

Marx's Critique of Enlightenment Humanism: A Revolutionary Ecological Perspective

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The fact that Karl Marx was the foremost revolutionary critic of Enlightenment humanism in the nineteenth century can scarcely be denied. No other thinker carried the critique of the Enlightenment's abstract, egoistic Man into so many areas—religion, philosophy, the state, law, political economy, history, anthropology, nature/ecology—nor so thoroughly exposed its brutal hypocrisy. But Marx's opposition to Enlightenment humanism can also be seen as transcending all other critical accounts down to the present day in its distinctive character as a dialectical and historical critique. His response to bourgeois humanism did not consist of a simple, one-sided negation, as in the Althusserian notion of an epistemological break separating the early and mature Marx. Instead, it took a more radical form in which the substance of his original humanist

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and naturalist approach was transformed into a developed

materialism.¹ The result was a simultaneous deepening of his materialist ontology, which now took on a definite, corporeal emphasis focused on the conditions of human subsistence, together with the extension of this to the historical realm in the form of a practical materialism.

Marx's analysis was thus unique in offering a higher synthesis envisioning the reconciliation of humanism and naturalism, humanity and nature. Rather than stopping with a mere antithesis (as in most contemporary "post"



Prometheus, chained to a printing press while the eagle of Prussian censorship rips out his liver as figures representing the citizens of Rhineland plead fruitlessly for mercy. Published March 1843. By Anonymus - Digitized for Wikipedia by Tim Davenport ("Carrite"), no copyright claimed. Released to the public domain without restriction., Public Domain, [Link](#).

¹ ↪ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 32–39, 221–47. A more compelling and focused interpretation of Marx's "epistemological break" than the one offered by Althusser is provided by Joseph Fracchia in his monumental work, *Bodies and Artefacts*. Fracchia sees Marx's emphasis on human corporeal organization in *The German Ideology* as the starting point of his historical materialism. Unlike Althusser's interpretation, Fracchia does not argue that Marx left his humanism behind, but rather he shifted the focus of his materialism to human corporeal existence. See Joseph Fracchia, *Bodies and Artefacts* (Boston: Brill, 2022), vol. 1, 1–6; vol. 2, 1209–17. This shift, however, was already prefigured in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, making it less of a break.

conceptions), the object was the supersession of those material conditions of the capitalist mode of production that had made Enlightenment humanism the paradigmatic form of bourgeois thought. This radical rejection of bourgeois humanism was integrated with the critique of colonialism, where capitalism was seen as walking “naked” abroad, exposing its full barbarism.² In this regard, Marx’s revolutionary response to Enlightenment humanism helped inspire the later critiques by such anticolonial thinkers as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire, all of whom called for the development of a “new humanism.”³

Recent research into the ecological foundations of Marx’s thought, particularly his conception of the metabolism of humanity and nature mediated by social production, has brought out more fully the depth and complexity of Marx’s overall critique of capitalism’s alienated social metabolism. This line of investigation demonstrates that, far from being anthropocentric, or succumbing to the Enlightenment notion of the conquest of nature, his vision encompassed the wider realm of what he called “the universal metabolism of nature.” This included an appreciation of other life forms and his critique of environmental destruction in his famous theory of metabolic rift, giving rise to what can be called a revolutionary ecological perspective.⁴

Post-humanist (including so-called new-materialist) thinkers have recently sought to challenge Marx’s metabolic vision and revolutionary ecology in general by promoting a phantom-like world of “dark ecology,” hyperobjects, and vitalistic forces. However, such irrationalist views, as we shall see, invariably fail to address the fundamental criterion of the philosophy of praxis: the object is to change the world, not simply to reinterpret it.⁵

Enlightenment Humanism and Marx’s Materialist Critique

For Marx, following G. W. F. Hegel, the Enlightenment criticism of religion led not to an all-out rejection of the Christian

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religious view, but rather in many ways its perpetuation through a pair of identical opposites: absolute idealism, stripped of an all-encompassing deity, on the one hand, and an equally absolute and mechanistic materialism, stripped of all sensuous qualities, on the other. Both of these mutually reinforcing opposites were evident in Cartesian rationalism, which carried over from Christian theology the dualistic distinctions between soul and body, mind and matter, and

humanity and nature, and which was meant from the start to reconcile mechanistic science with religious doctrine.⁶ As

² ↪ Karl Marx, *Dispatches for the New York Tribune* (London: Penguin, 2007), 224.

³ ↪ See Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 16, 20–21, 31, 46, 100, 179, 181, 315; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1967), 1; A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman, introduction by Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), xi–xx; W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (New York: International Publishers, 2019), 297.

⁴ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 30 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 63.

⁵ ↪ Of course, the irrationalist impulse is not simply to be defined by its opposition to the philosophy of praxis, but rather has a deeper historical significance associated with the imperialist stage of capitalism (and today’s late imperialism). Irrationalism, in this context, can be depicted, Herbert Aptheker wrote, as a continuum consisting of “the eclipse of reason, the denial of science, the repudiation of causation. The normal result is cynicism; the abnormal is sadism. The finale is fascism.” Herbert Aptheker, “Imperialism and Irrationalism,” *Telos* 4 (1969): 168–75.

