question of ends in relation to technicity. Technological developments do not just pose new political problems of the kind found within automation. Responses to all political problems are shaped by technology, as the cognitive capacities, terms of reference, and normative expectations that inform judgment are constituted within the relationship to technics. If political judgments are conditioned by technological locality in this way, then they cannot fall back on a-historical, metaphysical, or ontological resources to make general claims about the

nature of politics. Despite this, if technology poses dangers to institutions and norms in a way that threatens the very dissolution of political disagreement, as Stiegler argues it does within computational capitalism, then to defend politics requires critical judgment on precisely what is valuable. Political judgments will necessarily mobilize presuppositions that totalize their conditions because they answer the pressing question of ends in the face of human contingency. Such judgments are situated, conditional, and plural, because of the constitutive relationship between the human and technicity that renders the human without a-historical features, but also totalizing, insofar as they give meaning to the human future in the face of the very lack of any metaphysical, ontological, or teleological path.

While Stiegler's concern for judgment arises from his critique of twenty-first-century capitalism, which I touch on in the course of the argument that follows, I focus on the broader consequences that his philosophy of technicity and his conception of judgment have for the problem of totalization. This position on totalization arises within the context of a disagreement with continental political thought: by rejecting totalization, it is unable to articulate a vision of the future. Stiegler argues that reticence toward totality is untenable under the conditions of late capitalism, where futurity is totalized by the profit motive in a way that structurally constrains critique and restricts politics to the indifferent management of the economy rather than the articulation of criteria that would underpin the ongoing differentiating and discerning action of judgment.⁷ Stiegler acknowledges that figures such as Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Lyotard were all motivated by the need to defend small-scale and local forms of politics from being engulfed within capitalist totalization (Stiegler 2020c, 97). What they did not recognize, however, is the need to consider the dynamic and critical relationship between locality and universality that is established by the need for judgment in the face of the contingency of the human condition.

This evasion of totalizing judgment leaves continental political theory in a double bind. It cannot articulate a response to the problem of the erasure of the space for judgment within computational capitalism because it advocates local resistance to totalization while neglecting the need to invent new totalizing judgments (Stiegler 2015a; 2013e). However, it also unwittingly engages in totalization within its use of ontology without providing a critical framework for assessing it. Stiegler's wager is that totalization must be reconceived in a way that incorporates openness to avoid the twin threats of the abdication of judgment and the unintentional advocacy of totalization

without plurality. Rather than focus on his critique of capitalist calculation, I provide an account of the framework that underpins Stiegler's attempt to break with his predecessors' positions regarding totalization, judgment, and ontology, for the problem of capitalism exacerbates this underlying theoretical tension that permeates the entirety of his philosophy of technics.

Totalization, Ontology, and the Human

This break leads Stiegler to diverge from two themes in contemporary continental political theory that attempt to further the critique of totalization: a turn to post-foundational ontologies of the political that integrate a concern for locality and difference with an account of being that is agonistic and constantly in flux, and to critiques of anthropocentrism that provide ontological accounts of nonhuman agency. In both cases, ontology is used to circumvent claims that human nature, metaphysical principles, or totalizing assumptions underlie the political (Viriasova 2018, 7). Totalization is the *bête noir* of both of these strategies, for it facilitates domination by constraining the diversity that underpins the political, and by restricting conceptions of agency inside humanist, and therefore exclusionary, limits. These ontological criticisms of totalization seek to remedy what Bonnie Honig referred to as the "displacement of politics" by recovering the ways that the political flourishes beyond the constraints of totalizing normative judgment (1993).

Within political ontology, post-foundational accounts of the political are contrasted with the totalizing tendencies of real-world politics. As mentioned above, this post-foundationalism represents a broad field that encompasses a range of ontological concepts and styles of argument opposed to totalization, ranging across weak ontology, lack, becoming, and antagonism (e.g., Marchart 2007; 2018; Mihai et al. 2017; Strathausen 2009; Tønder and Thomassen 2005; White 2000; Wenman 2013; Widder 2012). Many of these approaches distinguish politics from the political to grant the latter a degree of autonomy, superiority, and unpredictability. The political is only visible when it interrupts stable assumptions regarding the nature of the social represented by politics (Rancière 1999).⁸ Two examples demonstrate the breadth of such approaches. In their adoption of a post-Heideggerian conception of ontology, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe mobilize the philosophical essence of the political—a primordial state of being-in-common that cannot be reduced to a unitary identity—against the eradication of this contingency by the totalization of the social field

