

Where Is the Rift? Marx, Lacan, Capitalism, and Ecology

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Abstract. In this article it is proposed that the Hegelian dialectical matrix thus serves as the model of the logic of the capital as well as the model of its revolutionary overcoming. Therefore, the fundamental question arises: Which mode of relating to Hegel should an ecologically-oriented Marxism assume today? The Hegelian idealist speculation does not imply an absolute appropriation of nature –in contrast to productive appropriation, speculation lets its Other be, it doesn't intervene into its Other.

Keywords: Hegel; Marx; Lacan; Capitalism; Ecology.

[es] ¿Dónde está la brecha? Marx, Lacan, capitalismo y ecología

Resumen. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar que la matriz dialéctica hegeliana puede servir tanto de modelo de la lógica del capital, como de modelo de su superación revolucionaria. Con ello se plantea la pregunta fundamental: ¿qué modo de relación con Hegel debería asumir en la actualidad un marxismo con orientaciones ecologistas? La especulación idealista hegeliana no implica una apropiación absoluta de la naturaleza: en contraste con la apropiación productiva, la especulación deja ser al Otro, no interviene en el Otro.

Palabras clave: Hegel; Marx; Lacan; capitalismo; ecología.

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When, decades ago, ecology emerged as a crucial theoretical and practical issue, many Marxists (as well as critics of Marxism) noted that nature –more precisely, the exact ontological status of nature– is the one topic in which even the crudest dialectical materialism has an advantage over Western Marxism: dialectical materialism allows us to think humanity as part of nature while Western Marxism considers socio-historical dialectics as the ultimate horizon of reference and ultimately reduces nature to a background of the historical process –nature is a historical category, as Lukacs put it. Kohei Saito's *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*¹ is the latest most consistent attempt to redress the balance and think humanity's embeddedness in nature without regressing into dialectical-materialist general ontology.

Since the main philosophical reference of Western Marxism is Hegel, no wonder that Saito aggressively rejects the Hegelian inheritance. His starting point is not nature as such but human labor as the process of metabolism between humanity (as part of nature) and its natural environs, a process which is, of course, part of the universal metabolism (exchange of matter) within nature itself. At its most basic, labor is a material pro-

cess of exchange which locates humanity into a much wider context of natural processes and, as such, cannot be reduced to any form of Hegelian self-mediation: the externality of nature is irreducible. This apparently abstract point has crucial consequences for how we deal with our ecological predicament. Saito sees the root of the ecological crisis in the rift between material metabolism of our life-process and the autonomous logic of the reproduction of capital which poses a threat to this metabolism. In the course of the book, Saito admits there are previous rifts:

despite the appearance of long-term sustainable production in precapitalist societies there was always a certain tension between nature and humans. Capitalism alone does not create the problem of desertification ex nihilo, [...] it transforms and deepens the transhistorical contradiction by radically reorganizing the universal metabolism of nature from the perspective of capital's valorization².

But the overall scheme remains the one of linear progress in the alienation. That's why Marx was also in his late years more and more interested in

¹ K. Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2017.

² *Ibidem*, p. 250. An exemplary case of a rift in premodern societies is provided by Island: it was fully forested when Norwegians arrived there in 8th century, and soon afterwards it was totally deforested.

“unconscious socialist tendency” in the persisting remainders of pre-capitalist forms of communal life and speculated that they can directly pass into a post-capitalist society (for example, in his famous letter to Vera Zasulich, Marx plays with the idea that, maybe, the Russian village communes could function as the place of resistance against capital and establish socialism without going through capitalism) –these pre-capitalist forms maintain more of the intimate ties of man with the earth. Along these lines, the title of the first chapter of Saito’s book –“Alienation of Nature as the Emergence of the Modern”³– clearly locates the “rift” into capitalist modernity: “After the historical dissolution of the original unity between humans and the earth, the production can only relate to the conditions of production as an alien property”⁴ And Marx’s Communist project is expected to heal this rift:

Only if one comprehends the estrangement in capitalist society as a dissolution of humans’ original unity with the earth does it become evident that Marx’s communist project consistently aims at a conscious rehabilitation of the unity between humans and nature⁵.

The ultimate ground of this rift is that, in capitalism, labor process does not serve our needs, its goal is to expanded reproduction of the capital itself irrespective of the damage this does to our environment –products count only insofar as they are valorized, and consequences for the environment literally do not count. The actual metabolism of our life process is thus subordinated to the artificial “life” of the reproduction of capital, there is a rift between the two, and the ultimate goal of the Communist revolution is not so much to abolish exploitation as to abolish this rift.

