

# Marxist-Humanism and the Struggle 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.

Our pursuit of this question must begin by taking issue with the widespread assumption that capital can be controlled.

The notion that capital can be controlled has defined statist approaches to social transformation over the past two centuries. A large number of social reformers and revolutionary theorists have assumed that state-directed economic development, whether of a Social-Democratic or Communist character, can tame capital's relentless hunger for self-expansion. Yet the horrible environmental record of "actually existing" Communist states, as well as the failure of Western Social-Democracy to tame the corporate consumption of environmental resources, reveals profound limitations in the assumptions that have guided much of the socialist movement for the past 150 years.

It is not only statist socialists who have presumed that capital can be controlled. It is also true of many anti-statist, libertarian leftists. To take one example, Arjun Appadurai writes of anarcho-syndicalism: "The syndicalists accept the general socialist proposition that society is divided into two classes, the capitalist and the proletariat, whose claims are irreconcilable; that the modern state is a class state dominated by the few capitalists; that the institution of private capital is the root of all social evils and that the only remedy for them is to substitute collective capital in place of private capital."<sup>(1)</sup> As Appadurai sees it,

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the aim of a new society is not to abolish capital but to make it the collective property of the workers, which will presumably remove the destructive sting of capital's impact on humanity and nature. The underlying assumption is that capital is a thing that can be controlled through external means.

This assumption remains widely shared by many in today's movement against corporate capital. David Korten, for example, has argued that the destructive impact of transnational capital can be ameliorated by the creation of a new international mechanism (perhaps based on the United Nations) that obtains control over major corporate decisions regarding investment and allocation of natural resources. Similar notions have been advanced by an array of other thinkers.(2) Whether one conceives of such a regulating mechanism as a centralized state, a popular assembly, or a "neutral" international organization, the prevailing assumption is that capital can be controlled.

In response to such standpoints a large of thinkers and activists have swung in the opposite direction by arguing 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."(3) Whether such thinkers view the basic problem as human civilization, the privileging of human over natural development, or authoritarian impulses associated with the rise of urban society, they share the assumption that capital is inseparable from economic development as such, which leads them to downplay or dismiss the importance of modernization altogether.

A Marxist-Humanist approach to the ecological crisis rejects both the assumption that capital can be controlled through external means and the assumption that civilization and/or economic development must be sacrificed in the name of rejecting capital. Though those who favor the "collective" ownership or control of capital may appear the opposite of those who disparage economic development and civilization, the two positions are not **absolute** opposites. They both share a common defect: they both view capital as a **thing** instead of as a specific social relation of production.

What does it mean to say that capital is not a thing? It means that it is not only the material properties of capital that make it so destructive but most of all its value form. As Marx never ceased to emphasize, capital is not simply a thing; it is a social relation mediated by the instrumentality of things. The specific social relation that capital is based upon is abstract, value-creating labor. 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.”(4)

Capital, in other words, is congealed **abstract** or **undifferentiated** labor. Abstract labor, the monotonous, routine process of “doing” regardless of purpose or content, is the substance of value. Capital is congealed abstract labor, or self-expanding value. Just as the labor that 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 does and indeed must assume a concrete, material form.

Another way to approach the issue of what is capital is to ask: what is labor? In *Capital*, Marx wrote: “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.”(5) Labor is here defined as an activity that “mediates” between humanity and nature. Labor in this generic sense does not, according to Marx, exist apart from or outside of nature. It is not some abstract “being-for-self.” As Marx wrote in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, “labor is only the manifestation of one natural force, human labor power.” Nature, he insisted, is “the primary source of all the means and material of labor.” Marx therefore explicitly opposed those socialists who (in his words) “attribute a supernatural creative power to labor.”(6) 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 undergoes a **split**; it assumes a **dual** character. Marx considered his concept of the dual character of labor to be his most important theoretical discovery. On the one hand, labor is the specific exercise of human muscle and mind in creating or distributing products; he refers to this as **concrete labor**. On the other hand, labor under capitalism becomes reduced to a routine, monotonous form of activity that is indifferent to any natural or human content. This kind of labor, **abstract labor**, is an abstract “being-for-self” that disregards the externalities of nature. This “Promethean” kind of labor predominates in capitalism. Far from viewing value production as “natural,” Marx viewed it as a specific and indeed **perverse** form that emerges in determinant contexts and conditions. Once labor assumes a dual character, and “doing” becomes reduced to a repetitive, monotonous act characteristic of abstract labor, society becomes governed by the drive to produce for the sake of producing an ever-greater abstraction, value.

