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*ANTHROPOCENE AND ECOSOCIALISM: A PERSPECTIVE*

INTERVISTA A CURA DI VIOLA CAROFALO E DELIO SALOTTOLO

**S&F\_:** The question of the ecological crisis is becoming increasingly central in the analysis of scholars from different fields, what do you think about the fashionable Anthropocene-concept?



**KS\_:** *The now fashionable concept of Anthropocene, first suggested by Paul Crutzen, is defined by a new geological epoch in which the entire surface of the earth is covered by the traces of human activities. Certainly, there are a lot of debates whether certain observable characteristics created within a relatively short time-span are sufficient to replace the Holocene which lasted more than 10000 years. There are also disputes over when exactly the Anthropocene started. As long as such debates continue, the concept may not count as a truly scientific concept. However, under these debates, there is an objective fact, which only skeptics can doubt. The popularity of the concept clearly reflects the undeniable fact that human species become a “major*

*geological force.” There are few people who would deny the enormous impact of human activities upon the environment, especially in a negative way. The entire conditions of the earth are significantly modified by our activities of production and consumption especially after the World War II, which now culminates to a dangerous level beyond tipping points of the planetary boundaries.*

*Consequently, the Anthropocene poses an interesting question in terms of the relation between humans and nature mediated by modern technology. For example, it poses a paradox, in which the modern attempt to conquer nature has been completed, but only in such a way that it produces unexpected consequences. The project of the domination over nature, which is often characterized as “the end of nature”, did not lead to the realization of human freedom based on the ability to freely manipulate nature. On the contrary, precisely because of the increasing power over nature, nature is now returning as an uncontrollable force against humans.*

*This age of the “Great Acceleration” obviously has to do with the development of capitalism, but there is also a tendency to not explicitly discuss the impact of capitalism, reducing the entire problematic to the ahistorical issue of nature, technology, and ontology. The Anthropocene thus needs to be analyzed in relation to the capitalist mode of production, and this is why a Marxist insight can be useful.*

**S&F\_:** Who (or what) is the *anthropos*, the supposed subject of the Anthropocene?

**KS\_:** *Of course, all of us by definition. I know why you ask this question. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg criticized the concept of the Anthropocene because it dissolved economic, social and political inequalities on a global scale into one single subject, the Anthropos. I agree.*

*For example, the emission of CO2 by people in the Global South is significantly less than by those in developed countries. The contribution to climate crisis is significantly different, and furthermore those who suffer first and more are those who are not responsible for the climate crisis. Those people who are rich and more responsible are also able to outsource the negative consequences to others in the periphery. This is basically what Markus Wissen and Ulrich Brand call "the imperial mode of living". The alternative concept to the Anthropocene here is the Capitalocene, which highlights the fact that the entire planet is now covered by the traces of the logic of capital accumulation and the fact that its negative consequences are unevenly distributed. But the fundamental difference between the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene disappears soon, once the issue of the Anthropocene is dealt from a Marxist perspective because it clearly analyses the situation in relation to the capitalist mode of production. It is possible to highlight the role of capital against those who employ the concept of the Anthropocene without seriously considering the fundamental impacts of capitalism.*

*Thus, within the Marxist tradition, emphasizing the difference between two concepts is fertile. The Anthropocene can be critically examined from a perspective of class, capital, and imperialism without simply reducing it to an abstract ontology. So the Anthropos is, of course, we all humans, but with different degree of participation in the formation of the Anthropocene.*

**S&F\_:** Starting from your studies on Marx and ecology, in what sense can the publication of a large number of notes, citations and marginalia in the fourth section of the MEGA2 transform the "classic" point of view of this relationship?

**KS\_:** First of all, my approach is classical. There have been various attempts to update Marx from a green perspective by

abandoning its key concepts. As an attempt of non-classical reading, we have people like Ted Benton and Alain Lipietz. But such an approach cannot show convincingly why it is still necessary to read Marx in the age of ecological crisis. Marxist tradition is actually treated as an “obstacle” by them because the Marxist idea is supposed to be Promethean, a naïve supporter of the idea of hyper-industrialism for the sake of absolute domination over nature. In contrast, by looking at his notebooks published for the first time in the MEGA, it is now possible to show quite clearly that Marx was seriously concerned with ecological issues.

Despite the importance, Marx’s notebooks were not even published until quite recently. One reason is that the so-called “traditional Marxism” treated Marx’s historical materialism as a closed dialectical system that explains everything in the universe, encompassing human history and nature. In this sense, Marxists did not pay enough attention to his economic manuscripts and even less to notebooks, which document the incomplete character of Marx’s *Capital*. Even Engels did not mention Marx’s serious engagement with natural science, and the following generation simply assumed that Marx had almost nothing to say about nature. Instead, they took recourse to Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Dühring* to expand their materialist theory to the universe.

