

Marx's Humanism and the Fight for a New Ecology

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The future of an ecological critique of existing society, if not the existence of society itself, depends upon halting capital's relentless drive for self-expansion. That the global self-expansion of capital is producing rampant destruction of natural habitats, innumerable species and social cohesion has become so evident as to hardly invite serious challenge. Far more challenging, however, is the question of whether capital's destructive course of self-expansion can be stopped before it consumes the lifeblood of the planet itself.

What can be done to stop capital's drive for self-expansion? Clearly, state-directed economic development is no solution, as shown by the horrid environmental record of the former "Communist" regimes as well as the failures of Western Social-Democracy to halt environmental destruction. In response to this, some argue today that capital's destructive logic of self-expansion is inherently rooted in economic development and even in civilization itself. Ridding the world of environmental destruction, according to this view, requires surrendering the notion that economic development, industrialization, and modernization can in any way be considered "progressive."

A Marxist-Humanist approach to the ecological crisis rejects the view that capital can be controlled by the state AND the view that civilization and/or economic development must be jettisoned in the name of ecological diversity. Those who favor the "collective" ownership of capital make the same mistake as those who disparage economic development and civilization—they both view capital as a THING instead of as a specific social relation of production.

Capital, however, is not a thing; it is a social relation mediated by the instrumentality of things. As Marx wrote in his *ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS* of 1844, capital is "the expression of a special sort of work which is indifferent to its content, of complete being-for-self, of abstraction from all other being."⁽¹⁾ Just as the labor that

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creates capital is indifferent to its content, capital as self-expanding value is indifferent to any material or natural property confronting it, even though capital must assume a concrete, material form.

Capital is congealed labor. But capital is not the congealation of just any kind of labor. In CAPITAL Marx wrote of the KIND of labor that does not produce capital: “Labor is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the ever-lasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of every form of that existence, or rather is common to all forms of society in which human beings live.”(2) Labor in this generic sense does not exist apart from or outside of nature.

As Marx wrote in his CRITIQUE OF THE GOTHA PROGRAM in 1875, “labor is only the manifestation of one natural force, human labor power.” Marx therefore opposed those socialists who (in his words) “attribute a supernatural creative power to labor.”(3) The labor that “is common to all form of society in which human beings live” is dependent on nature, bound by its limits, and defined by its ability to interact with nature.

In capitalism, however, the nature of “labor” is radically transformed. Labor in capitalism takes on the two-fold form of concrete labor (the specific exercise of human muscle and mind) and abstract labor (labor in general, which is indifferent to any natural or human content). ABSTRACT LABOR is an abstract “being-for-self” that disregards the externalities of nature. When labor assumes a dual character society inevitably becomes governed by the drive to produce for the sake of producing an ever-greater abstraction, value.

For this reason efforts to control capital or to “reject” it without uprooting value production is self-defeating. Capital devastates natural habitats, eliminates species, and shows disregard for nature because it is the expression of abstract, alienated labor. So long as labor assumes a value form of mediation, capital will find a way to persevere regardless of the acts of the state, the community, or the most well-intentioned individuals.

Likewise, any effort to turn the clock back by rejecting economic development, let alone “civilization,” is quixotic—not to mention that it ignores the urgent need for economic development and modernization in a world where a third of the global labor force is unemployed or underemployed, where two billion people live on less than a dollar a day, and where the most basic amenities of housing, sanitation, and transportation technology is out of reach for hundreds of millions. Like so many heads springing from the head of hydra, capital will find a way to persevere in its destructive path as long as we do not break free of value production by creating a totally new kind of labor.

TIME AND SOCIAL LABOR

What does it mean to create a new kind of labor that breaks from the logic of value production? It cannot be achieved simply by changing property forms. It can only be ended by transforming CONDITIONS of labor in which work becomes “thing-like,” abstract, and hence a source of capitalist value and surplus value.

It is crucial to note that value is not determined by the actual amount of time it takes to produce a commodity. Value is instead determined by the AVERAGE amount of time that it takes to produce a commodity. If it takes 36 hours to assemble a car in China, but 24 hours to assemble one in the U.S., the 12 hours of additional labor in China create no value. Value is determined by the amount of SOCIALLY NECESSARY labor time required to create a commodity. Because of this there is a constant pressure to produce faster and faster. “Man becomes time’s carcass.”(4) This is why the rape of the environment is endemic to capitalism. Time becomes an abstract, external measure that must be obeyed regardless of any limits.

The only way to change this is by uprooting the two-fold CHARACTER of labor, in which labor time takes on the DUAL form of individual working time vs. the amount of social labor that it represents.

Labor is either forcefully associated or freely associated; there is no in-between. In capitalism all labor is forced labor, even when it is formally “free,” because labor is employed for the sole purpose of augmenting value. One has no choice in the matter; if you wish to work regardless of the amount of value created you will be shown the door. Alienated labor cannot be ended simply by achieving “free association” in the POLITICAL sphere (a view shared by many social ecologists); it can be ended only by creating new relations at work and in society as a whole that abolishes the split in the category of labor.

What happens to TIME in a freely associated society? Time no longer is what rules us; we instead rule time. There is of course still a need to economize on time in a non-capitalist society. The difference is that, unlike in capitalism, where the economization of time is imposed forcefully from without through an abstract standard, in a freely associated society the laborers consciously and deliberately decide what to produce and how to produce based on the amount of time at their disposal. Instead of us being a slave to time, time becomes the space for our human development.