1. No capitalism –and no way out of it– without modern science

In capitalism, this rift gets more radical not just in the sense that the metabolic process between humans and nature is subordinated to the valorization of capital. What made the rift explode was the intimate link between capitalism and modern science: capitalist technology which triggered radical changes in rational environs cannot be imagined without science, which is why some ecologists already proposed to change the term for the new epoch we are entering from Anthropocene to capitalocene. Apparatuses based on science enable humans not only to get to know the real which is outside the scope of their experiential reality (like quantum waves); they also enable them to construct new “unnatural” (inhuman) objects which cannot but appear to our experience as freaks of nature (gadgets, genetically modified organisms, cyborgs, etc.). The power of human culture is not only to build an autonomous symbolic universe beyond what we experience as nature, but to produce new “unnatural” natural

objects which materialize human knowledge. We not only “symbolize nature”, we as it were denaturalize it from within.

Should we not apply Marx’s description of how in capitalism “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” also to nature itself? Today, with the latest biogenetic developments, we are entering a new phase in which it is simply *nature itself* which melts into air: the main consequence of the scientific breakthroughs in biogenetics is the end of nature. Once we know the rules of its construction, natural organisms are transformed into objects amenable to manipulation. Nature, human and inhuman, is thus “desubstantialized”, deprived of its impenetrable density, of what Heidegger called “earth”. This compels us to give a new twist to Freud’s title *Unbehagen in der Kultur* – discontent, uneasiness, in culture. With the latest developments, the discontent shifts from culture to nature itself: nature is no longer “natural”, the reliable “dense” background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic direction. The latest example of such “unnatural nature” was provided by the infamous DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency):

Researchers in the US have created the first living machines by assembling cells from African clawed frogs into tiny robots that move around under their own steam. “These are entirely new lifeforms. They have never before existed on Earth”, said Michael Levin, the director of the Allen Discovery Center at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. “They are living, programmable organisms”. Their unique features mean that future versions of the robots might be deployed to clean up microplastic pollution in the oceans, locate and digest toxic materials, deliver drugs in the body or remove plaque from artery walls, the scientists say. “It’s impossible to know what the applications will be for any new technology, so we can really only guess”, said Joshua Bongard, a senior researcher on the team at the University of Vermont. Sam Kriegman, a PhD student on the team at the University of Vermont, acknowledged that the work raised ethical issues, particularly given that future variants could have nervous systems and be selected for cognitive capability, making them more active participants in the world. But the work aims to achieve more than just the creation of squidgy robots. “The aim is to understand the software of life”, Levin said. “If you think about birth defects, cancer, age-related diseases, all of these things could be solved if we knew how to make biological structures, to have ultimate control over growth and form”⁶.

It’s the old story of an invention propagated for its benevolent uses (“to clean up microplastic pollution in the oceans”, etc.), with the fact that it is part of a defence (military) project left unsaid. But the crucial point is that an “entirely new lifeform” was created

³ *Ibidem*, p. 25

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁶ Quoted from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jan/13/scientists-use-stem-cells-from-frogs-to-build-first-living-robots>.

through this combination of a natural organism with a robot, something that exists nowhere in nature –the very expression “the software of life” tells it all: life itself loses its impenetrable density once it is considered to be something regulated by a “software” (a term from computer programming), i.e., in the combination of a natural organism with an artificial one, the artificial organism predominates, it determines the medium of their encounter. It would be easy to engage here in the praise of cyborgs as the new post-human mode of existence that blurs the old “metaphysical” limits between animal life, human life, and artificial life –it’s more difficult to simply think out the consequences and basic coordinates of what is going on: what, exactly, is disappearing and what is emerging?

Biogenetics, with its reduction of the human psyche itself to an object of technological manipulation, is therefore effectively a kind of empirical instantiation of what Heidegger perceived as the “danger” inherent to modern technology. Crucial here is the interdependence of man and nature: by reducing man to just another natural object whose properties can be manipulated, what we lose is not (only) humanity but *nature itself*. In this sense, Francis Fukuyama was right: humanity itself relies on some notion of “human nature” as what we inherited as simply given to us, the impenetrable dimension in/of ourselves into which we are born/thrown. The paradox is thus that that there is man only insofar as there is impenetrable inhuman nature (Heidegger’s “earth”): with the prospect of biogenetic interventions opened up by the access to the genome, the species freely changes/re-defines *itself*, its own coordinates; this prospect effectively emancipates humankind from the constraints of a finite species, from its enslavement to the “selfish genes”.