⁶ ↪ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 351–53; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 131–32; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 461.

Frederick Engels wrote, the Enlightenment “merely posited Nature instead of the Christian God as the Absolute confronting Man.”⁷

Bourgeois humanism, which arose in this bifurcated context, was characterised by Marx as the notion of abstract Man, or the isolated, spiritual, egoistic individual, “squatting outside the world,” devoid of sensuous connections and material-social relations. Each atomistic individual was viewed as a “self-sufficient monad” emptied of all relations, yet endowed with innate rights, justifying a system of “mutual exploitation.”⁸

Hidden within this abstract notion of bourgeois Man was not only class exploitation, but also the expropriation of human beings themselves, their very bodies, as in colonialism, genocide, and slavery. Deploing the blatantly racist content of such so-called humanism, Marx observed, quoting a public statement made at the time: “A Yankee comes to England, where he is prevented by a Justice of the Peace from flogging his slave, and he exclaims indignantly: ‘Do you call this a land of liberty where a man can’t larrup his n*****?’” What, Marx asked, could the “equal rights of man” possibly signify in this inhuman context?⁹

Bourgeois humanism was no less to be condemned for its inhumanity in the treatment of women. In an 1862 article titled “English Humanity and America,” Marx chastised the English government and press for its effort to trade on “humanity” as an “export article” in its defence of wealthy, slave-owning women in New Orleans who were openly confronting and vilifying Union troops, and who had been told by the occupying Union general that if they acted like “street walkers” they would be treated as such. In the face of these supposedly high-minded protests in England over the gross “inhumanity” of such threats directed at upper-class, slave-owning women of the Confederacy, Marx noted that these same sanctimonious defenders of women’s rights had conveniently lost sight not only of the slaves whose lives were in effect “devoured” by these New Orleans ladies, but also the English colonial abuse of Irish, Greek, and Indian women. Nor was there any consideration of the fate of proletarian women currently starving in Lancashire. The result was nothing less than a grand “humanity farce,” concealing the most brutal inhumanity.¹⁰

Yet, despite his sharp attacks on Enlightenment humanism, Marx expounded a revolutionary humanism that came to be subsumed within his overall materialist conception of nature and history. What he characterised in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts as positive humanism, later termed real humanism, had nothing in common with the “pseudo-humanism” of bourgeois thought but rather was its negation.¹¹ “Communism,” he wrote, “is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of private property. Only when we have superseded this mediation will positive humanism, positively originating in itself, come into being.” The emergence of an unalienated society would open the way to “the realised naturalism of man and the realised humanism of nature.”¹² This would represent the “real emergence” of humanity, both as a “part of nature” and as the revolutionary realisation of human social being.¹³

⁷ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 419; Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 17, 21.

⁸ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 162–67; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 410; Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 244; István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 220–21.

⁹ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 210. Marx was quoting a real statement by a Yankee slave owner from the original English.

¹⁰ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 19, 209–212.

¹¹ ↩ Marx, *Early Writings*, 281, 348, 395; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 7. The term “pseudo-humanism” was used by Jenny Marx in 1846 in a letter to Karl, where she also referred in this connection to “besottedness with progress.” This clearly reflected Karl Marx’s views as well (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, 532).

¹² ↩ Marx, *Early Writings*, 349–50, 395.

¹³ ↩ Marx, *Early Writings*, 328, 395.

In the opening sentence of *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels wrote: "Real humanism has no more dangerous enemy in Germany than spiritualism or speculative idealism, which substitutes 'self-consciousness' or the 'spirit' for the real individual man." The *Holy Family* can be seen as a work in which such speculative idealism was combated in the name of both humanism and materialism, and in which a more developed, dialectical conception of real materialism subsumed real humanism in Marx's thinking.¹⁴ Thus, Marx writes that the speculative metaphysics arising in the seventeenth century and having its highest form in the nineteenth-century work of Hegel "will be defeated for ever by materialism, which...coincides with humanism.... French and English socialism and communism represent materialism coinciding with humanism in the practical domain."¹⁵

In recounting the origins of materialism in *The Holy Family*, Marx described how the resurrection of ancient Democritean and Epicurean materialism had in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generated a new materialism with "socialist tendencies," leading eventually to nineteenth-century socialism. Nothing was more opposed to the development of materialism in this sense than seventeenth-century speculative philosophy, particularly that of René Descartes, with its dualistic division of mind and body, soul and mechanism. Cartesian metaphysics, Marx declared, "had materialism as its antagonist from its very birth."¹⁶

Marx also opposed Hegelian idealism where it sought to reduce both humanity and nature external to humanity to pure thought, "abstracted from natural forms," creating a mystical realm of "fixed phantoms" operating on their own. Hegel, Marx wrote, saw "the history of mankind" as "the history of the Abstract Spirit of mankind, hence a spirit far removed from the real man." The human individual was reduced to a phantom-like abstraction. However, "if man is not human," since removed from material being, "the expression of his essential nature cannot be human, and therefore thought itself could not be conceived as an expression of man's being, of man as a human and natural subject, with eyes, ears, etc., living in society, in the world and in nature."¹⁷