by the static categories of politics. It is from this “retreat of the political that the political ‘itself,’ its question or its exigency, arises” (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1997, 131). Those influenced by Carl Schmitt, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, argue that the antagonistic differences between groups, represented by the political, are irreducible to politics (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). A translation of ontological antagonism into an agonism that recognizes difference but negates violence is necessary to counter liberal democracy’s delusions of establishing a totalizing consensus that overcomes the ineradicable conflict at the heart of the political (Mouffe 2000; 2005; 2013). In both cases, a claim about the ontological nature of the political is leveraged against totalization.

A related but distinct tendency within continental political theory criticizes totalizing anthropocentrism by advocating for ontologies of immanence that account for the agency of nonhuman entities. Ian James and John Mullarkey have argued that much recent French philosophy has rejected ontological distinctions between the poetic and the scientific or the linguistic and the material (Mullarkey 2006; James 2012; 2019a; 2019b). Similarly, “new materialists” have adopted comparable principles to argue for the significance of nonhuman agency within political problems.⁹ Both new materialists and proponents of immanence have developed monist ontologies that collapse the distinction between nature and culture into a single plane where nonhuman and human forms of agency intermingle. For William Connolly, this attention to ontological immanence “seeks to render us more sensitive to a variety of nonhuman force fields that impinge upon politico-economic life” by ruling out exceptionalist and totalizing conceptions of human agency (Connolly 2013, 9). In these perspectives, ontology is mobilized to highlight the political implications of nonhuman agency within an ethical attunement to materiality that escapes the totalization of politics. To engage in this attunement, Jane Bennett implores us to “*postpone judgment*” and “hold off the sorting discrimination often assumed to be the very essence of ethical action,” a sorting that I am referring to as totalization (Bennett 2020, xvi).

Post-foundationalist and new materialist iterations of the ontological turn have been subject to criticism because of the consequences of their critiques of totalization. Both have been accused of focusing on ontological speculation to the neglect of real political problems (Lemke 2018; McNay 2014; Rekret 2016). Moreover, it can be argued that the attempt to incorporate epistemological reflexivity with ontological resources backfires insofar as the latter short-circuits the former (Turner 2019a). In the case of new materialism, Claire Colebrook argues that the decoupling of agency from

the human and the attribution of agentic powers to a monist, flat, and vital ontological field leads to an “ultrahumanism” in which human capacities are simply expanded to being writ large—repeating the problems of humanism at the level of being in general (Colebrook 2014, 163). Such ostensibly egalitarian conceptions of agency fail to consider how our capacity to act is shaped in ways that are fundamentally unequal (McNay 2016). Ontological accounts of the political, for Clayton Chin, engage in a similar gesture by presupposing a level of argumentation that “subsists below conscious dialogue, conditioning our interactions, requiring a specialized form of theoretical access” (Chin 2021, 774).¹⁰ While reflexivity regarding ontological questions is central to these theories, they conceptualize reflexive capacities within a particular ontology that is situated and thus subject to questions of power. Who gets to decide what the determining ontological principles of plurality are? In both cases, attributing necessity to particular ontological claims—such as the vitality of nonhuman agency or a specific conception of political ontology—leads to the conflation of being and normativity despite the intention of such claims being the untethering of ontological reasoning from totalization (M. G. E. Kelly 2018, 73–94). To borrow a phrase from Johanna Oksala, “ontology is politics that has forgotten itself” (Oksala 2012, 35).

Stiegler’s skepticism toward the rejection of “‘mastery’” that he sees in Derridean philosophy (Stiegler 2020b, 69) resonates with these criticisms of post-foundational and new materialist ontologies. As we have seen, he holds that totalizing judgments are a necessary component of any meaningful response to the problems posed by technological change *and* that totalization is an unavoidable component of any philosophical claim about the nature of politics. Rather than a rejection of mastery, the defense of plurality requires a critical assessment of possible modalities of totalization in order to reconcile judgment with contingency. It can be argued here that continental political theory does not reject concrete claims about politics. However, such claims are typically oriented toward the undoing of totalization and the rejection of judgments that might raise themselves to a macro-political level of generality beyond the micro-political and the local (e.g., Connolly 2017, 55). For Stiegler, this reticence toward mastery leads to the failure to articulate totalizing judgments that would both actively challenge the totalization of capitalism and engage in the task of critically assessing what counts as an acceptable modality of totalization. From the perspective he establishes, post-foundational, immanent, and new materialist ontological approaches to politics are too quick to withdraw from this challenge.