The mutual implication, complicity even, of science and capitalism is, of course, not seamless, it implies an immanent tension in each of the two terms. Science offers itself to capitalism insofar as it is in itself blind for a key dimension of its existence signalled by Lacan in a couple of co-dependent formulations: science forecloses the dimension of the subject: science operates at the level of knowledge and ignores truth; science has no memory –let’s begin with this last feature:

the fact is that science, if one looks at it closely, has no memory. Once constituted, it forges the circuitous path by which it came into being; otherwise stated, it forgets a dimension of truth that psychoanalysis seriously puts to work. I must, however, be more precise. It is widely known that theoretical physics and mathematics –after every crisis that is resolved in a form for which the term “generalized theory” can in no way be taken to mean “a shift to generality”– often maintain what they generalize in its position in the preceding structure. That is not my point here. My concern is the toll [drame], the subjective toll that each of these crises takes on the learned. The tragedy [drame] has its victims, and nothing allows us to say that their destiny can be inscribed in the Oedipal myth. Let us say that the subject has not been stud-

ied to any great extent. J. R. Mayer, Cantor –well I am not going to furnish a list of first-rate tragedies, leading at times to the point of madness; the names of certain of our contemporaries, in whose cases I consider exemplarily the tragedy of what is happening in psychoanalysis, would soon have to be added to the list⁷.

What Lacan aims at here goes far beyond the psychic tragedies of great scientific inventors (he mentions Cantor whose revolutionizing of the notion of infinity triggered an inner turmoil which pushed him to the limit of madness and even led him to practice coprophagia) –from the scientific standpoint, such tragedies are irrelevant private life details which in no way affect the status of a scientific discovery. Such details HAVE to be ignored if we want to comprehend a scientific theory– this ignorance is not a weakness of the scientific theory but its strength. A scientific theory is “objective”: it suspends its position of enunciation –it doesn’t matter who enunciates it, all that matters is its content. In this sense, the discourse of science forecloses its subject. Lacan, however, who tries to think the subject of modern science, brings out such “psychological” details –not in order to relativize the validity of scientific theories but to answer the question: what shifts have to happen in the subjectivity of a scientist so that such a theory can be formulated? A theory may be “objectively valid”, but its enunciation can nonetheless rely on traumatic subjective shifts –there is no pre-established harmony between subject and object.

What Lacan aims at also goes beyond the so-called “ethical responsibility” of scientists for the (mis)use of their scientific achievements – Lacan mentions a couple of times J. R. Oppenheimer, the wartime head of the Los Alamos Laboratory often credited with being the “father of the atomic bomb”. When the first atomic bomb was successfully detonated in July 16 1945, he remarked that it brought to mind words from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Now I became Death, the destroyer of worlds”. Beset by ethical qualms, he expressed his doubts publicly and, as a consequence, he suffered the revocation of his security clearance and was effectively stripped of direct political influence... Commendable as it is, such a critical stance is not enough, it remains at the level of “ethical committees” which proliferate today and try to constrain scientific progress into the straight-jacket of predominant “norms” (how far should we go in biogenetic manipulations, etc.). This is not enough, it amounts just to the secondary control over a machine which, if allowed to run its immanent course, would have engendered catastrophic results.

The trap to be avoided here is double. On the one side, it is not enough to locate the danger into particular misuses of science due to corruption (like the scientists who support climate change denial) or something similar –the danger resides at a much more general level, it concerns the very mode of functioning of science. On the other side, we should also reject the

⁷ J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, New York, Norton, 1997, p. 738.

over-hasty generalization of danger into what Adorno and Horkheimer called “instrumental reason” –the idea that modern science is in its very basic structure directed to dominate, manipulate and exploit nature, plus the concomitant idea that modern science is ultimately just a radicalization of a basic anthropological tendency (for Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is a straight line from primitive use of magic to influence natural processes to modern technology). The danger resides in the specific conjunction between science and capital.