The treatment of "positive humanism" in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 owed a great deal to Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy. However, as Marx's materialism developed, taking a more active form, he broke with Feuerbach's own abstract Man in which the human was nothing but "the true solemnisation of each individual bourgeois" writ large.¹⁸ In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx rejected any essentialism or fixed conception of human nature, writing: "The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations." He added to this that in creating such a rarefied conception of humanity Feuerbach had been "obliged to abstract from the historical process...and to presuppose an abstract—isolated—human individual" that was unchanging.¹⁹ All of [human] history, Marx wrote in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, "is nothing but a continuous

¹⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 7, 131. Although Althusser argued that Marx's early humanism was outside of material science and pre-Marxian, he had a harder time dismissing the concept of "real humanism," which Marx used to refer to his transcendence of bourgeois humanism in the form of a materialist analysis focusing on the real, living corporeal human being. See Althusser, *For Marx*, 242–47.

¹⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 125.

¹⁶ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 126–131.

¹⁷ ↪ Marx, *Early Writings*, 398–99; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 85, 399–400.

¹⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 197.

¹⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 7–8.

transformation of human nature.”²⁰ There was no sign in Marx’s analysis, either before or after 1845, of what he called in Capital “the cult of the abstract man.”²¹

Already in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx, in his comments on Hegel’s Phenomenology, had

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referred to the human individual as a “corporeal, real, living, sensuous being” and “objective being,” such that one finds one’s objects and needs outside of oneself.²² This was to form the starting point of The German Ideology and of Marx’s historical materialism, in which he

merged his early philosophical anthropology with a corporeal materialism:

*The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the corporeal organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.... Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their corporeal organization.*²³

Here he both materialised humanity and made this the starting point for his philosophy of praxis. This, as Engels emphasised, was Marx’s first great discovery: “the law of evolution in human history.”²⁴

Marx’s Dialectical Human Ecology

Marx’s materialist perspective, which owed far more to Epicurus than to Feuerbach, was ecological from his earliest writings, recognising that the human alienation from nature was simply the other side of the coin of the alienation of labor (human self-estrangement). Hegel had defined nature as “externality,” existing in “the form of the other being,” and representing the realm of a distinct other that could only be transcended in thought. Marx retorted that this estrangement from the material world of nature should “be taken in the sense of alienation, a flaw, a weakness, something that ought not to be.”²⁵ In this way, he declared as early as the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts that the alienation of humanity from nature was the dialectical twin of the alienation of human labor, and a flaw to be historically transcended. The dual alienation of an externalised nature and of human labor could only be overcome through socialism and communism, or a new, revolutionary relation to human labor and production.

Marx has sometimes been mistakenly criticised for Prometheanism, in the contemporary sense of adherence to extreme productivism and a machine-centred technological determinism. Yet, not only are there no signs of this in his thought, but he devoted part of The Poverty of Philosophy to a strong condemnation of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s very explicit, extreme mechanistic view and his myth of a “new Prometheus,” which stood for the human “conquests over Nature”

²⁰ ↪ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers 1973), 147.

²¹ ↪ Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” chap. 1 in *Capital*, vol. 1, 1st German ed., marxists.org, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 172; Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 41; István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 221.

²² ↪ Marx, *Early Writings*, 389–90.

²³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 31. The translation here follows Fracchia, *Bodies and Artefacts*, 1–2.

²⁴ ↪ Although *The German Ideology* was coauthored by Marx and Engels, this fundamental discovery was attributed by Engels to Marx. See Frederick Engels, “The Funeral of Karl Marx,” in *Karl Marx Remembered*, ed. Philip S. Foner (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1983), 39.

²⁵ ↪ Marx, *Early Writings*, 399–400.

seen as part of a “providential aim.”²⁶ Hence, the direct critique of mechanistic Prometheanism began with Marx himself. Marx’s own identification with Prometheus was of a much earlier variety, dating back to Aeschylus’s ancient Greek play, which saw Prometheus as the bringer of light (later giving rise to the notion of Enlightenment) and as a revolutionary figure, one who defied the gods and who was bound in chains.²⁷

Nor is there any sign in Marx’s work, even in his earliest writings, of a sharp separation of the human species being and the other species beings represented by nonhuman animals, except in the sense that human individuals were seen as the

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“self-mediating beings of nature,” and thus the authors of their own self-estrangement.²⁸ Marx drew his understanding of psychological development of animal species from Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s studies of animal drives, rejecting the notion of instincts projected by

Cartesian rationalism. Instead, he identified both human and nonhuman animals as material, objective beings, motivated by inner drives, while seeking satisfaction of their needs outside of themselves, as objective beings.²⁹ Human beings were distinguished within this by their role as homo-faber, or the tool-making animal.³⁰ Nevertheless, as late as his Notes on Adolph Wagner, Marx continued to argue that not simply human beings but also “animals” more generally, “learn to distinguish ‘theoretically’ from all other things the external things which serve the satisfaction of their needs... and the activities by which they are satisfied.”³¹ Marx was a severe critic of Descartes’s bourgeois reduction of nonhuman animals to machines, observing that “Descartes in defining animals as mere machines, saw with the eyes of the period of manufacture. The medieval view, on the other hand, was that animals were assistants to man.”³²