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Marx wrote, “the aim of capital is not served merely by obtaining more ‘wealth,’ but because it wants more value, to command more objectified labor.”(7) Capital cannot exist unless it obtains ever-more unpaid hours of abstract labor (or value) from the worker. Capital as “value that is big with itself” is therefore constantly driven to expand for the sake of expansion, to augment value for the sake of augmenting value, regardless of any natural or human limits. Herein lies the secret of capital’s enormous productivity as well as its environmental and social destructiveness.

As Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*, “Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a barrier for it. Else it would cease to be capital—money as self-reproductive. If capital ever perceived a certain boundary not as a boundary, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would have declined from exchange value to use value...Capital is the constant movement to create more of the same.”(8)

For this reason any effort to control capital or to “reject” it without uprooting the basis of value production is ultimately self-defeating. Capital devastates natural habitats, destroys species, shows disregard for natural limits and nature itself because it is the expression of a kind of labor that has become indifferent to its natural as well as human content. So long as labor is reduced to abstract labor and assumes a value form of mediation, capital will find a way to persevere regardless of whether the state, the community, or the most well intentioned group of individuals seek to control it.

And so long as labor is reduced to abstract labor and assumes a value form of mediation, any effort to “turn the clock back” by rejecting economic development, let alone “civilization,” will prove equally quixotic (not to mention that such an approach completely neglects 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 of people). 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 from the value-form of mediation by creating a totally new kind of labor.

What does it mean to create a totally new kind of labor that breaks from the logic of value production and allows us to reverse capital’s destructive march toward total environmental degradation? We must first of all be clear that the creation of a new kind of labor does not entail a mere rearrangement of the existing economic architecture. As Raya Dunayevskaya, the founder of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S. put it, “The difference

between the science of economics ‘as such,’ as a science of objective elements, wages, value, etc. and the Marxian science of economics is that for Marxism, all economic categories are social categories and thus in the science of economics it incorporates the subjective element, the receiver of wages, the source of value, in other words, the laborer.”(9) On this basis she argued that Marx’s critique of capitalism goes deeper than a critique of class relations; it is a critique of alienated **human** relations. She insisted that social transformation can by no means stop with the negation of the mode of labor, but must extend to an uprooting of all conditions in which human relations take on the form of relations between things. For this reason, she wrote, Marx viewed the transformation of alienated man/woman relations as the “most fundamental” of all of in society.(10) This didn’t mean that Dunayevskaya viewed the creation of a new kind of labor as of secondary importance. As she wrote in *Marxism and Freedom*: “Our point of departure has always been production only because to see the crisis in production means to understand it everywhere else. Failure to see it in production means inability to understand the crisis anywhere.”(11) The creation of new human relations that frees humanity as a whole from the domination of capital cannot and will not be achieved unless the working people make a social revolution that uproots the very **kind** of labor that defines contemporary capitalism.

This needed transformation in the mode of labor cannot be achieved simply by changing property forms. Changes in property forms can, at best, alter the mode of distribution that act as a conduit for alienating the product of labor from the producer. However, as Marx never ceased to emphasize, the alienation of the product from the producer is only the manifestation of a deeper problem—the alienation in the very activity of laboring. That cannot be ended by changing the mode of distributing products of labor; it can only be ended by transforming **conditions** of labor wherein work becomes “thing-like,” abstract, and hence a source of capitalist value and surplus value.

We need to stress here that value is not determined by the actual amount of time it takes to produce a commodity. It is instead determined by the **average** amount of time that it takes to produce a commodity based on the world market as a whole. If it takes 48 hours to assemble a car in India, but 24 hours to assemble one in Germany, the 24 hours of additional labor in India creates 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 times carcass.”(12) This is also why the rape of the environment is endemic to capitalism. Time becomes an abstract, external measure that we must obey regardless of human or natural factors.

How is the alienation inherent in the activity of laboring to be uprooted? There is only one way—through the collective self-activity of the laborers who create freely associated labor. 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 soon be shown the door. Alienated labor cannot be ended simply by achieving “free association” in the **political** sphere (as assumption shared by many social ecologists); it can be ended only by internally uprooting of the value form of mediation by creating a freely associated labor process that dispenses with the split in the category of labor.

So what happens to time once the workers achieve such a free association? Time no longer is what rules us; we instead rule time. The workers decide, on the basis of their available time and resources, how to organize production and distribution. There is still of course a need to economize on time, since our time is limited. The difference is that unlike in capitalism, where the economization of time is imposed forcefully from without and according to 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 being a slave to time, time now becomes our handmaiden. Or as Marx once put it, time becomes the space for human development.