To get the basic dimension of what Lacan is aiming up in the passage quoted above, we have to introduce the difference between knowledge and truth, where “truth” acquires all its specific weight –to indicate this weight, let’s mention yet again Lacan’s paradox of jealousy. Lacan wrote that, even if what a jealous husband claims about his wife (that she sleeps around with other men) is all true, his jealousy is still pathological: the pathological element is the husband’s need for jealousy as the only way to retain his dignity, identity even. Along the same lines, one could say that, even if most of the Nazi claims about the Jews were true (they exploit Germans, they seduce German girls...) –which they are not, of course–, their anti-Semitism would still be (and was) a pathological phenomenon because it repressed the true reason why the Nazis needed anti-Semitism in order to sustain their ideological position. In the Nazi vision, their society is an organic Whole of harmonious collaboration, so an external intruder is needed to account for divisions and antagonisms.

The same holds for how, today, the anti-immigrant populists deal with the “problem” of the refugees: they approach it in the atmosphere of fear, of the incoming struggle against the islamization of Europe, and they get caught in a series of obvious absurdities. For them, refugees who flee terror are equalized with the terrorist they are escaping from, oblivious to the obvious fact that, while there are among the refugees also terrorists, rapists, criminals, etc., while the large majority are desperate people looking for a better life. The cause of problems which are immanent to today’s global capitalism is projected onto an external intruder. We find here “fake news” which cannot be reduced to a simple inexactitude –if they (partially, at least) correctly render (some of) the facts, they are all the more dangerously a “fake”. Anti-immigrant racism and sexism is not dangerous because it lies, it is at its most dangerous when its lie is presented in the form of a (partial) factual truth.

It is this dimension of truth that eludes science: in the same way that my jealousy is “untrue” even if its suspicions are confirmed by objective knowledge, in the same way that our fear of refugees is false with regard to the subjective position of enunciation it implies even if some facts can confirm it, modern science is “untrue” insofar as it is blind for the way it is integrated into the circulation of capital, for its link to technology and its capitalist use, i.e., for what in old Marxist terms it was called the “social medi-

ation” of its activity. It is important to bear in mind that this “social mediation” is not an empirical fact external to the immanent scientific procedure: it is a kind of transcendental a priori which structures from within the scientific procedure. So it is not only that scientists “don’t care” about the eventual misuse of their work (if this were the case, more “socially conscious” scientists would be enough), this “not-caring” is inscribed into its structure, it colors the very “desire” that motivates scientific activity (which is what Lacan aims at with his claim that science doesn’t have a memory) –how?

In the conditions of developed capitalism, a strict division prevails between those who do the labor (workers) and those who plan and coordinate it –these last are on the side of capital, their job is to maximize the capital’s valorization, and when science is used to enhance productivity, it is also constrained to the task of facilitating the process of capital’s valorization. Science is thus firmly entrenched on the side of the capital, it is the ultimate figure of knowledge which is taken away from laborers and appropriated by the capital and its executors. Scientists who work are also paid, but their work is not at the same level as laborers’ work: they as it were work for the other (opposite) side, they are in some sense the strikebreakers of the production process... This, of course, doesn’t mean that modern natural science is inexorably on the side of the capital: today, science is needed more than ever in any resistance against capitalism. The point is just that science itself is not enough to do this job since it “has no memory”, since it ignores the dimension of truth.

We should thus distinguish two levels of what makes science problematic. First, there is, at a general level, the fact that science “has no memory”, a fact that is part of its strength, that is constitutive of science. Then, there is the specific conjunction of science and capitalism –here, “no memory” relates to a specific blindness for its own social mediation. However, Greta Thunberg is right when she claims that politicians should listen to science –Wagner’s *Die Wunde schließt der Speer nur, der Sie schlug* (*The wound can only be healed by the spear that made it*) thus acquires a new actuality. Today’s threats are not primarily external (natural) but self-generated by the human activity permeated by science (the ecological consequences of our industry, the psychic consequences of uncontrolled biogenetics, etc.), so that sciences are simultaneously (one of) the source(s) of risks, the sole medium we have to grasp and define the threats (even if we blame the scientific-technological civilization for global warming, we need the same science not only to define the scope of the threat, but often even to perceive the threat. What we need is not science that re-discovers its grounding in pre-modern wisdom –traditional wisdom is precisely something that prevents us from perceiving the real threat of ecological catastrophes. Wisdom “intuitively” tells us to trust mother-nature which is the stable ground of our being –but it is precisely this stable ground which

is undermined by modern science and technology. So, we need a science that is decoupled from both poles, from the autonomous circuit of capital as well as from traditional wisdom, a science which could finally stand on its own. What this means is that there is no return to authentic feeling of our unity with nature: the only way to confront ecological challenges is to fully accept the radical denaturalization of nature.