Quoting Thomas Müntzer, Marx pointed to the intolerability of the fact that in bourgeois society, “all creatures have been made into property, the fish in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the earth—all living things must become free.”³³ In his critique of early capitalist agribusiness, Marx condemned the conditions imposed on animals reduced to the state of commodity machines. In previous agricultural practices, he noted, nonhuman animals had been able to remain in the free air. Now they were confined to stalls with the accompanying box-feeding mechanisms. “In these prisons,” he observed, “animals are born and remain until they are killed off,” resulting in “serious deterioration of life force.” Referring to these conditions as “Disgusting!,” he declared that it was nothing but a “system of prison cells for the animals.”³⁴

²⁶ ↪ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 98–99, 115, 119–20, 132–44, 155–56, 184; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *System of Economical Contradictions* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 96–101, 117–18, 126–28, 168, 174–75; John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 126–33.

²⁷ ↪ In ancient philosophy and during the Enlightenment, Prometheus stood mainly for enlightenment (as the bringer of fire to light the darkness) itself. This led to Marx’s celebration of Epicurus as the “true radical Enlightener of antiquity,” identifying him directly with Prometheus. Later, beginning in the nineteenth century, as represented by Proudhon and Mary Shelley, Prometheanism came to be associated with extreme productivism and extreme industrialism. It was this that Marx took on in his critique of Proudhon. See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 141; John Bellamy Foster, “Marx and the Environment,” in *In Defense of History*, ed. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 149–62; Walt Sheasby, “Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx,” *Organization and Environment* 12, no. 1 (1999): 5–44.

²⁸ ↪ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 162–65.

²⁹ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *Critique of Intelligent Design* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 86–90; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 132–38.

³⁰ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 286.

³¹ ↪ Marx, *Texts on Method*, 190.

³² ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 512.

³³ ↪ Marx, *Early Writings*, 239.

³⁴ ↪ Karl Marx, Marx-Engels Archives, International Institute of Social History, Sign. B, 106, 336, quoted in Kohei Saito, “Why Ecosocialism Needs Marx,” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 6 (November 2016): 62. Translation altered slightly.

Marx's wider material-ecological perspective, however, was to manifest itself fully only in his theory of the social

What he called the “universal metabolism of nature” stood for fundamental processes underlying all existence, both inorganic and organic, in line with matter and motion (energy) and levels of organization (emergence). It thus prefigured the development of ecological theory in general, where such categories as the ecosystem, the biosphere, and the Earth System were to have the concept of metabolism as their basis.

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as the human mediation of the universal metabolism of nature via the labor and production process. The metabolic rift, or the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism,” stood for the way in which the alienated social metabolism came in conflict with the universal metabolism of nature, generating ecological crises.³⁵ His analysis of the metabolic rift in the industrial capitalism of his day focused initially on the robbing of the soil through the sending of soil nutrients, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles in the form of food and fibre to the new urban manufacturing centers, where these “elementary constituents” of the earth ended up polluting the environment, rather than returning to the soil.³⁶

On this basis, Marx developed a way of looking at how the destruction of ecological conditions, in capitalist production in particular, undermined human habitability—a viewpoint that extended beyond the issue of the soil itself to manifold ecological problems, including the role of the social system in spreading periodic epidemics. Marx's ecological critique, coupled with that of Engels, embraced nearly all of the ecological problems known in his time: the expropriation of the commons, soil degradation, deforestation, floods, crop failure, desertification, species destruction, cruelty to animals, food adulteration, pollution, chemical toxins, epidemics, squandering of natural resources (such as coal), regional climate change, hunger, overpopulation, and the vulnerability to extinction of the human species itself. It has now been extended by Marxian ecologists via his theory of metabolic rift to the entire set of anthropogenic rifts in the Earth System present in the twenty-first century, including the contemporary rift in the earth's carbon metabolism.³⁷

Post-humanist Phantoms versus the Philosophy of Praxis

In recent years, much of Marx's critique of Enlightenment humanism has been replicated in what is called the “post-humanist turn” in philosophy, embracing a variety of attempts to deconstruct and destabilise Enlightenment humanism. These new philosophical perspectives draw principally on Nietzschean and Freudian and, more recently, on Foucauldian-Derridean-Deleuzian deconstructions of the human subject and of nature.³⁸ This has led to a variety of post-humanist traditions including object-oriented ontology, Latourian hybridism, new materialism, and the cyborgism of thinkers like Donna Haraway. Such views have gained considerable prominence within sectors of the left. Still, post-humanism (even when compared with the postmodernism that preceded it) has had relatively little influence thus far on Marxian theory itself, since it is radically divorced from the philosophy of praxis.

³⁵ ↪ See John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 41–61.

³⁶ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 637.

³⁷ ↪ See, for example, John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, *The Tragedy of the Commodity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

³⁸ ↪ Kate Soper, “The Humanism in Post-humanism,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 368–69.

