

UNDERSTANDING PHILOSOPHY, UNDERSTANDING MODERNISM

The aim of each volume in *Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism* is to understand a philosophical thinker more fully through literary and cultural modernism and consequently to understand literary modernism better through a key philosophical figure. In this way, the series also rethinks the limits of modernism, calling attention to lacunae in modernist studies and sometimes in the philosophical work under examination.

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"separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital."⁵ This historical separation from conditions of production for social need and metabolic stability into conditions governed by the imperative for capital accumulation and value production entails a fundamental transformation in metabolic relations. Capitalist relations not only create the division of labor, divorcing producers from their connection to land and capacities for use-value production, but also generate new methods of extraction, expansion, and scientific and technological development that operate on a scale beyond particular ecological relations or ecosystemic processes, diminishing dependence on these more immediate natural conditions.⁶ These modes of alienation combine with new forms of exploitation of both worker and nature, as capitalist production relentlessly pursues surplus value: "Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker."⁷

Marx's analysis of capitalist productive relations attends to the profound effects of this metabolic disturbance on workers as corporeal beings and on natural processes and systems more broadly. Both in his individual writings and his collaborations with Engels, Marx chronicles polluted and deleterious working conditions, various health afflictions and diseases, as well as malnutrition, arguing that capitalist production exhausts the corporeal metabolism of laborers, undermining their capacity to reproduce their conditions of health and vitality. These bodily and environmental health conditions are aligned with the broader transformations to ecological processes and relations that characterize capitalism.

As Marx writes in a discussion of soil exhaustion in *Capital* (1867) volume three, capitalist relations "provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself."⁸ Drawing in particular from the chemist Justus von Liebig's concept of metabolism and his descriptions of the depletion of soil nutrients in capitalist agriculture, Marx argues that the intensification of agricultural production under capitalism "hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil."⁹ Marx stresses that industrialized methods of agriculture, which rely on technological innovation in the form of artificial fertilizers, large-scale machinery, and new modes of international trade, will necessarily generate long-term instability and declining productivity. Capitalist production "stands in contradiction" to sustainable agricultural practices that are attuned to natural processes and the longevity of ecosystemic health.¹⁰

Capitalist production, with its ceaseless revolutionizing of the productive process by way of new methods and markets, approaches the natural world as resources for expropriation. This abstract, profit-oriented advantage instrumentalizes nature's capacities and disregards natural limits or strives to overcome them with new technological innovations and expansion into new terrain.¹¹ As Marx points out, the contradiction between capitalism's built-in requirements for growth and these natural laws, balances, and limits creates long-term sustainability problems, ecological and economic. This limitless tendency toward expansion and accumulation has allowed capitalism to thrive as a global economic system, while also creating the conditions for crisis at a

Nature

Margaret Ronda

Over the past two decades, Marxists have turned increasing attention to the importance of ecological thought in relation to broader theories of political economy, emphasizing Marx's interest in the natural sciences, agricultural and evolutionary theories, as well as his attention to issues of population, deforestation, and colonial land development.¹ Far from disregarding ecological dynamics and natural limits in favor of a progressivist "mastery of nature" ideology, Marx's materialist arguments from the *Grundrisse* (1858) forward are inextricably linked to his materialist conceptions of nature, and his critique of capitalism attends to its ecological as well as economic contradictions.² Marx's theories must be understood as socioecological, offering a framework for approaching the relation between capitalism as a world-system and the dynamics of the Earth system. Marx's definition of nature, in turn, is a fundamentally dialectical one, attuned to its material forms, exchanges, and systems as they act upon and are reshaped by human social relations, and to the fundamental alterations that capitalist production creates.

Marx conceives of nature not merely as a passive entity, but as an active and relational force. The key concept employed in his works from the 1850s forward to discuss the fundamental characteristics of nature is *metabolism* (*Stoffwechsel*). Metabolism is a term that emerged in nineteenth-century chemistry and biology to describe the interchanges that regulate the growth and regeneration of individual organisms and broader ecosystems.³ Nature as a metabolic system is composed of dynamic interdependencies and transfers of energy that facilitate life. Marx argues that humans participate in this "universal metabolism of nature" as biological entities, but are differentiated from other species with regard to the unique capacity to labor. Through the labor process, humans "appropriate" "what exists in nature" to meet their needs, and in this way "mediate, regulate, and control the metabolism" between themselves and nature.⁴ At the same time, natural conditions and processes necessarily shape these interactions.

