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A dialogue with Marx on **the** **relationship** between **Nature** and **Human**

Vu Hoang Long

The purpose of this article

This writing is the memoir that I have assembled from materials I collected in the 3-day course of the Marx Autumn School - hosted by [Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung](#). In the first part of the course, we took part in the 2-day coursework including a close reading of Marx et al.'s works such as *Capital*, *Grundrisse*, and the chapter *Theories of Surplus Value in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Christian Schmidt¹ - Senior Academic Advisor at the Humanities and Social Change Center Berlin of Humboldt University Berlin, was our moderator/supervisor. We together shed a different light on the philosophy of Karl Marx which is both familiar and somewhat estranged in Vietnam. In the second part of the course, we joined an international conference connecting environmental activists from France, Germany, Greece, Czech, and Colombia².

After finishing the course, I have two things to conclude with an adequate amount of time for self-reflection. First of all, Karl Marx is a great philosopher. He lived his life to the fullest in his historical epoch. His clairvoyant gaze and subtle writing revealed the disastrous mechanism of nineteenth-century capitalism. Marx's humanism aimed to radically liberate humans from the alienated chain of his era's economic-industrial structures. Nonetheless, to be fair, Marx's humanism saw nature only as a supporting character in the play where humans were positioned as key players. Therefore, I assume that to keep the spirit of Marx's philosophy alive, a spirit which he ignited more than a century ago, we must read Marx in tight relation to the context of our own time, when twenty-first-century capitalism has already gained its hegemonic position in our mainstream discourse.

Keeping in mind all previous notions, I want to go straight to my second conclusion: Marx's philosophy should be put into a dialogue with contemporary schools of philosophy. I adore the way the young philosopher Kohei Saito poses the problem of environmental catastrophe through the Marxist frame in his book [Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capitalism,](#)

Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy, along with the way environmental activists from around the world elaborate their hardships. Thus, I think the association between Marxism and two branches of contemporary thought - postcolonialism and posthumanism - should be useful for us to understand our own era. And the most important thing is, it helps us to understand Marx in a different light in the twenty-first century. The present-day human condition is the intersectionality between countless forces of systemic oppression from heteronormative gender frames to ethnic/racial conflicts and environmental exploitation. This complexity urges us to reconsider some of the most fundamental theoretical questions: What does it mean to be human? Are humans separated entities from nature, or are they parts of nature? With either way to answer question 2, a further question should be: How will humans' role to change nature happen, and can they do that?

Human and Nature

The question about the relationship between humankind and nature is an ontological question. It questions the essence of our existence. The reason for that is because, if we say that our species exists independently with nature, we have to prove an idealistic proposition in which God created us and nature independently from ancient times. Then God legitimized our legitimacy of governing nature based on our will. This proposition has not been proved yet. And if we presume that we are a part of nature, then our "(biological and social) nature" has been determined by nature itself. Thus, our effort to change nature, in fact, proves that nature is changing itself. And we have nothing more special than other kinds of species.

Marx wittily elaborated this question. He pointed out that to understand the relationship between humans and nature, we must have understood the nature of labour. "Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own

¹ Christian Schmidt's profile can be found here: <http://criticaltheoryinberlin.de/author/christian-schmidt/>

² "Mine, Forest, Dam - Liberation of a Nature that became Prey: Activists in Exchange about their Struggles and Practices" conference can be played back here: http://marxherbstschule.net/10/?page_id=29

actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (Marx et al., 1990, p. 283). This metabolism as Marx mentioned is not only the exchange of nutrients between our bodies and the environment. Through the senses of our bodies, we perceive forces of nature around us, understand their essences and change these relations so that they benefit our desire. As a result, nature serves humans' benefits. The labour process is what distinguishes between humans and other animals, such as ants and bees - those who change the environment only because their instincts allow them to do it without beneficial intention. Marx said that, while animals change the environment, such as involving in the process of vegetal pollination, only because they are born to do that, humans change the environment due to their needs. Thanks to abstract understandings of the world, we understand the rules of nature and expropriate them for making a profit. We internalize the rules of nature into our bodies, thus, make nature an elongation of our organs.