According to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."³⁹ A corollary of this is that in order to understand the world you have to seek to change it. Since post-humanism generally has been content to destabilise the human and the natural in ways that remove the theoretical bridges and ladders for changing the world, and has even sought to undermine the notion of human praxis itself, its relation to Marxism has been quite limited. Post-humanism is caught in the world of "fixed phantoms" depicted by Marx, where the complete destabilisation of the concept of the human means a disruption of the "human and natural subject, with eyes, ears, etc., living in society, in the world, and in nature." The result is a flat, monistic world of objects without subjects, populated by windowless monads, limitless assemblages (divorced from any conception of emergence), actants, hybrids, cyborgs, and enchantments—anything but a conception of material-sensuous human being, production, and practice.⁴⁰

This spectral world of phantoms might easily be dismissed as a pure distraction for those concerned with needed social and ecological change. However, the last decade or so has seen a shift of post-humanism (particularly in the form of so-called new materialism) into the ecological domain, where it has come into confrontation with Marxian ecology. New materialist (or new vitalist) thinkers in the humanities, such as Jane Bennett, have taken their inspiration in part from Epicurus's swerve, which was originally meant to introduce contingency into the mechanistic world of Democritean materialism. However, Bennett and other new materialists fail to note that by far the most penetrating analyst of Epicureanism in the nineteenth century, and the first to emphasise the importance of the swerve, was Marx, who deeply admired and drew upon Epicurus's non-mechanistic, non-deterministic materialism with its "immanent dialectics."⁴¹

New materialists, coming primarily out of the humanities, insist—as if this were a surprising new discovery—that human beings are not separated from the physical world as a whole, but instead that becoming human translates into "becoming with" nonhuman persons, who make up what was formerly called external nature.⁴² Such analysts deny any special status to humanity, while embracing a flat ontology in which all life, and indeed all existence, is treated as web-like in its interconnections and fundamentally indistinguishable, even by the force of abstraction.

Replicating a tradition of thought within environmental ethics going back half a century or more, based on the notion of the intrinsic value of all things, the vitalistic new materialism places its emphasis on the moral equality of all existence (or a "democratic ontology") as the very basis of its ecological perspective.⁴³ Moreover, it insists on what it calls the "vibrancy" of all nature, both organic and inorganic. Still, it does so outside of anything that could be described as a dialectical-naturalist or critical-realist perspective. Such post-humanist views are divorced from the long development of ecological theory, the critique of political economy, and the whole realm of natural science, as well as the philosophy of praxis.

³⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 8.

⁴⁰ ↪ Marx, *Early Writings*, 398; Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," *Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities*, issue 5.1 (2016), csalateral.org. Although assemblages have been recognised as crucial to material forms since ancient times, the emphasis on "interlaced assemblages" that deny any hierarchical relations whatsoever in the material world and all forms of emergence or integrative levels, in opposition to material science and dialectics, is peculiar to post-humanism and the new vitalistic materialism.

⁴¹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 413; Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 52–53. Although Bennett admires Epicurus, she forgets that he was, as Marx explained, the main thinker to insist on the need for "disillusionment" in antiquity, and who is thus at odds with her own criticisms of "demystification" as an approach that leads back to the human. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 141; Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 2–6, 33–39; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 62. Nothing is more absurd than treating Epicurus as a vitalist thinker.

⁴² ↪ Simone Bignall and Rosi Braidotti, "Post-human Systems" in *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process After Deleuze*, ed. Braidotti and Bignall (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 1; Arie Ben Arie, "The New Materialist Approach to Art and Aesthetics," Well of Faith (blog), July 29, 2021, well-of-faith.com.

⁴³ ↪ Graham Harman, Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political (London: Pluto, 2014), 14.

In Bennett's work, nature is given a vitalist, reenchanting meaning, simply adding vital powers to material forms.⁴⁴ The goal, as in post-humanist thought in general, is to destabilise the concepts of both humanity and nature by creating phantom-like objects. For Timothy Morton, "dark ecology" is an approach that preserves "the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe." Dominating this dark ecology are "hyperobjects," standing for spectral forces more massive than humanity and beyond its reach—as if the immensity of nature had not always been part of the materialist and dialectical conception of nature from ancient times to today.⁴⁵

Morton, whose nihilistic dark ecology has nothing whatsoever to do with engaging with capitalism or the planetary ecological crisis (other than occasional references to the Anthropocene), nonetheless finds it necessary to enter into direct combat with Marx's ecology, given its emphasis on revolutionary praxis.⁴⁶ Marx's core concept of "social metabolism" becomes, in Morton's inventive rephrasing, a mere "human economic metabolism" that leaves out the rest of ecological existence. We are told that Marx adopted a "mechanical and reified" view of nature that is "frozen in the past."⁴⁷ Marx is repeatedly charged with being "anthropocentric" in introducing the notion of human species being—discounting the fact that this also left room, in Marx's conception, for nonhuman species beings (species).⁴⁸

All of this allows Morton to ignore or downplay the ecological analysis of classical historical materialism entirely, including Marx's notion of human society as an emergent form of nature, his broad adherence to Darwinian evolutionary theory, and his conception, along with Engels, of the dialectics of nature.