Because of his return to the questions of totalization and judgment, Stiegler's work resonates with attempts to resuscitate the figure of the human by considering its formation within a broader ecology of influences while simultaneously critiquing antihumanism for the "ultrahumanism" identified by Colebrook. Christopher Watkin finds in the work of Alain Badiou, Bruno Latour, Catherine Malabou, and Michel Serres a renewal of the concept of the human that is in line with, but nevertheless tries to overcome, its place within continental thought (Watkin 2016). Similarly, Martin Crowley argues that Stiegler develops a conception of agency that provides traction upon political problems in a way that responds to the new materialist rejection of mastery while also avoiding the exceptionalism of humanism (Crowley 2022). In this light, Stiegler's embrace of judgment does not entail throwing the baby out with the bathwater by rehabilitating the human and uncritically returning to totalization, humanism, and metaphysics. To the contrary, one finds a concern for the elimination of diversity by these three concepts across his work. The importance of Stiegler's contribution to continental political theory lies in his recognition that totalization is inescapable and must be grappled with in order to advocate for a pluralism that integrates local concerns with generalizable visions of the political.

The Philosophy of Technics and the Problem of Totalization

I pursue this argument by drawing consequences from Stiegler's central philosophical claim: humanity is formed within a co-constitutive relationship to technical objects. Since its inception philosophy has, according to Stiegler, repressed the constitutive relationship between knowledge and technics by attributing necessity to the former and contingency to the latter (Stiegler 1998, 1). He develops this thought through readings of the continental canon of thinkers who influence theorists of political ontology, immanence, and new materialism—ranging from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger; the poststructuralism of Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault; to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud—while also stating the need to critique and overcome the shortcomings of these traditions (Stiegler 2013e; 2015a). This cast of figures is supplemented by the work of less prominent figures in continental philosophy, like Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and Gilbert Simondon, and those who do not explicitly fall within its boundaries, such as Alfred North Whitehead. Across his reading

of these thinkers, Stiegler's consideration of technicity shares the concern for the underlying conditions of politics demonstrated by political ontology (Beardsworth 1998a, 71; Lindberg 2020, 385) and for the interaction between human and nonhuman agency within new materialism (Crowley 2013a; 2019; 2022; James 2012). His positive view of totalization both distinguishes him from these traditions and allows him to move beyond the vexed relationship between totalization and ontology within them.

Stiegler's interventions regarding the nature of technics are laid out in strictly philosophical terms in his *Technics and Time* series (1998; 2009b; 2011c) and form the basis of his engagements with politics across numerous books, series, and interviews. The most prominent of these include *Disbelief and Discredit* (2011a; 2013b; 2014b), *Symbolic Misery* (2014e; 2015b), *Automatic Society* (2016a), *Pharmacologie du front national* (2013c), *The Neganthropocene* (2018c), and *Qu'appelle-t-on panser?* (2018a; 2020c). Across these writings and his political interventions with organizations such as Ars Industrialis, Plein Commune, and the Internation Collective, Stiegler strove to develop a conceptual framework suitable for establishing new political futures from contemporary technical conditions.¹¹ In this work, one finds an understanding of politics that seeks to avoid the negative consequences of totalization (James 2015), understood as the elimination of diverse forms of human judgment, and an activism characterized by an attempt to put these ideas into practice.

The major consequence of Stiegler's understanding of technics that I pursue here is summarized in brief by Gerald Moore's claim that his work brings "an end to the philosophical overdetermination of the political" (G. Moore 2011, 199). Similarly, James sees Stiegler's writings as characterized by "an image of philosophy oriented toward an eclipse of totality and all horizons of unity and completeness" (James 2019b, 223). If ontologies and definitions of the human are tethered to the development of technical objects, then the conceptualizations of the political that arise from these claims are as varied as the technical contexts that support them. This insight curtails attempts to define and delimit the space of politics with reference to post-foundational ontologies precisely because ontology participates within the intellectual traditions of a particular technical context. Nevertheless, Stiegler argues that totalizing judgments are necessary precisely because the human lacks an overarching *telos* that would guide the political. While I concur with Moore and James regarding Stiegler's critique of totality and the philosophical overdetermination of politics, my account of his work emphasizes his commitment to a critical understanding of totality. As such,

I do not engage in a detailed account of the limits of the work of specific thinkers within the field of continental political theory, political ontology, and new materialism, although some of their work is discussed at crucial junctures. Instead, the limits to political ontology are developed within an account of the metapolitical consequences of the role that totalization and judgment play within Stiegler's philosophy of technics.