2. Is abstract labor universal?

In passing in silence over this key role of modern science, Saito thinks abstractly (in the Hegelian sense of abstracting from or ignoring concrete circumstances), and nowhere is this abstraction more palpable than in his claim that abstract labour is there already in premodern societies, that it is not (like value) a purely social form that emerges only through exchange of commodities, he ignores the key fact that Marx's notion of abstract labor presupposes modern science, specifically the thermodynamics of the 19th century.

In order to prove that “abstract labor is also a material element of the labor process”⁸, Saito quotes Marx: “All labor is an expenditure of human labor-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labor that it forms the value of commodities”⁹. But does it really follow from this that abstract labor is “a certain material aspect of human activity, in this case labor's pure physiological expenditure”¹⁰? Is it not that, as Marx has shown in his introduction to *Grundrisse*, abstraction itself is a social fact, the result of a social process of abstracting?:

although the simpler category may have existed historically before the more concrete, it can achieve its full (intensive and extensive) development precisely in a combined form of society, while the more concrete category was more fully developed in a less developed form of society.

Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form—as labour as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, “labour” is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction¹¹.

Does the same not hold for abstract labour? When Marx writes that “by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values”, men “equate their different kinds of labor as human labor”, does he not indicate that different kinds of labor are equated only through market exchange? Only in a society whose metabolism is regulated by commodity exchange “abstract labour” is posited as such, for itself. In a capitalist society, its “abstrac-

tion” is a social fact (a worker gets a wage for his labour measured in its abstraction). Saito argues that abstract labour refers to what all human labour has in common, a purely physiological expenditure of human energy in time. However, does this not remain a “mute universality”, not an actual abstraction that marks labour in an immanent way, making the gap between abstract and concrete part of the very identity of labour?

Saito's main argument for his reading is that abstract labor is physiological “because it plays a social role in a transhistorical fashion in any society”¹²: the total quantity of labour is inevitably limited to a certain amount of time, and this is why its allocation is crucial for the reproduction of society—abstract labor is operative in any social division of labor. But does this argument hold? It immediately strikes the eye that Saito's definition of labour as physiological expenditure is itself historically specific, rooted in 19th century anti-Hegelian space—only within this space can one conceive “simple average labor” as a zero-level standard to which all its more complex forms can be reduced:

More complex labour counts only as *intensified*, or rather *multiplied* simple labour, so that a smaller quantity of complex labour is considered equal to a larger quantity of simple labour. Experience shows that this reduction is constantly being made. A commodity may be the outcome of the most complicated labour, but through its value it is posited as equal to the product of simple labour, hence it represents only a specific quantity of simple labour. The various proportions in which different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers; these proportions therefore appear to the producers to have been handed down by tradition¹³.

The key enigmatic term is here “experience” — as David Harvey noted in his classic commentary, “Marx never explains what «experience» he has in mind, making this passage highly controversial”¹⁴. The least one can add is that this “experience” has to be conceived as referring to a specific historical situation: not only what counts as simple labor but *the very practice of reducing complex to simple labor* is something historically specific and not a universal feature of human productivity, limited not only to capitalism but to classic industrial capitalism. As Anson Rabinbach demonstrated, it is operative only within the 19th century break with Hegel, the assertion of thermodynamic engine as a paradigm of how labor force operates, the paradigm which replaces the Hegelian paradigm of labor as the expressive deployment of human subjectivity still operative in the texts of young Marx:

⁸ K. Saito, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ *Idem.*

¹¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm>.

¹² K. Saito, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹³ Marx, *op. cit.* (cf. footnote 11)

¹⁴ D. Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, London, Verso Books, 2010, p. 29.

The thermodynamic engine was the servant of a powerful nature conceived as a reservoir of undiminished and inexhaustible motivating power. The laboring body, the steam engine and the cosmos were connected by a single and unbroken chain, by an indestructible energy, omnipresent in the universe and capable of infinite mutation, yet immutable and invariant. [...] This discovery also had a profound, game changing effect on Marx's thinking about labor. After 1859, Marx increasingly regarded the distinction between concrete and abstract labor in the language of labor power, as an act of *conversion* rather than *generation*. [...] Put in another way, Marx superimposed a thermodynamic model of labor onto the ontological model of labor he inherited from Hegel. As a result, for Marx labor power became quantifiable and equivalent to all other forms of labor power (in nature or in machines). [...] Marx became a "productivist", when he no longer considered labor to be simply an anthropologically "paradigmatic" mode of activity, and when, in harmony with the new physics, he saw labor power as an abstract magnitude (a measure of labor-time) and a natural force (a specific set of energy equivalents located in the body)¹⁵.