Yet, having dismissed dialectics and historical materialism, Morton's dark ecology, with its myriad phantom-like objects, cannot get "beyond antithesis," and has nothing meaningful to say about ecology itself.⁴⁹ In *Ecology without Nature*, *Dark Ecology*, and *Humankind*, he portrays a post-humanist, new-materialist world rife with "paranormal" spiritual phenomena, "spectral beings" and "hyperobjects." It is a postworld dominated by flat assemblages of humans and nonhumans, filled with "ghostly, quivering energy," and existing within the "symbiotic real." A biological species is reconceived as a "sparkling entity" beyond all rational definition. Hyperobjects become mysterious forces removed from a materialist and scientific understanding.⁵⁰

Historical materialism is condemned by Morton for its anti-ecological perspective in excluding a conception of all objects as nonhumans to be placed on the same philosophical plane as humans. Marx's analysis is said to have come up short in its failure to recognise that oil, wind, water, and steam belong to the realm of "nonhuman people." Marxism, we are told, can only work if it becomes a new form of "animism," extending beyond the human, and even beyond living

⁴⁴ ↪ On the critique of vitalism, see John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 407–9.

⁴⁵ ↪ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2019), 155; Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 187; Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1, 41.

⁴⁶ ↪ On the inherent conflict between Marxian ecology and vitalistic new materialism see SunYoungAhn, "Magic, Necromancy, and the Posthuman Turn," *Monthly Review* 73, no. 9 (February 2022): 26–37.

⁴⁷ ↪ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 26, 166; Morton, *Humankind*, 39, 80, 177. On Marx's general ecological perspective, see Foster, *Marx's Ecology*. Bennett also excludes Marx's materialist conception of nature and his ecological materialism, claiming that Marx's materialism was simply a matter of "economic structures and exchanges" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi).

⁴⁸ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 41–42. Compare Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, 130–51.

⁴⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 419.

⁵⁰ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 27–39, 54–56, 70–71, 97–99; Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 24.

species themselves, encompassing within its conception of persons everything from rocks to microbes—in line with a vitalistic new imperium that embraces the “paranormal.”⁵¹

The inner logic of this post-humanist, phantoms-of-the-opera world with its destabilising mysticism is evident in the attacks on Marx's critique of the fetishism of commodities in the work of Bruno Latour, Bennett, and Morton. Latour famously rejected Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, along with critique altogether. Marx had argued that behind the fetishised forms of appearance of capitalist commodity relations lay human-productive relations. More concretely, as Georg Lukács put it: “Fetishism signifies, in brief, that the relations between human beings which function by means of objects are reflected in human consciousness immediately as things, because of the structure of the capitalist economy. They become objects or things, fetishes in which men crystallise their social relations.... Human relations, as Marx says, acquire a “spectral objectivity.”⁵²

Yet, such a view of commodity fetishism, according to Latour, was too arbitrary, since rooted in particular conceptions of nature, humanity, production, etc., and indeed, particular types of “facts.” Having summarily dispatched in this way the critique of fetishism, Latour himself was then free to present the world of appearances as one of infinite things, commodities, objects, hybrids, and “actants,” existing within a “flat ontology,” with no up and down or inside and outside, blurring all distinctions. Reification in this world of “imbroglios” was no longer the subject of critique, which had thus “run out of steam.”⁵³ Rather, the goal was to universalise the reification of human-social relations such that commodity fetishism became the model for analysing an infinity of assembled things, forming an object-oriented ontology.

Such a total destabilisation of the concept of humanity also requires the total destabilisation of any concept of nature itself, of which humanity is an emergent part. So integral to Latour's theory was the negation of nature as a concept standing for the whole of material reality that, when he belatedly recognised the existence of the earth crisis, whereby humanity was destroying its own planetary habitat, he sought to replace the notions of nature and ecology with the earth, the terrestrial, and Gaia—a discursive change that constituted his entire contribution to the ecological discussion. For Latour, the post-humanist rejection of Marx's critique of the capitalist fetishism of the commodity had to be preserved, even to the point of claiming together with the capitalist ecomodernists of the Breakthrough Institute that we should uncritically “love” our technological Frankenstein monsters—disregarding the fact that adopting such a position would ensure a total incapacity to address the human-social dimensions of the planetary ecological emergency itself.⁵⁴

Following in the footsteps of Latour, Bennett and Morton both explicitly reject Marx's critique of commodity fetishism (and of reification), insisting that instead of the “demystification” of things/objects/commodities, the goal should rather be one of their reenchantment, even remystification. Bennett thus seeks to speak on behalf of the inner “force of things” as nonhuman actants, both living and nonliving, organic and inorganic. She characterises Marx's critique of the fetishism

⁵¹ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 33, 71, 97. Morton goes so far as to censure Engels for his critique of the occult in *The Dialectics of Nature*, on the grounds that Engels had closed off the paranormal. See Morton, *Humankind*, 166; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 345–55.