Marx's notion of the internalization of nature into bodies is an epistemological notion. It questions the essence and boundaries of humans' knowledge. Like Spinoza, Marx saw that it was irrelevant to ask whether the human being is the exceptional creation of God or not. Since the beginning of human existence, they have encountered various forms of social, political, and natural construction. Human existence is "from within" nature. We have survived to live life due to natural conditions that benefited us. We have gained our self-realization through the process of constant interaction with nature. By default, we were born inside nature, thus, all theories we have created to resolve the essence of nature are for the sake of co-existing with nature. Theory per se must be practical.

This is where Marx can make conversation with posthumanists like Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, eco-critics like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, and ethic of care theorists like Joan Tronto and Nel Noddings. One of the most crucial keywords which we repeatedly used in our 2-day coursework was "immanence". "Immanence" serves as the opposition of "transcendence". A transcendent viewpoint

is a God-like viewpoint that allows us to see the rules of the world "objectively" which includes nature per se and human per se. A transcendent viewpoint is destructive because since we adopted this point of view, we have treated nature (and even other fellow humans) as our object while playing God. Similar to Spinoza, Marx's viewpoint on the metabolism between humans and nature placed us into a very humble immanent position: we have been a part of what Tronto and Fisher (1990) call a "life-sustaining web" which includes humans and non-humans.

Marx's notion of the supremacy of humans over animals has to be reconsidered. I propose that, we can adopt the monistic viewpoint of Spinoza which uniformizes God and nature in order to reveal that the ability to think and to take part in the labour process are among countless attributes of nature; thus, there is no way to claim these attributes are more superior than others (Grey, 2013). Therefore, it is meaningless to say that, the existence of humans is more superior to the existence of other animals (Sharp, 2011). The only argument we can make to legitimize the use of animals to fulfill humans' needs is that humans cannot communicate with animals, thus, they cannot be "friends" (Grey, 2013). The exact attitude can be seen in animals: they treat humans in their way and we cannot judge whether it is "right" or "wrong". Understanding animals, thus, should be considered as humans' cognitive limitation (Sharp, 2011).

How humans claimed their ownership of time and space

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How human claimed their ownership of time and space

Transforming the world, for Marx, is a basic practice of being human. With the effectiveness created by the means of production, humans

have transformed the world in both good and bad ways. Space and time - two fundamental elements of being - have been expropriated in order to make the earth a pure object to humans, since the day we used language to make sense of space and time. Environmental catastrophe rooted its origin in the epoch of agricultural production. Since we decided to inseminate seeds in equal superficies, the destiny of the earth has been to be changed and strictly governed by humans. Nonetheless, it will be fooled to say that in order to save nature, all civilizations should be torn down. The transformation of nature is destined as humans are still alive and interact with the world surrounding them. And nature also changes humans.

Before elaborating on the way humans took control of space and time, I want to demonstrate the role of machines and techniques on the production process and how they changed "the face of the earth" as Marx put it. Pieces of machinery affected the production growth because capitalism took place. It was neither due to the invention of machines that gave ways for capitalist production to arise nor due to the birth of capitalism that humans gained enough capital to develop technologies. The rise of capitalism and the progress of technologies were two intertwined and dialectical processes. From the framework of anti-dialectic, I and professor Schmidt shared with each other about the idea of the posthumanist philosopher Bernard Stiegler (1998): It was not because we were civilized and intelligent that we were able to invent tools, but in contrary, the invention of tools made us civilized and intelligent. Stiegler's notion is strange enough to lead to an important question: If humans' intelligence is not superior to animals' intellect, how could they invent tools to transform nature? Stiegler's answer - nature lets us create tools by providing us with materials. Imagine if there were no caves and fruit flesh with colors, people could not have invented the signification of meanings. Therefore, language and memory could not have taken place. It is true to say that we randomly created tools, and we adapted with the presence of tools in our lives. That was the beginning of civilization.

Let us come back to the supremacy of the most dangerous species in governing the earth - humans, according to Marx et al. (1990), through humans' gaze, the earth which contains lands, animals, plants, sunlight, and wind becomes raw materials for our production. "Every object possesses various properties, and is thus capable of being applied to different uses. The same product may therefore form the raw material for very different labour processes. Corn, for example, is a raw material for millers, starch-manufacturers, distillers and cattle-breeders. It also enters as raw material into its own production in the shape of seed; coal both emerges from the mining industry as a product and enters into it as a means of production" (Marx et al., 1990, p. 288). We need to remind ourselves that raw material is a social category. There is no raw material per se. Without this categorization, nature still exists. Through social conceptualization, everything out there becomes materials for our production.