Three concepts in Stiegler's work are central to pursuing this argument. The first is the concept of the non-inhuman. This term represents Stiegler's attempt to retain the category of the human while evacuating any remnants of humanist totalization from it. At first glance, this appears to be contradictory. Is the human not among the most totalizing of philosophical concepts? Stiegler avoids this regression to humanism by conceptualizing the non-inhuman as a product of how what we have typically called the human is constituted, but also put into question, by technics: "humanism, as the question of knowing what humanity is, is not a true question if it is true that man is the one who individuates himself with technics such that he constantly *becomes other*" (Stiegler 2020a, 231). Humanism does not recognize that transformations in technical systems undercut the possibility of a-historical conceptions of the human. The non-inhuman is, by contrast, not a historical constant. It is a projection or judgment that responds to the question of the human posed by technics. Answers to this question are always provisional because of the lack of origin, and because our ideals are embodied only intermittently as a result of the presence of a counter-tendency toward inhumanity (Stiegler 2010e, 170). Intermittence prevents totalizing concepts of the non-inhuman from repeating the flaws of humanism, for we never fully embody our judgments on the nature of the human, and the possibility of inhuman totalization disregards this constitutive indeterminacy. Inhuman totalization in its universalist automated, capitalist form does not make space for this non-inhuman diversity (Stiegler 2019d, 44). The non-inhuman as a form of totalizing, yet non-transcendental, judgment is necessary to answer the persistent question of the human in a way that the inhuman totalization of capitalism cannot.

I introduce the non-inhuman by focusing on the question of why political judgment must recognize its particularity, locality, and contingency. This account rests on the second key concept in Stiegler's work: the a-transcendental. Stiegler did not dedicate an entire text to systematizing this term, yet he described himself as "an a-transcendental philosopher."¹² He continues: "Everything that precedes me in philosophy proceeds from what we call the transcendental, but at the same time I believe that I belong

to an era that challenges the difference between what is transcendental and what is empirical, an era that says that this difference is not relevant” (Stiegler 2003, 165). Stiegler’s scattered references to the a-transcendental articulate this co-implication of the empirical and the transcendental that permeates his entire oeuvre.¹³ Any transcendental that regulates humanity’s understanding of itself, its place in the world, and its political significance is mediated and produced by the technical objects that define the empirical contexts from which such concepts emerge. Speculation on human nature, metaphysics, or ontology always takes the form of an empirically conditioned transcendental. One might attempt to evacuate totalization from ontology or avoid making claims about the intertwinement of human nature and the political, however *all* political theory is situated within an a-transcendental, technical horizon and, as such, engages in judgments that are in tension with plurality. The a-transcendental allows a distinction to be made between totalizing judgments that recognize their situated character and those that do not, and makes it possible to articulate totalizing judgments regarding the nature of the political that are reconciled with their contingency.

A consequence of this position that must be resisted is a trajectory toward relativism that incapacitates politics. Without addressing this issue, Stiegler would fail to overcome the lack of critical purchase on politics that he identifies in his predecessors in continental political thought, and we might also argue characterizes the ontological turn and new materialism. The *pharmakon*, the third key concept in the argument that follows, represents Stiegler’s response to this problem. By stipulating that technical objects are defined by both curative and poisonous tendencies, he provides a minimal definition of the political. Politics responds to the problems of a particular pharmacological field and must be defined in reference to the specific a-transcendental horizon in which these problems emerge. By pursuing this point, I expand considerably upon Stephen Barker’s claim that it is “pharmaka on which ‘the political’ in general can be built” (Barker 2012a, 13). The difference between inhuman and non-inhuman forms of totalization rests on this pharmacological dynamic between poison and cure: “In order to think the possibility of non-inhuman beings requires the thinking of the possibility of the inhuman in the human . . . The non-inhuman is dynamically sensitive to this duplicity, which is endemic to human pharmacology” (Stiegler 2010e, 231, n.5). Politics navigates these two tendencies toward the non-inhuman and the inhuman and cannot be understood in abstraction from the pharmacological problems within which they are embedded. Totalizing judgments, such as the calculation endemic

within capitalism, perpetuate inhumanity by negating the openness of the non-inhuman. By contrast, Stiegler advocates for political judgments that project a totalizing yet open vision of the non-inhuman in response to the pharmacological problems unique to a particular technical context.