⁵² ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 163–77. For the origins and development of Marx's critique of fetishism, see Kaan Kangal, “Young Marx on Fetishism, Sexuality, and Religion,” *Monthly Review* 74, no. 5 (October 2022): 46–57; Georg Lukács, *Marxism and Human Liberation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973), 251.

⁵³ ↪ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: Matters of Fact and Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2014): 225–48; Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 9–12; Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 20; Harman, *Bruno Latour*, 14, 18, 81, 90, 112–17; Andrew B. Kipnis, “Agency between Humanism and Post-humanism: Latour and His Opponents,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015).

⁵⁴ ↪ Bruno Latour, “Love Your Monsters,” Breakthrough Institute, February 14, 2012, thebreakthrough.org; Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

of commodities in Capital as inherently anthropocentric, since “what demystification uncovers is always something

Marx's critique of commodity fetishism is thus rejected by post-humanist object-oriented ontology, and by what has been called the “vitalistic new materialism,” in the name of a phantom-like world, akin to the mystical realm of religion, where objects of all kinds take on the role of spectral beings.

human,” thereby screening out nonhumans. Adopting Baruch Spinoza's seventeenth-century metaphysical doctrine of conatus—or the inner impetus to be found within all physical entities aimed at preserving themselves and their motions—Bennett insists that “there is “a power in every body.” Quoting Spinoza, she pronounces: “In this respect all things [objects] are equal.” In a questionable

interpretation of Spinoza, she suggests that even stones have “thing-power.” As Engels observed, “The notion of a ‘vital force’ latent in all things has been the last refuge of all supernaturalists.”⁵⁵

Morton similarly argues that human-centred demystification and defetishisation, aimed at the world of commodities/ things, should be rejected, and replaced by a kind of remystification, thereby opening up space for nonhumans. By nonhumans, Morton, like Bennett, is not simply concerned with real, material, living species, but extends this to the realm of objects generally, embracing a flat ontology that puts Theodor Adorno's collection of plastic dinosaurs, a chocolate bar, and a microbe on the same physical and moral plane as a human individual living in society.⁵⁶ Marx's critique of commodity fetishism is thus rejected by post-humanist object-oriented ontology, and by what has been called the “vitalistic new materialism,” in the name of a phantom-like world, akin to the mystical realm of religion, where objects of all kinds take on the role of spectral beings.⁵⁷

For Morton, the issue is not that capitalism fashions a mystical veil associated with commodity fetishism, but rather that “capitalism is not spectral enough,” and hence needs to become more so. “The realm of the ‘object’ (the nonhuman in its most basic guise),” he writes, “is precisely the realm in which commodity fetishism is happening.” But what is

Post-humanist ecology, along with post-humanism more generally, thus closes off the philosophy of praxis in the name of the levelling of all things within its flat ontology. Here there is no room left for the consideration of the long history of capitalism, colonialism, racism, imperialism, or ecological destruction.

fetishistic, in his view, inverting Marx, is not the failure to perceive the underlying human-social relations, but rather the failure to give full spectral identity to the object. Thus, defetishisation or “demystification, rudely stripping the appearance from things, is the capitalist operation par excellence,” and needs to be reversed, by privileging the mystical, the spectral, and the paranormal. Only by means of animating commodities/objects, no longer seeing them as

mere things, will “solidarity with nonhuman beings”—encompassing everything from microbes to clouds—become

⁵⁵ ↪ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiv–xv, 1–4; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 560; Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1996), 75, (III, prop. 6); “‘From Baruch Spinoza's Letter to G. H. Schuller’ (1674),” Explanantia (blog), October 3, 2018, explanantia.wordpress.com; Richard Manning, “Spinoza's Physical Theory,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 24, 2021, plato.stanford.edu. Bennett claims not to adhere to strict vitalism. Nevertheless, she relies on metaphysical concepts such as the innate “force” of things (based on a questionable interpretation of Spinoza's concept of *conatus*), on the notion of “thing power,” and on Henri Bergson's “critical vitalism” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 63–65).

⁵⁶ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 55, 61–63, 166–71.

⁵⁷ ↪ Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan, and Thomas Nail, “What Is New Materialism?,” *Angeleikai: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 24, no. 6 (2019): 119.

possible.⁵⁸ In line with object-oriented ontology, we are told that “all beings [both organic and inorganic] have agency, even mind.”⁵⁹

Post-humanist ecology, along with post-humanism more generally, thus closes off the philosophy of praxis in the name of the levelling of all things within its flat ontology. Here there is no room left for the consideration of the long history of capitalism, colonialism, racism, imperialism, or ecological destruction, only infinite webs of vital assemblages and hyperobjects, all circulating nomadically on the same ontological plane without essential order or meaning.⁶⁰

The sharp contrast with historical materialism can be illustrated by the way in which Morton selects for criticism a passage from Marx's technical description of how raw materials are absorbed in the process of production (in the account of constant capital in volume 1 of *Capital*). Quoting a sentence in which Marx says, “the coal burnt under the