Within this conceptual frame of the universality of abstract labor, Communism is not just the restored unity of man and nature but simultaneously the fulfilment of their rift: in capitalism, social production remains "irrational", not regulated by social planning (which characterizes humanity) and in this sense pre-human, part of "natural history". The underlying problem is here a philosophical one: Saito misses *this* rift because he unquestionably accepts Marx's definition (from *Capital*) of human specificity: while every living species is involved in metabolism, the exchange of matter between its own organism and its natural environs, only the human species performs this metabolism through labour in the sense of a consciously regulated activity –here is the well-known passage from chapter 7 of *Capital* I:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will¹⁶.

The obviousness of this definition should not seduce us. The question persists: conscious planning of a work process requires some kind of distance from one's own natural immediacy, and the form of that immediacy is language, so there is no labour in specific human sense without language. This implies a lot: language is not just an instrument of communication, it forms what Lacan

calls "big Other", the substance of our social being, the thick social network of written and unwritten rules and patterns. Consequently, Marx goes too fast in his definition of labor, he obfuscates or ignores another break. Preceding the quoted passage, he writes:

We are not now dealing with those primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal. An immeasurable interval of time separates the state of things in which a man brings his labour-power to market for sale as a commodity, from that state in which human labour was still in its first instinctive stage. We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human¹⁷.

The limitation shared by Marx and Saito is clear here: they both posit a progressive line from animality to humans, from instinctual to planned/conscious, so that premodern phases are perceived as "primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal". However, these "primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal" already involve a radical break with nature –the "metabolic rift" is already there, the "metabolism" of ancient societies is always grounded in a symbolic big Other of regulated exchanges. Suffice it to recall ancient Aztecs and Incas whose social metabolism was regulated by an enormous symbolic apparatus whose activity culminated in sacrificial rituals: we have to perform human sacrifices so that the most "natural" circulation of nature will go on (so that sun will rise again, etc.), and sacrifice is by definition a disruption of smooth metabolism. In short, the metabolic rift with (animal) Life is *culture itself*, even if –or especially when– it is grounded in natural rhythms of seasons, when it projects meaning into nature. When, in his "anthropological" writings, Freud inquires into the origins of such rituals, his ultimate result is that the true metabolic rift (cut between nature and culture) is sexuality itself: human sexuality is immanently self-sabotaging, it involves paradoxes of desire, it imposes its own violent rhythm on "natural" rhythms –Freud's name for these paradoxes is, of course, death drive¹⁸.

Saito thus proceeds too fast in conceiving the trans-historical metabolism of human and natural life as the base on which capitalism parasitizes: there is a third term between these two, the symbolic order itself, the universe of symbolic fictions, the symbolic substance of our social lives, and capitalism is not only destroying our natural habitat, it is simultaneously destroying our shared symbolic substance, what Hegel called *Sitten*. This ignorance of the symbolic order affects also Marx's notion of Communism.

¹⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁸ We should do even a step further (or, rather, backward) here. It is not only that a metabolic rift happens with humanity, a rift operates already in pre-human nature itself –just think about our main sources of energy, oil and coal, what kind of rifts had to happen to create these reserves. So we have to accept the paradox: if humanity will ever reach a kind of harmonious metabolism (exchange with nature), it will be imposed by humanity as a kind of "second nature". Different ideas of regulating the entire metabolism on earth to prevent ecological catastrophes already circulate, and some of them involve radical interventions into natural cycles (like spraying our atmosphere with chemicals which would diminish the quantity of sun rays hitting earth).

¹⁵ A. Rabinbach, "From Emancipation to the Science of Work: The Labor Power Dilemma" (quoted from the manuscript).

¹⁶ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>.

When, towards the end of Chapter I of *Capital*, Marx deploys the matrix of four modes of production/exchange, he begins and ends with the imagined example of Robinson –and what I find important is that, at the end, he returns it as the model for transparent Communist society with no fetishist inversion:

Since Robinson Crusoe's experiences are a favourite theme with political economists, let us take a look at him on his island. Moderate though he be, yet some few wants he has to satisfy, and must therefore do a little useful work of various sorts, such as making tools and furniture, taming goats, fishing and hunting. [...] In spite of the variety of his work, he knows that his labour, whatever its form, is but the activity of one and the same Robinson, and consequently, that it consists of nothing but different modes of human labour. [...] All the relations between Robinson and the objects that form this wealth of his own creation, are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion, even to Mr. Sedley Taylor. And yet those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value.