Realizing the importance of the possession of raw materials, humans began to claim their ownership of lands. In present days, ownership is something normal, but let us imagine hundreds of years ago, it was absurd to point at a piece of land and claim that it belonged to someone. There was nothing to legitimize anyone's ownership except the "existence" of an imagined God. Slave ownership in North America in the nineteenth century was equally absurd! "From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias*" (Marx et al., 1990, p. 911).

Marx was obsessed with the birth of agriculture - the beginning of everything which is now called "civilization". After fabricating the right to own lands, humans did farming and ranching. At first, humans followed the rules of nature, such as weather and life circles of

plants and animals, to assemble agricultural products. Then, we found our way to manipulate these rules in order to reduce production time. This effort marked our first attempt to manipulate time. From the constant change of the phenomenal world, we created the concept of time and embedded into it a mission - to measure the amount of time used for producing goods. Corporeal time became a productive force. In this type of temporality, humans measured, researched, controlled, and elevated the speed of production. We harvested more crops in a shorter amount of time, we slaughtered cattle at a smaller age, and we produced more goods in a shorter period. At least, this temporality still relied on natural elements such as weather conditions, diseases, seasons, etc. Working time, on the other hand, implies the amount of time that workers must spend in the production process. The increase in productivity means the increase in humans' exploitation.

In developed industrial societies, time is no longer a quantity of measuring productivity. Time itself becomes a type of commodity and can be exchanged in the market, according to the genius of many Marxist philosophers, Walter Benjamin. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin et al. (1968) propose the concept of a homogeneous-empty time. It is the kind of temporality that is calculated by mechanical clocks. Homogeneous-empty time is seen as a continuous line of equal blanks of time, like a collection of countless similar drawers being put next to each other. You can insert any kind of event in these blank drawers. The diffusion and universalization of homogeneous-empty time help humans gain their absolute control on temporality. Homogeneous-empty time erases all traditional rituals and even our circadian rhythm, just to optimize working time.

"For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and

prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces" (Marx & Nicolaus, 1973, p. 410).

The powerful paragraph above from Marx which describes the absurd rule of humans on nature, or to be more exact, the rule of the ruling class on everyone else and nature, is an inspiring conclusion for this article. The supremacy of humans in the past was seen as a potential threat to the ecosystem's existence. In today's world, this existential threat becomes an everyday reality./.

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Environmental catastrophe **is not only** the problem of nature

Vu Hoang Long

After 2-day coursework with Mr. Christian Schmidt, our Marx Autumn School class joined with hundreds of audiences around the world in the conference on Mine, Forest, Dam – Liberation of a Nature that became Prey: Activists in Exchange about their Struggles and Practices, held by the [Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung](#). The conference was a very meaningful conclusion for the course. And it was, to me, an invitation to confront the difficulty of making judgments in both thinking and practice. Negativeness that happened to both nature and humans globally is more far-reaching than what a system of theories from the nineteenth century could ever describe.

From the points of view and practices of environmental activists such as Mikuláš Černík (Czech Republic), Jakeline Romero Epiayú (Colombia), Catalina Caro Galvis (Colombia), John Malamatinas (Greece), Florian Özcan & Robin Rosswog (Germany), and a group of activists from France, we realized that issues that happened everywhere were not only environmental exploitation-related. Furthermore, there were inequalities and conflicts among countries, races, ethnicities, genders, etc. In the field of social sciences and humanities, scholars urge us to see world issues as “intersectionality”.

Most simply, when we discuss natural resources, we often think about the replacement of renewable energy over fossil fuel to reduce the amount of CO₂ in our atmosphere. The media draws us a dream of an illusional future of electric cars, solar batteries, and wind electricity. They say that a “progressive”, “developed” future to think of is a future, in which we colonize the solar system by “clean” energy-driven technology. In fact, when all centers of development which have already reacted to “the end of history” (in the words of G. W. F. Hegel and Francis Fukuyama) try to restrict domestic mining and nuclear waste disposition, their capitalist corporations will instead do the same things in countries that are facing public debt and post-socialist crisis in the East and the South of Europe. And where will they mine cobalt and lithium for “clean” energy exploitation? It is understandable that some billionaires in third world countries who both shake hands

with the local governments and overseas corporations dare to carve from the face of the earth to hell if Satan owns raw materials. They dare to destroy every ancient town of local communities and indigenous people if their towns are randomly located on the surface of some cobalt mines. The precarious economic-political-social context of poor indigenous communities leads to domestic violence and other drawbacks on a micro-scale.