Of course, there were Marxists who rejected this omnipotent “world-view” (*Weltanschauung*) of historical materialism by traditional Marxism. They are known today under the banner of “Western Marxism,” as Merleau-Ponty named it. However, when they rejected the traditional Marxism, they harshly reproached Engels as the misleading founder of the problematical world-view, who wrongly expanded Marx’s dialectical analysis of capitalist society to the scientific system of the universe. Consequently, when Western Marxists expelled Engels and his *dialectics of nature* from

Marxism, they also excluded the sphere of nature and natural sciences altogether from their analysis. Consequently, Marx's serious engagement with the natural science was ignored by both traditional and Western Marxists during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But as said, today, thanks to the publication of Marx's notebooks in the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), it is possible to analyze them and reconstruct what he intended to develop by intensively studying natural science while he was also striving to finish *Capital*. This reconstruction of Marx's ecological critique of capitalism, as already begun by ecosocialists such as Burkett and Foster, gains a clear textual evidence that, in contrast to Liedman, Marx was clearly an "ecologically conscious person," as he was quite consciously intended to add more substantial claims about the environmental destruction under capitalism.

Instead of simply rejecting Marx's approach to update into green Marxism by abandoning the "classic" approach, it is now possible to develop Marx's ecology in relation to various classical concept such as value, class, and socialism.

**S&F\_:** Why are Marx's extracts from the volumes of the agrarian chemist von Liebig particularly important?

**KS\_:** Liebig was a famous chemist at the time, and Marx read his works multiple times during his life. It is interesting how both Marx and Liebig changed their view on modern agriculture over time from a Promethean one to an ecological one. It is possible to trace these developments in the notebooks, and we can understand how Marx stopped naively believing the unlimited increase of productivity and attained an ecological view. The key concept here is metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) and robbery (*Raubbau*).

In the seventh edition of *Agricultural Chemistry* published in 1862, Liebig corrected his earlier naive optimism about the omnipotent ability of chemical fertilizer to overcome natural

limits in agriculture. Rather, he harshly criticized the modern agriculture as robbery because it takes as much nutrition as possible from the soil without returning it to the soil, thus exhausting it. Robbery agriculture is driven by the need to maximize profits in the short term, which is incompatible with the material conditions of the soil for sustainable production in the long run.

Famously enough, Marx integrated Liebig's critique of robbery into *Capital*. He argued that there emerges a grave discrepancy between the logic of capital's valorization and that of nature's metabolism, which creates "metabolic rifts" in human interaction with the environment. In this case of agriculture, the problem manifests itself as exhaustion of soil fertility, but this problem of robbery is by no means restricted to the issue. Marx himself expanded the concept to discuss issues such as excessive deforestation and exhaustion of other natural resources in his late years. Liebig is important for Marx's ecology because it really opens up a new paradigm in his critique of political economy.

**S&F\_:** In what sense can Marx's reflection on "metabolism" (*Stoffwechsel*) of Nature and Society be useful to understand the origin of the current ecological crisis?

**KS\_:** Apparently, it would be absurd to say that Marx predicted global climate breakdown after reading Liebig. His knowledge of natural science was significantly limited from today's standpoint. But he also knew it, and that is why he intensively studied various books on natural sciences after 1867. Notably, he also read various authors who even criticized Liebig's theory of robbery.

The point is that Marx's ecological critique of capitalism is founded on his own system of political economy. It does not simply

come from Liebig's Agricultural Chemistry. It is more elastic and comprehensive, and it is also capable of integrating new scientific discoveries after Marx's death. In this sense, Marx's political economy provides a methodological foundation for analyzing an ecological crisis. It reveals particular ways of organizing the metabolism.

Going back to the relationship between Marx and Liebig, Marx integrated Liebig's critique into his theory of metabolism, arguing in *Capital* that the metabolism between humans and nature is seriously disturbed due to the antagonism between town and country. Metabolism between humans and nature is, according to Marx, a transhistorical physiological fact, as humans must work upon nature to live on this planet. He then defined labor as the conscious mediating activity of this metabolism. How this metabolism takes place thus depends on the social organization of labor. In capitalism labor attains a singular function as the sole source of value. Consequently, the entire metabolism is organized under the primacy of value as the objectification of abstract labor.

However, this value alone only represents the one-sided aspect of the entire process of universal metabolism of nature (i.e. abstract labor), inevitably creating tension between humans and nature. This tension becomes more manifest when value becomes capital as an automatic subject. Capital reorganizes the entire sphere of society and nature from the perspective of maximal valorization, out of which an "irreparable rift" emerges.

Here, if I may repeat, it is important not to limit Marx's ecological critique to agriculture under the influence of Liebig but to understand it under his broader theory of metabolism. Although Marx himself mainly focused on the issue of robbery in agriculture, it is by no means necessary to restrict it. Marx also tried to apply this theoretical concept to various issues in his later life such as deforestation and stock farming.

Thus, Marx would be happy to see that today there are various attempts to apply this theoretical framework as a tool to analyze ongoing environmental crisis. To name a few, Stefano B. Longo's analysis of marine ecology, Ryan Gunderson's critique of livestock agribusiness, as well as Philip Mancus's discussion on the disruption of nitrogen cycle are excellent examples for the contemporary ecosocialist application of Marx's theory of metabolic rift.

