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

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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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