When environmental catastrophe occurs, nature is not the only victim. Humans, with their greed and unradical patches for disasters they have created, systematically oppress each other. Puzzling from the narratives of five activist groups from five countries, I saw forms of neocolonialism that disguise values of benevolence and humanism, and progressivism. The disastrous thing is, this neocolonialism has no specific face and shape. In general, capital has no face and identity.

The West as an ideology

“The West” is often used as a scapegoat which implies the root of colonialism. Based on what is the case, “the West” does not fit any real geographical entity such as Europe. Greece is a European country, but it is seen as subordinated to richer countries due to its public debt crisis. Post-socialist Eastern Europe is also seen as a backyard of the economic giants in Western Europe. Therefore, there is no concreated, ontologically-viable, and geographical West that fits the image of Europe. For Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Europe must be “provincialized”. There has been no geographical Europe with disenchanting space, secular time, and sovereignty. Europe exists with fragmentation and invisible hierarchies.

The West must be understood as an ideology. For Gamble (2009), the Western ideology is an assemblage of market democracy, liberalism, and universalized capitalism, in which, freedom of choice is seen as human nature. This ideology is what Francis Fukuyama praised as “the end of history” after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The footnote to Fukuyama’s flying colors adoration of the Western ideology is the logic of linear

evolutionism which declares that human civilization has only one way to progress from a lower to a higher stage of development - from tribal societies to monotheistic societies, from cults of personalities to market democracies. It seems to me that it is indistinguishable between the cult of Stalin and the cult of capitalism. It is just that capitalism has been rebranded as a buffet party in which all choices of dishes are predetermined by the elites.

With the claptrap promises of the Western ideology, we dream of an eternal democracy in which the hardest considerations humans must make are binary choices between Coca and Pepsi, KFC and McDonald, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, and so on. In the same way, we think about saving the environment as a choice between buying an electric car or a gasoline-powered car. If more people choose renewable energy, the invisible hand of the market will eliminate fossil fuels. Let us think further: Who will be the first to drive electric cars fueled by wind electricity and solar batteries? Which country will be the first to abandon domestic mining and to reduce the amount of CO2 to the lowest? And to pay for these futuristic plans, forests, oil, coal, and cobalt from which places on the earth will be exploited without any regulation? It is no need to think twice that people from the poorest, most corrupt countries will pay the price for the dreams of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg.

Green capitalism - a logic implies that we can take advantage of the free market to save the environment without considering structural inequalities - is the reason why we keep following a superficial "westernization" (Chichilnisky, 2019).

Dream of a possible future

Along with the narrative of how to fight climate change is the projection of a better future to live. In the imagination of the Western ideology, this projection is quite clear and determined with the vibe of a conqueror. They presume that human development is like a bullet being shot into the future. This is a kind of radical accelerationism being made up of the desire to maintain human consciousness forever.

What if there is no resource left on the earth to maintain life? All right, let us use clean energy-powered spacecraft to mine every meteorite flying across our head! What if the ecosystem collapses? All right, the richest people on the earth will have their slots to live on Mars. For the international elite class, saving the environment is easy. Because in case they fail to do that, God will save them first. Or to be exact, they will pray God to save themselves.

For the rest of the world, the future is nothing like fairytales and sci-fi movies. The future is even unthinkable.

For countries being entombed in public debt, people dream of a future as a point in which they are out of debt, the economy is being restored, and overseas mining capitalists leave the people's sovereignty. For people in places that used to be under Soviet colonialism, the future is more pessimistic. With continuous disasters such as the state's corruption or the lack of democratic institutions from the day the Eastern bloc collapsed, it seems like those who cried watching the movie "Goodbye, Lenin" will have to put their faith in the hands of the few in more "developed" countries in Western Europe. Life has not changed that much from the days of Soviet colonialism to the days of West colonialism. There is one positive thing to be certain - the media draws a more benevolent face to neocolonialism. Many people assume that, for the future to be thinkable, mining areas must be declared as public properties. Nonetheless, in the context of post-socialism, a variety of the public will see this as a red flag of the return of Soviet-style communism 30 years ago.

Even though being stuck in the conversation of the rights of land ownership and so on, it seems like to people of developed countries, no imagination of the future will surpass the Overton window of wind electricity, solar panel farms, electric cars, and the colonization of all solar systems.