This creation of freely associated labor was no distant goal for Marx. While he knew that the transcendence of capitalist alienation would be a long, protracted, and bloody process, he insisted that freely associated labor must emerge in the immediate aftermath of a social revolution for a truly new society to emerge. Indeed, what excited him about the Paris Commune is that it brought this to life. Marx held the secret of the Commune, which helped strip away the fetishism that attaches itself to commodity production, was “its own working existence.” Dunayevskaya held to Marx’s emphasis on freely associated labor throughout her life. She insisted, “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.”(13)

The complexity involved in achieving this is evident from the unfinished and aborted revolutions of the past century. The importance of breaking from the capitalist law of value by creating “freely associated labor” in the immediate aftermath of the seizure of power was no secret to many of those who made the Russian Revolution of 1917. It was

surely recognized by Lenin. As Dunayevskaya wrote, “What was Lenin’s Universal? The new for Lenin was not *Imperialism*, but *State and Revolution*, and the Universal was ‘To a Man’—production had to be organized and run ‘to a man.’ It was a great Universal, but it was general.”(14) Why was it only general? The reason was that despite Lenin’s view that production needed to be run by the masses “to a man, woman, and child,” the tragedy of the Russian Revolution was that this was never achieved. Instead, “in relation to the working masses a gulf opened between the Bolsheviks in power and the working people.”(15) This wasn’t only due to the ravages caused by Civil War and imperialist invasion. It was most of all due to Lenin’s failure to break from the elitist concept of a vanguard party.

The political monopolization of power by a single party not only conflicts with the aim of ensuring the free association of the producers; it contradicts it. Real and effective decision making by the laborers quickly gives way to the dictates of “the party” once the “vanguard” manages to “seize the heights” of state power. The duality in Lenin’s heritage between affirming free association of the producers on the one hand and the vanguard leadership of the party on the other left little room for actualizing the breakdown of the value form of mediation. Stalin soon learned to take full advantage of this by transforming what for Lenin was a temporary expedient into a permanent virtue. The ultimate result was totalitarian state-capitalism, which produced an environmental disaster too extensive to detail here.

The powerful hold of vanguardist and elitist concepts of organization on revolutions and social movements since 1917 explains why Marxist-Humanists call upon revolutionaries to work out a new approach to organization, based on Marx’s distinctive, non-vanguardist concept of organization. The question is not simply what kind or form of organization is needed to “make” the revolution. The central question facing us today is **what happens after** the revolution; that is, how can we ensure that a new bureaucracy or ruling class does not emerge following the overthrow of the old? It is the most difficult question facing us. We need to begin our exploration of this issue by recognizing that nothing ensures that even a social revolution will lead to the abolition of capital unless the uprooting is total from the start. Put simply, labor must be freely associated from the inception of the revolution; otherwise, the revolution is bound to retrogress into some variant of capitalism.

The alienation in the very activity of 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. The alienation in the very activity of laboring can be ended only by those subjected to the alienation of labor itself. This is why it is imperative for social movements to develop new forms of organization and association that break from the hierarchical division between mental and manual labor even before the revolution. If we wait for the moment of revolution for freely associated labor to arise, as if everything depends on spontaneity alone, we may well find ourselves ill prepared to deal with the question of how production relations can be fundamentally transformed. It is not possible to impede the destructive path of capital without a social revolution. But it is also not possible to make a successful social revolution unless hierarchical forms that impede the elimination of value production are challenged and broken down in the very course of our struggle for a new society.

For this reason Marxist-Humanists have emphasized organizational responsibility for Marx's philosophy of "revolution in permanence." (16) The division of mental and manual labor is the hallmark of class society; it existed long before capitalism, but the capitalist labor process builds upon and extends it. Without the hierarchical division between intellectuals as "leaders" and workers as "followers," capitalism would never have been able to construct a social system based on the split in the category of labor. Whether or not a social revolution emerges in our times, as indeed it must, we must prepare for one by breaking down the separation of mental and manual, worker and intellectual, and theory and practice within our movements. Just as there is no substitute for social revolution, there is no substitute for preparing for one by prefiguring the creation of a new kind of labor in our movements today.