Here a turn from post-humanism to reality is necessary. The current planetary ecological emergency is the greatest environmental threat that the human species has ever encountered, endangering the lives of billions of people along with the majority of known species on Earth... “it is human ways of living,” and, more specifically, capitalist ways of producing, “that are wrecking the planet, and [it is] humans alone who can do something about it.”

boiler vanishes without leaving a trace; so too the oil with which the axles of the wheels are greased,” Morton pronounces that Marx here adopts the “anti-ecological concept of ‘away’” toward such “nonhumans” (that is the coal, the oil, and the grease) denying that “objects have agency.”⁶¹ However, what Morton, caught up in his post-humanist/post-naturalist conceptions, fails to comprehend is that coal, oil, and grease do not

themselves have agency—though, like everything else in existence, they are in perpetual flux—and cannot usefully be treated as “nonhuman persons,” comparable to human beings. Coal burnt under the boiler is not its own self-mediating being of nature any more than a lump of coal could wilfully decide to combust itself and distribute the resulting carbon dioxide molecules into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change.⁶²

⁵⁸ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 61, 169–70.

⁵⁹ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 56–57. Morton is well aware that from a Marxian dialectical standpoint, post-humanism makes no sense: “The logic,” of such criticisms, he writes, “goes like this: hypnotised by capitalism, the spiritualist's sin is flat ontology, spirit has become a ‘thing among things.’” He is equally aware that the notion that all things have innate agency (and even mind) can be criticised as an attempt to out-reify capitalism itself. Thus, he goes out of his way to insist “that OOO [object-oriented ontology] definitely isn't a manifestation of commodity fetishism.” But he bases this on the spurious grounds that commodity fetishism consists not of downplaying the human relations behind objective appearances so much as its opposite: not fully animating the world of things. The argument thus inverts the approach to fetishism introduced by Marx. This follows Latour's notion that the critique of fetishism can be turned any way one wants (Morton, *Humankind*, 59, 169; Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”).

⁶⁰ ↪ The multiple dangers posed by forms of irrationalist “post” theories, with their flat ontologies, can be seen in their abandonment of revolutionary anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism. This is powerfully expressed in Oliver W. Baker, in “‘Words Are Things’: The Settler Colonial Politics of Post-Humanist Materialism in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*,” *Mediations* 30, no. 1 (2016): 1–24. Similar issues have arisen in relation to Afropessimism, which has been criticised for its flat ontology and regressive erasure of anti-colonialism. See Kevin Ochieng Okoth, “The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought,” *Salvage*, no. 7 (2020), salvage.zone; Ato Sekyi-Otu, “Con-Texts of Critique,” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu* (Quebec: Daraja Press, 2021), 236–51. Leading post-humanist theorist Rosi Braidotti declares: “What we have learned since 1968 is that capitalism never fails.” Given this assumed permanency of capitalism, the message of her new “vital materialism” for feminist, antiracist, and other movements is confined to finding ways to “disassociate and put distance between ourselves” and the “mistaken consumer models,” male violence, and white supremacism, which constitute the worst aspects of contemporary capitalism (Rosi Braidotti, interview by Lu Andrés, “What Is Necessary Is a Radical Transformation, Following the Bases of Feminism, Anti-Racism, and Anti-Fascism,” *Cultural Research and Innovation*, April 2, 2019, lab.cccb.org; Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 36, no. 6 [November 2019]: 31–61).

⁶¹ ↪ Morton, *Humankind*, 6, 30–34, 59, emphasis added; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 311. It is important to recognise that Morton is *not* claiming here that Marx ignored entropy (which could not possibly be claimed on the basis of this quote or in relation to any other statement by Marx or Engels), but rather that Marx simply allowed the coal to go “away” in the sense of ignoring its agency as a “nonhuman person.” On Marx and Engels and thermodynamics, see John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 147–64.

⁶² ↪ Bennett goes a step further than Morton and tries animistically to ascribe political agency to all “vibrant matter” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 94–109).

Here a turn from post-humanism to reality is necessary. The current planetary ecological emergency is the greatest environmental threat that the human species has ever encountered, endangering the lives of billions of people along with the majority of known species on Earth. As Kate Soper said in responding to the post-humanist destabilisation of the concepts of humanity and nature, it needs to be remembered that “it is human ways of living,” and, more specifically, capitalist ways of producing, “that are wrecking the planet, and [it is] humans alone who can do something about it.”⁶³ In the struggle before us focusing on phantoms, spectral beings, and cyborgs will not help. Everything in existence is not on the same plane and the world will not be rescued by the actions of objects.⁶⁴ What is needed instead is a revolutionary humanity inspired by reason and dedicated to the struggle to create what Marx called “the perfected unity in essence of man with nature.” This can only be achieved through the transcendence of the capitalist order and the rational regulation of “the interdependent process of social metabolism” by the associated producers.⁶⁵ There is no other way.

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⁶³ ↪ Soper, “The Humanism in Posthumanism,” 366.

⁶⁴ ↪ The irrationalism of our time has much in common with the irrationalism of the early twentieth century. It must be combated just as thoroughly. See Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980).

⁶⁵ ↪ Marx, *Early Writings*, 349; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 949, 959.

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