After the Colombian activists raised their voices, I realized that the narrative of "saving the world" must be more complicated. It was ironic to place the dream of the West and the reality of the indigenous people in Colombia

together. It was funny to see the Western projection of a renewable energy-powered future when the fact was, all resources, such as lithium and cobalt, to make that future possible, were looted from South America. Mines were under the private ownership of the top 1% of the top 1% of billionaires who work with both Western corporations and the local military. Local people's lands were robbed in broad daylight, by neither Western capitalists nor local billionaire class, but directly by the local military. In the last two decades, the status quo of radical social inequality in non-West countries has become a reality, along with the rise of Western "futurists". When people got poorer and poorer, they did not care about the environment as much as they care about land ownership and domestic violence.

I cried after hearing one Colombian activist share about how her community dreamt of the future - it was a privilege to project what the future could be in someplace on the earth. The future was undreamable.

The biggest deficiency of the conference was that the problem of gender inequality was not mentioned in a proper amount of time. The feminist take towards environmental exploitation was ambiguous, even though when we tried to connect all the dots in the map, we could see that women of the "third world" countries were most affected by structural oppression. And when all puzzles were put into a complete picture, I soon realized that the traditional Marxist frame we used in the last two days was not to see the whole oppressive world with its completed intersectionality.

"Global North", "Global South" and binary oppositions

There was one thing that made me confused about the conference, as well as many academic forums in the world, was the over-usage of the "Global North" - "Global South" dichotomy. Similar to the case of "The West", this dichotomy must be understood not as two split geographical entities, but as opposition in ideologies caused by postcoloniality. In mainstream discourses, this dichotomy can be falsely understood as if "the West" is "bad",

then its oppositional types of governmentality, such as the authoritarianism regimes in China, Russia, and Iran are "good".

In thinking about the relations of power, we often hear the two terms "center" and "periphery". The powerful often position themselves in the center of common sense, while the powerless are marginalized to the periphery of discourses. It will be a reductionist notion to say that anyone who relates to "the West" is in the center, while everyone who opposes "the West" is marginalized. If we say so, then poor people would not have existed in Western Europe and North America, and capitalism would not have existed outside Europe.

Joey Ayoub (2021) opposes the idea of the binary opposition between the "Global North" and the "Global South". To Ayoub, the elite class exists internationally, regardless of whether they belong to "the West" or "the Rest". Similarly, the marginalized class is everywhere. Special interest groups which pursue the strategy of Occidentalism to confront Orientalism, or in short, to antagonize the West just for gaining power, do not necessarily portray the protagonists to the powerless. It is most likely that these Occidentalists only expropriate the people's hatred towards capitalism to rise to power, to become a new West.

Marx said: "Workers of the world, unite!" More than ever, this manifesto is relevant to our contemporary world. Especially when the term "workers" can be expanded to "the marginalized", "the not-haves", "the weak", etc. My most significant reflection after hearing the narratives as well as the stuckness of the environmental activists was that, could we reduce the complexity of this world to fairytales, showbiz culture, the good, the bad, fans, and anti-fans? Class struggle is an important field of struggle, but it is not the only struggle that deserves to be fought for. Other identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc. are equally important because the weak do not only wear one single chain.

Until this point, I agree with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2006) - author of "the

communist manifesto of the 21st century”, Empire - when they say that when capitalism becomes a global phenomenon, all identities, including “bourgeois” and “proletariat” are stolen from people. There are only “the rich” and “the poor” are left in this world. What a reductionist dichotomy! “Rich” and “poor” here must be understood based on all frames of politics, culture, society. Their meanings should not be reduced to the realm of economics. We cannot reduce our struggle to a binary fight in activism and other kinds of “changing the world”, but should see the struggle through the lens of intersectionality and rhizome: An Asian-American CEO can be a potential oppressor who exploits thousands of (male, female, other) workers in Africa and South Asia, and she can be oppressed by her white husband. This dilemmatic situation of power relations in the globalization era would confuse any great minds in Western philosophy in the 19th century if they could predict the future. Green capitalism will improve nothing except strengthen this status quo, especially when the CEO I have mentioned earlier works in the field of the renewable energy industry.

If pure class struggle can alone save the earth, then our 3-day course should not have existed because we would have surpassed capitalism some decades ago. But still, we sat down, talked about the issues, and thought about the issues, because there was a significant question we had to solve: “Whom are we fighting for?”./.

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