It is true that many today shy away from meeting this challenge. It is all the more reason to take issue with them. The problem is reflected in the work of an important Marxist theorist, István Mészáros. In addition to numerous works on Marxist and radical theory, Mészáros is author of *Beyond Capital*—a serious, 1,000-page study that raises a number of critical questions for our movements today. Mészáros not only insists on the need to raise the question of "what happens after" the revolution now; he does so by integrating an important ecological perspective into his work. He writes: "Unless some viable strategies of transition [to socialism] succeed in breaking the vicious circle of the by now catastrophic social embeddedness of capitalist technology, the 'productivity' of capital will continue to cast its dark shadow as a constant and acute threat to survival, rather than being that accomplishment of 'the material conditions of emancipation' which Marx so often greeted with praise." (17)

When it comes to directly addressing the question of “what happens after,” however, 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’ argues that “there is a great deal in the ‘wages system’ that...must be transcended on the long-term time-scale of the new historic form.”(18) He makes no secret of the fact that he is critical of Marx for presuming that wage labor can be abolished shortly after the revolution. He of course has the “right” to criticize Marx, but the question is what is lost conceptually in doing so. We can see what is lost from his ensuing statement: “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.” But if the hierarchical division of labor and “the wages system” persist for a prolonged period after the revolution, capital as the medium of social interaction must persist for a long period as well. After all, as Marx never tired of repeating, 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 the revolution, how is the destructive impact of capital to be halted? The only answer possible (which Mészáros himself refrains from providing) is that capital must somehow be externally controlled by the state, the community, or the “revolutionary” leadership.

The assumption that capital can be controlled is more widespread than many realize. It permeates leftwing discussions on the ecological crisis, including those writing from a Marxist, post-Marxist, anarchist, liberal, or postmodernist perspective. However, if we agree that the law of motion of capitalism suggests that capital cannot be controlled, we are left with one alternative: to work out perspectives for abolishing capital through the creation of a new kind of labor and through the creation of new human relations in society as a whole.

Attempts to avoid this conclusion by reverting to primitivist or anti-developmental perspectives do not suffice, 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. The latter is evident from the way capitalism is increasingly abandoning the field of production altogether by

investing vast amounts of social wealth and value in **unproductive** sectors, where (for now at least) it is able to obtain a greater mass of profits. As Murray E.G. Smith has argued, “If capitalism’s tendency to promote the ‘objective socialization’ of labor and of production once reflected its historically-progressive role in developing the forces of production, it now **also** reflects a hypertrophy of the capitalist state and the sphere of circulation—a hypertrophy that impedes the advance of the productive forces by diverting enormous economic resources **away from** production.”(19)

The question facing us today is not to have or not to have development but what **kind** of development can meet human needs without relying on the value form of mediation. Marxist-Humanists such as Raya Dunayevskaya confronted this question close to half a century ago; it is high time that we delve into it ourselves.(20) Though we face many difficult theoretical and practical problems, a rich conceptual foundation exists for dealing with them that we can make us of and develop anew for our times. The need for a philosophic new beginning is certainly felt by many in today struggles against imperialist war, poverty, and environmental degradation. All that we now need is for the dialogue to begin.

### Notes

1. Arjun Appadurai, *The Substance of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 124.
2. For a summary of some of these discussions, see the Summer 2000 issue of *Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought*.
3. For one expression of this position, see David Watson, *Anti-Bookchin* (New York: Autonomedia, 1990).
4. See *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 3* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 286.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 290.
6. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (New York: International Publishers, 1933), p. 21.
7. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 353.
8. *Grundrisse*, p. 334.
9. Raya Dunayevskaya, “Labor and Society,” in *The Marxist-Humanist Theory of State-Capitalism* (Chicago: News and Letters, 1992), p. 21.

10. For Dunayevskaya's extensive discussions of this issue, see her *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991) and *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).
11. Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom, from 1776 Until Today* (New York: Humanities Books, 2002), pp. 281-82.
12. Karl Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 6* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 127.
13. *Marxism and Freedom*, p. 64.
14. Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001), p. 156.
15. Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution, from Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 116.
16. See Parts I and 5 of Dunayevskaya's *The Power of Negativity* for a discussion of this issue.
17. Istvan Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Books, 1995), p. 433.
18. *Beyond Capital*, p. 489. Mészáros quotes Marx's statement on abolishing the wages system from *Wages, Price and Profit*. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program* Marx 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).
19. Murray E.G. Smith, *Invisible Leviathan: The Marxist Critique of Market Despotism and beyond Postmodernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 180.
20. See Dunayevskaya's *Nationalism, Communism, Marxist Humanism, and the Afro-Asian Revolutions* [original 1958] (Chicago: News and Letters, 1984).