Let us now transport ourselves from Robinson's island bathed in light to the European Middle Ages shrouded in darkness. Here, instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterises the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organised on the basis of that production. But for the very reason that personal dependence forms the ground-work of society, there is no necessity for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality. [...] For an example of labour in common or directly associated labour, we have no occasion to go back to that spontaneously developed form which we find on the threshold of the history of all civilised races. We have one close at hand in the patriarchal industries of a peasant family, that produces corn, cattle, yarn, linen, and clothing for home use. These different articles are, as regards the family, so many products of its labour, but as between themselves, they are not commodities. [...] The labour power of each individual, by its very nature, operates in this case merely as a definite portion of the whole labour power of the family, and therefore, the measure of the expenditure of individual labour power by its duration, appears here by its very nature as a social character of their labour.

Let us now picture to ourselves, by way of change, a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are here repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual. [...] The social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution¹⁹.

This series of four modes of production –Robinson alone, medieval domination, family collective, Communism– is surprising and counter-intuitive. The first mystery that strikes the eye is: why do we get family where we would expect capitalism as the mode which follows medieval direct domination? Should family not be at the beginning, as a mode that characterizes the pre-class “primitive” societies? Instead of family, Marx begins with the example of Robinson (a sole producer) –why is Robinson the starting point when (as Marx knew very well) Robinson is not a historical starting point but a bourgeois myth? Is it not that Marx has to begin with Robinson so that, in a (pseudo) Hegelian dialectical circle, at the end he can get back to a collective Robinson as an imagined model of Communist society? The parallel with Robinson enables Marx to imagine Communism as a self-transparent society in which relations between individuals are not mediated by an opaque substantial big Other –and our task today is to think Communism outside this horizon.

3. Ecology with alienation

There is a fundamental difference between subject's alienation in the symbolic order and the worker's alienation in capitalist social relation. We have to avoid the two symmetrical traps which open up if we insist on the homology between the two alienations: the idea that capitalist social alienation is irreducible since the signifying alienation is constitutive of subjectivity, as well as the opposite idea that the signifying alienation could be abolished in the same way Marx imagined the overcoming of capitalist alienation. The point is not just that the signifying alienation is more fundamental and will persist even if we abolish the capitalist alienation –it is a more refined one. The very figure of a subject that would overcome the signifying alienation and become a free agent who is master of the symbolic universe, i.e., who is no longer embedded in a symbolic substance, can only arise within the space of capitalist alienation, the space in which free individuals interact. Let's indicate the domain of this symbolic alienation with regard to Robert Brandom's attempt to elaborate “the way to a postmodern form of recognition that overcomes ironic alienation. This is the recollective-recognitive structure of trust”²⁰. For Brandom, this

may be the part of [Hegel's] thought that is of the most contemporary philosophical interest and value. That is partly because he attributes deep political significance to the replacement of a semantic model of atomistic representation by one of holistic expression. [...] It is to lead to a new form of mutual recognition and usher in the third stage in the development of Geist: the age of trust²¹.

¹⁹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>.

²⁰ R. Brandom, *The Spirit of Trust*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 501.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 506.

“Trust” is here trust in the ethical substance (the “big Other”, the set of established norms) which doesn’t limit but sustains the space of our freedom. Referring to Chomsky, Brandom gives his own reading to the classic distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom: negative freedom is the freedom from predominant norms and obligations which can lead only to universalized ironic distance towards all positive regulations (we shouldn’t trust them, they are illusions masking particular interests), while positive freedom is the freedom whose space is opened up and sustained by our adherence to a set of norms. As Chomsky has proven, language enables an individual who inhabits it to generate an infinite number of sentences –this the positive freedom of expression provided by our acceptance of the rules of language, while negative freedom can only lead to ironic alienation... But is the freedom of irony, of ironic distance, also not a form of positive freedom grounded in a deep acquaintance with the rules? Is something like ironic alienation not inherent to those who really inhabit a language? Let’s take patriotism: a true patriot is not a fanatical zealot but somebody who can quite often practice ironic remarks about his nation, and this irony paradoxically vouches for his true love of his country (when things get serious, he is ready to fight for it). To be able to practice this kind of irony, I have to master the rules of my language much more deeply than those who speak it in a flawless non-ironic way. One can even say that to really inhabit a language implies not just to know the rules but to know the meta-rules which tell me how to violate the explicit rules: it doesn’t imply to make no mistakes but to make the right kind of mistakes. And the same goes for manners that held together a given closed community –this is why, in the old times when there were still schools to teach ordinary people how to behave in a high class society were as a rule an abominable failure: no matter how much they did teach you the rules of behavior, they were not able to teach you the meta-rules that regulate the subtle transgressions of the rulers. And, speaking about expressive subjectivity, one can also say that subjectivity appears in a speech only through such regulated violations –without them, we get a flat impersonal speech.