For Marx, both labor and nature are key sources of "material wealth," and their interaction constitutes the grounds of social existence across human civilizations. Yet, as he argues in the *Grundrisse*, this "unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic interaction with nature" does not necessitate materialist analysis, but rather the *separation* between these conditions, a

biospheric level, given the system's structural disregard for ecological concerns. While Marx did not predict the full extent of capitalism's ecological transformations, his writings convey the contradictory, crisis-prone tendencies of capitalist development in a broadly systemic way, discussing ecological matters such as deforestation and famine, the depletion of coal reserves, and the rise of urban waste and pollution across a variety of locales. Nature appears, in these descriptions, as reshaped by and expressive of these alienated and exploitative metabolic interactions, even as its laws and limits present barriers to the accumulation process.

Notes

- 1 Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (London: Haymarket, 2014); John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Monthly Review Press, 2000); Brett Clark, John Bellamy Foster, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (Monthly Review Press, 2011); James O'Connor, *Natural Causes* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998); Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (Monthly Review Press, 2017); Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016) and *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2017); Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015); and Stefano Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, Aquaculture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015) offer influential and innovative considerations of Marx's ecological approaches, extending them to current socioecological conditions.
- 2 Earlier critical accounts of Marx's conceptions of nature favored such readings of Marx as a progressivist thinker. See Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique* (London: Brill, 2016), for sustained engagement with these first-wave eco-socialist accounts.
- 3 On the history of metabolism as a concept in nineteenth-century science and natural history as well as in Marx's theories, see Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 141–77, and Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*, 68–97.
- 4 Marx, *Capital* vol. 3, 949; Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, 283, 290.
- 5 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 489.
- 6 For a detailed discussion of these ideas, see Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, 57–68.
- 7 Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, 637–8.
- 8 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 949.
- 9 Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, 637–8.
- 10 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 754.
- 11 For more on this subject, see Moore and Raj Patel on Cheap Nature, *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 44–63.

Revolution

Colleen Lye

Revolution is the qualitative, hard-to-imagine leap from one mode of production to another. And yet the task is not only to describe it but, even more, to help actualize it. It's the ambitious task anyway that Marx set for himself. One factor in his favor was his intuition that capitalism was a mode of production in which the revolution of the future was immanent in the contradictions of the present. Capital's self-valORIZING tendency continually depended upon the destruction and transmutation of other lifeworlds, which is why the attainment of a historical view of the transition into capitalism was also key to imagining any transition out of it.

Grasping capital accumulation to have a globalizing logic, Marx attempted to make a study of varieties of capitalist transitions and their modes of combination around the world. He thought that communists needed to support anti-colonial and antislavery causes because proletarian struggle may often first be national in form. Indeed, actual proletarian revolution could not only have its beginnings in one country but a less developed country may also see the prospect of a bourgeois revolution directly passing into a proletarian one. Importantly, though, it could succeed only if it coordinated with proletarian struggles elsewhere, especially in the capitalist core. This is what Marx meant by a "revolution-in-permanence," a phrase which concluded his 1850 address to the Communist League on the necessity of maintaining the autonomy of a proletarian organization.¹ That tactical instruction was counterpart to his view of the combined and uneven nature of global capitalist development, which made it possible for the mid-nineteenth-century German proletariat to take the lead in a bourgeois revolution that might well be more advanced than any that had previously occurred in England and France. And it made it possible to think that the traditional Russian commune in the 1880s might serve as the starting point for communist development in general.

Who comprises the revolutionary proletariat? The revolutionary proletariat is not simply identical with the industrial working class, although the alienation of the wage labor form is certainly exemplary of capital's modern separation of human beings from their capacities. Just as Marx thought that non-European peasants being subsumed into English-led capitalism in the nineteenth century could provide the mass basis for a "proletarian majority," he also thought intellectuals had a role to play in the fomenting of proletarian consciousness. The preservation of a proletarian standpoint even in the midst of an alliance with the enemies of its enemy might well be aided by "a portion