The non-inhuman, the a-transcendental, and the *pharmakon* guide my account of totalization in Stiegler's work. Political judgments respond to the problems posed by the *pharmaka* distinct to a particular a-transcendental horizon, preventing any singular decision on the nature of politics from totalizing the possible permutations of the political. Nevertheless, such judgments are totalizing, as they presuppose an understanding of being and an image of the non-inhuman derived from that context. The task of political theory is to consider the pharmacological possibilities posed by these judgments and to determine whether they make space for the plurality of possible decisions on the nature of the political that might arise from other localities. This evaluative claim signals Stiegler's importance for thinking the limit to political ontology. If many have turned toward ontological judgments and away from the human to understand the nature of the political, then the a-transcendental limit to this approach represents the difficulty of turning to ontological reasoning for accounting for the diversity of forms of politics. Because of their situated nature, ontological claims are totalizing and therefore must be subjected to a critique similar to those leveled at metaphysics and transcendental concepts of the human.¹⁴ Thinkers of political ontology seek to avoid totalization, but in doing so fail to assess the pharmacological consequences of the judgments inherent within their ontological projects. Stiegler's work facilitates the recognition of this problem, as he provides a conceptual architecture for assessing whether judgments on the nature of politics are simultaneously open and totalizing.

This commitment to totalization is at odds with the ways that continental philosophy has been used to underpin critiques of mastery, particularly within work on decoloniality (e.g., Singh 2018). My account of Stiegler's philosophy does not reject the necessity of this critique of mastery within ongoing relationships of coloniality and domination. However, rather than critique mastery qua totalization, I attempt to integrate this concern with the need to give credence to and support local forms of totalization that provide dignity for a plurality of ways of conceptualizing politics. Non-totalizing versions of political ontology are not up to this task, as they necessarily exclude other forms of politics because of the totalizing nature of ontological reasoning (Banerjee 2020, 8–12). With Stiegler, I make the case that the answer to this problem requires the support of a plurality of totalizing

judgments rather than the rejection of judgment itself. In doing so, my account of totalization in continental political theory draws inspiration from decolonial and Indigenous perspectives in political thought that highlight the imposition of liberal political categories on other conceptions of politics (e.g., Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014), comparative political theorists who challenge the primacy of Western presuppositions in political thought (e.g., Jenco, Idris, and Thomas 2020), those who argue that there is an exclusionary basis to the use of ontology within the Western tradition (e.g., Fanon 2008; Warren 2018; Wynter 2003), and anthropologists who stress the various ways in which the political is distinguished from the non-political across a plurality of ontological schemas (de la Cadena 2010; Candea 2011).

Uniting these diverse approaches to the problem of totalization, which should by no means be reduced to a single school or approach, is the presence, in some form, of the claim that a single concept of the political is insufficient to capture the plurality of possible understandings of politics that themselves constitute important judgments in their own right. To simply reject totalization as a political goal neglects the value of these political decisions. I do not have the space to engage with the above intellectual movements in detail, and I accept the shortcoming for the project of developing epistemological and political diversity presented by the fact that Stiegler did not engage with these traditions or the problems of colonialism, race, or racism.¹⁵ However, I draw on some of the above perspectives at key points in my argument to both develop the implications of Stiegler's critique of totalization and make visible his engagement in totalization within his own political judgments in a way that many of these authors would be critical of. These developments in political theory and anthropology provide a critical mirror that shows how Stiegler both reconciles totalization with diversity but also relapses into totalization without openness.

Here my claims diverge from dominant understandings of Stiegler's work, for he is best known for his critique of contemporary capitalism. Put simply, my argument focuses on the consequences of his philosophy for concepts of the political rather than for capitalist politics.¹⁶ Here his relevance for continental political theory lies in his provision of a way to formalize and assess the tension between ontological openness and the advocacy of specific political goals. I suggest that Stiegler both articulates this problem philosophically and provides a clear example of how it operates. He makes it possible to conceptualize the tension between totalization and openness while also embodying it by presenting political judgments that close the space of conceptual plurality. His political judgments make totalizing claims

regarding the nature of politics and of the human that, when viewed in terms from Stiegler's own work, do not always maintain a position of open totalization. By way of this immanent critique, I argue that Stiegler's work both makes the case for and demonstrates the need to engage critically with totalization if political judgments on the future are to resist placing unjustified constraints on the diversity of the political.