**S&F\_:** Jason W. Moore, in his essay *Metabolic Rift or Metabolic Shift? Dialectics, Nature, and the World-Historical Method*<sup>1</sup>, states that the metabolic rift theory shows an unresolved contradiction «between a philosophical-discursive embrace of a relational ontology (humanity-in-nature) and a practical-analytical acceptance of Nature/Society dualism (dualist practicality)», what do you think?

**KS\_:** Moore's monistic theory and his critique of the concept of "metabolic rift," which he falsely attributes to Foster alone, and not to Marx himself, seems to attain the increasing influence. Moore is more a Latourian than a Marxist because his monism is incompatible with Marx's own method. Foster and I regard his theory to be anti-ecosocialist. An important problem is "monism," which, despite its apparent radicalness, ends up falling into an anti-ecological argument.

It is apparently wrong to blame the concept of the metabolic rift for Cartesian dualism for the reason that it presupposes a fully separated set of entities. But Marx's theory of metabolism discusses the unity in separation, and nature and society are always in their interaction.

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<sup>1</sup> J.W. Moore, *Metabolic Rift or Metabolic Shift? Dialectics, Nature, and the World-Historical Method*, in «Theory and Society», 46, 2017, pp. 285-318.

Moore does not see that the separation of human from nature as the fundamental condition of the capitalist mode of production. Marx recognizes that nature has been fully modified by human labor, but human is also a part of nature, creating a unity, instead of a “Cartesian” binary, in the transhistorical process of the metabolic interaction between human and nature. Marx’s theory shows the historical specificity of the way humans relate to nature when this metabolic exchange is fully mediated by the capitalistically constituted labor.

On the contrary, in Moore’s analysis of capitalism, labor does not play any primary role, and he rather treats it only as just one of four components of “Cheap Nature.” This marginalization of labor is not a minor issue. In fact, important aspects such as a critique of the modern separation between human and nature, the one-sided mediation of the universal metabolism of nature by abstract labor alone, the socialist project to rehabilitate the unity of human and nature, are all missing in Moore’s analysis. Consequently, Moore’s critique of capitalism turns out narrower than Marx’s own ecological critique of capitalism.

Foster and Paul Burkett argued in *Marx and the Earth* that James O’Connor’s concept of the “second contradiction of capitalism” was primarily “economic,” while Marx’s critique is both “economic and ecological.” Moore’s discussion about the end of Cheap Nature pretty much shares O’Connor’s theory of underproduction, and accordingly Moore also subordinate the ecological crisis to the economic crisis due to the increasing costs of cheap nature and neglects a larger ecological disruption of the Earth. On the contrary, Marx’s theory of metabolism does actually deal with a set of broader ecological problems that are not confined to the crisis of capital’s accumulation but relevant to sustainable human development in and with nature.

**S&F\_:** In your opinion, does the Marxian socialist project suppose the question of sustainable development of humanity in nature?

**KS\_:** *Ecosocialism demands for the free sustainable human development in nature. The current capitalist system undermines material conditions for such development. If socialism is about bringing humanity freedom, it must be sustainable.*

*It is thus important that Marx distinguished “robbery” and “development” of the productive forces. According to Marx, only the sustainable development counts as a historically driving force toward socialism. Robbery, which only gives an appearance of the increasing productivity in sacrifice of the future generations, only undermines the material conditions for the development of humanity in nature. Marxists need to comprehend ecological crisis and metabolic rifts as the central contradiction of capitalism. Marx recognized this point when he found a “socialist tendency” in Carl Fraas’s warning against excessive deforestation and climate change.*

*By doing so, he also problematizes the notion that only economic contradiction is the central contradiction. Capitalists instead aim at profiting more from the current ecological crisis by inventing new business such as geo-engineering, GMOs, carbon trade, and insurances for natural disasters. Thus, a serious engagement with global warming simultaneously means a struggle against capitalism. Otherwise, the economic crisis will be overcome precisely through the means of the deepening of the ecological crisis.*

**S&F\_:** Moving from theory to praxis, what should global socialist movements do to face the ecological crisis?

**KS\_:** *I do not want to give up the idea of progress and development. When the time is left, it is necessary to provide a*

positive vision. It brings nothing to say that only in ecosocialism society will be sustainable. People will be lost without knowing what to do in front of such an abstract vision. In contrast, Green New Deal can be such a positive vision.

Inspired by these recent ecosocialist critiques, Naomi Klein, though not a Marxist, argues: “Let’s acknowledge this fact [that actually existing socialism caused serious environment degradation], while also pointing out that countries with a strong democratic socialist tradition – like Denmark, Sweden, and Uruguay – have some of the most visionary environmental policies in the world. From this we can conclude that socialism isn’t necessarily ecological, but that a new form of democratic eco-socialism, with the humility to learn from Indigenous teachings about the duties to future generations and the interconnection of all of life, appears to be humanity’s best shot at collective survival.”

Klein recently argues a lot for Green New Deal, but it does not mean that she argues for green capitalism. As is indicated in this passage, Green New Deal is envisioned as a strategy toward a realization of more radical society, which I call ecosocialism.

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