While Marx knew that uprooting capitalism would entail a long and bloody process, he held that freely associated labor must emerge in the immediate aftermath of a revolution for it to have any chance of success. As Raya Dunayevskaya put it, “Marx saw the free time liberated from capitalist exploitation as time for the free development of the individual’s power, of his natural and acquired talents. He did not consider that Utopia. It was not the hereafter. It was the road to be taken, on the morrow of capitalism’s fall, IF the nationalized means of production were to serve any better end than the privately owned means of production.”(5)

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER?

Alienated labor, which is the basis of value production and capital’s werewolf hunger for self-expansion, cannot be abolished by dictates or programs; nor can it be ended by the actions of some enlightened “leadership,” no matter how well intentioned. It can be ended only by an all-sided “revolution in permanence.” For this reason we must seriously explore the question of what happens after the revolution BEFORE it occurs.

If we wait for the moment of revolution to figure out how to transcend alienation, as if liberation depends on spontaneity and experimentation, we will find ourselves ill prepared to deal with the question of how to fundamentally transform production relations. It is not possible to impede the destructive path of capital without a revolution. But it is also not possible to make a successful revolution without a concept of “what happens after” that can spell out how the seizure of power can lead to the effective breaking down of the law of value and the dual character of labor. For this reason Marxist-Humanists stress organizational responsibility for working out Marx’s philosophy of “revolution in permanence” in light of today’s realities.(6)

Many conceptual roadblocks remain in the way of achieving this. Take István Mészáros’ BEYOND CAPITAL—a serious, 1,000-page study that contains an important ecological perspective. In the course of this study Mészáros takes issue with Marx’s declaration that the workers “ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, Abolition of the Wages System!” Mészáros writes, “there is a great deal in the ‘wages system’ that...must be transcended on the long-term time-scale of the new historic form.”(7)

Mészáros admits he is critical of Marx for saying wage labor can be abolished shortly after a revolution. He of course has the right to criticize Marx, but the question is what is lost in doing so. Mészáros’s critique has him conclude: “Immediately after the ‘expropriation of the expropriators’ not only the inherited means, materials and technology of production remain the same...but the very organization of the labor process itself stays deeply

embedded in that hierarchical social division of labor which happens to be the heaviest burden of the inherited past.”

The problem with this is that if the hierarchical division of labor and the wages system persist for a prolonged period after a revolution, capital as the medium of social interaction must persist for a long period as well. After all, wage labor implies capital, and capital implies wage labor; each stands or falls on the basis of the other. If capital remains the prevailing medium of social interaction even after a revolution, how is the destructive impact of capital to be halted? The logical conclusion (which Mészáros himself refrains from providing) is that capital must be controlled by the state, the community, or the “revolutionary” leadership.

If such a conclusion is unacceptable, we must reject the premise upon which it is based. Attempts to avoid the conclusion by reverting to primitivist or anti-developmental perspectives do no good at all, not least because they fail to address the burning question of how to achieve industrialization and economic development in a non-capitalist manner.

Humanity remains very much in need of economic and social development; the crushing poverty that afflicts over half the planet is living proof of it. We cannot count on the self-expansion of capital to achieve this: one, because capital’s very existence places the life of our planet in jeopardy; and two, because contemporary capitalism is structurally incapable of generating development and opportunity for the mass of humanity. This is evident from the way capitalism is increasingly abandoning the field of production by investing vast amounts of social wealth and energy in UNPRODUCTIVE sectors, where (for now at least) the system is able to obtain a greater mass of profits.

The question isn’t to have or not have development but what KIND of development can meet human needs without relying on value production. Dunayevskaya grappled with this question half a century ago; it is high time that we do so as well.(8) Though we face many difficult theoretical and practical problems in working through these unresolved questions, Marxist-Humanism contains a rich conceptual foundation for dealing with them that can be developed anew for our times.

Notes:

1. See ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS OF 1844, in MARX-ENGELS COLLECTED WORKS, Vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 286.
2. Karl Marx, CAPITAL, Vol. I (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 290.
3. Karl Marx, CRITIQUE OF THE GOTHA PROGRAM (New York: International Publishers, 1933), p. 21.
4. Marx, POVERTY OF PHILOSOPHY, COLLECTED WORKS, Vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 127.
5. MARXISM AND FREEDOM, by Raya Dunayevskaya (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000) p. 64.
6. See Dunayevskaya's THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002) for a discussion of this issue.
7. Istvan Mészáros, BEYOND CAPITAL: TOWARDS A THEORY OF TRANSITION (New York: Monthly Review Books, 1995), p. 489. Mészáros quotes Marx's statement on abolishing the wages system from WAGES, PRICE AND PROFIT. In his CRITIQUE OF THE GOTHA PROGRAM likewise says that wage labor is abolished not only in the "higher" phase of communism but in the lower stage, "as it emerges from capitalist society": "The producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor embodied in the products appear here as the value of the products...The same amount of work which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another...that is, equal quantities of labor in one form are exchanged for equal quantities of labor in another form" (p. 29).
8. See Dunayevskaya's NATIONALISM, COMMUNISM, MARXIST HUMANISM, AND THE AFRO-ASIAN REVOLUTIONS [original 1958] (Chicago: News and Letters, 1984).

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