These two tendencies toward openness and closure, or the "unprincipled" and "principled" dimensions of Stiegler's philosophy (Colebrook 2017), can be perceived across the reception of his work. Some read him as committed to working through the complexities of a given pharmacological situation in a way that rejects the role of absolutes in political judgment (Abbinnett 2020; Colebrook 2017; Lampe 2017, 324). His return to ideology critique after its rejection by Deleuze and Foucault represents a clear example of where he grapples with this challenge (Turner 2017). However, others argue that he exhibits a tendency toward conservatism and the closure of pluralism within his analyses of capitalism (Davis 2013; Fuggle 2013; Howells and Moore 2013, 11; Hui and Lemmens 2017, 38–39; C. Turner 2010). A similar ambiguity can be found between those who see Stiegler as providing a conception of the human that rejects anthropocentrism (Crowley 2013a; James 2013, 72; Vesco 2015, 89) and those who see his claim regarding the co-constitution of the human and the technical as a traditionally anthropocentric gesture (A. Bradley 2011, 139; Vaccari 2009). There is also disagreement over whether Stiegler is a technophobe who clings to this latter anthropocentric image of the human (A. Bradley 2011, 135; Vlieghe 2014, 534) or whether he engages in a technocentrism that subordinates human becoming and ingenuity to the technical question (Hansen 2017, 185–86). These disagreements often find their motivation in dissatisfaction with Stiegler's argument regarding the co-implication of the empirical and the transcendental. His claim appears to be simultaneously positivistic, in the sense that technical objects are reduced to an investigation that is empirical and not philosophical (Bennington 2000, 162–79), and transcendental, insofar as it retains an anthropocentrism and idealism that an investigation of technics should displace (Hansen 2004).

I return to some of these disputes in due course. For now, suffice it to say that I do not seek to settle them by recourse to one position alone but to try and take stock of Stiegler's work in the terms set out by Arthur Bradley: "Stiegler's almost contradictory philosophical reception . . . where he is simultaneously criticised for being excessively transcendentalist *and* empiricist, or not empiricist or transcendentalist *enough*—might be a symp-

tom that we have not quite come to terms with the central ambition of his thought: a re-organisation of the empirico-transcendental opposition” (A. Bradley 2011, 127). In developing an immanent critique of Stiegler’s work, I do not seek to favor one of these tendencies but consider how they illuminate one another. Rather than settling for reading Stiegler as principled, because of his specific political commitments, or unprincipled, because of his account of the genesis of judgment, I pursue both of these claims and their consequences for a plural conception of totalizing political judgment, and for the future of the critique of totalization in continental political theory.

Brief Considerations on Method and Chapter Outline

To develop this argument, the following takes a methodological cue from Stiegler’s consideration of what it means to practice philosophy in the second volume of *Symbolic Misery*. Because of his claim that thinking is conditioned by an a-transcendental, pharmacological horizon and its attendant problems, conceptual invention requires the re-composition of the ideas and concepts that preexist invention within the context where it occurs. Thinking generates new insights from its engagement with preexisting materials: “The consequences of a thought, if it is a genuine thought, which is to say a conceptual *invention*, always extends beyond the person who thought it” (Stiegler 2015b, 3). While I give an account of Stiegler’s philosophy that will be useful to those unfamiliar with it, this is not a complete, chronological, or entirely faithful rendering. As such, there are some notable omissions concerning his influences in order to facilitate a focus on the problem at hand.¹⁷ Instead of an exhaustive presentation of his work, I aim to engage in the conceptual invention advocated by Stiegler by folding his philosophy back upon itself to identify the wider consequences of the tension between totalization and openness within his understanding of technicity.

These claims are pursued as follows. The first five chapters introduce the reader to Stiegler’s philosophy and the four limits to political ontology found within it. The concepts of the a-transcendental and the non-inhuman are introduced across these chapters on key elements of the philosophy of technics. Chapter 1 introduces the default of origin, or the claim that the human is without essence. Here I argue that ontology is limited by the fictional status of all concepts: conceptual decisions respond to the question of the origin that is, ultimately, unanswerable beyond a particular technical