And what if we imagine Communism in a similar way: as a new ethical substance (a frame of rules) that enables positive freedom? Maybe this is how we should reread Marx’s opposition of the kingdom of necessity and kingdom of freedom: Communism is not freedom itself but the structure of a kingdom of necessity that sustains freedom. This is also how I should have replied to Tyler Cowen who, in a debate in Bergen, asked me why do I continue to stick to the ridiculously-outdated notion of Communism, why do I not drop it and just enjoy writing my provocative anti-PC comments with all their perversities and provocations? My reply should have been that I need Communism precisely as the background, the firm ethical standard, the principal commitment to a Cause

which makes all my transgressive pleasures possible. In other words, we shouldn’t imagine Communism as a self-transparent order with no alienation but as an order of “good” alienation, of our reliance on thick invisible cobweb of regulations which sustains the space of our freedom. In Communism, I should be led to “trust” this cobweb *and ignore it*, focusing on what makes my life meaningful.

This constitutive alienation in the symbolic substance is missing in Saito due to his focus on metabolism of the labor process: in search of a pre-capitalist foundation of human life, he posits the process of metabolism between nature and humans as the ground on which the process of Capital is based. This metabolism was distorted by Capital which parasitizes on it, so that the basic “contradiction” of capitalism is the one between natural metabolism and capital –nature resists capital, it poses a limit to capital’s self-valorization. The task of Communists is thus to invent a new form of social metabolism which will no longer be not market-mediated but organized in a human (rationally planned) way. That’s why Saito is profoundly anti-Hegelian: his axiom is that Hegelian dialectics cannot think the natural limits of Capital, the fact that the self-movement of Capital cannot ever fully “sublate”/integrate its presupposed natural base:

Marx’s ecology deals with the synthesis of the historical and transhistorical aspects of social metabolism in explaining how the physical and material dimensions of the “universal metabolism of nature” and the “metabolism between humans and nature” are modified and eventually disrupted by the valorization of capital. Marx’s analysis aims at revealing the limits of the appropriation of nature through its subsumption by capital²².

Marx does not talk about subsumption under capital in abstract formal terms, he is interested in how this subsumption is not just a formal one but gradually transforms the material base itself: air gets polluted, deforestation, land is exhausted and rendered less fertile, etc. Saito sees in this rift the basic “contradiction” of capitalism: once social production is subsumed under the self-valorization process of the Capital, the goal of the process becomes capital’s extended self-reproduction, the growth of accumulated value, and since environment ultimately counts just as an externality, destructive environmental consequences are ignored, they don’t count:

capital contradicts the fundamental limitedness of natural forces and resources because of its drive toward infinite self-valorization. This is the central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, and Marx’s analysis aims at discerning the limits to this measureless drive for capital accumulation within a material world²³.

When he talks about the “contradiction” between capitalism and nature, Saito remains within the confines

²² K. Saito, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

of the opposition between the exploding demands of humanity and the obvious limitations of the finite world in which we dwell: the entire world simply cannot re-join the consumerism of the highly developed countries since natural resources at our disposal are limited and non-renewable... What such a commonsense approach ignores is the opposite, the other side, of exhaustion, of the growing *shortage* of natural resources: the excess, the exploding *abundance*, of waste in all its forms, from millions of tons of plastic waste circulating in oceans to air pollution. The name for this surplus is “emissions” –what is emitted is a surplus which cannot be “recycled”, reintegrated into the circulation of nature, a surplus which persists as an “unnatural” remainder growing ad infinitum and thereby destabilized the “finitude” of nature and its resourced. This “waste” is the material counterpart of homeless refugees which form a kind of “human waste” (waste, of course, from the standpoint of capital’s global circulation)²⁴.

Ecology is thus in the very centre of Marx’s critique of political economy, and this is why, in the last decades of his life, Marx was extensively reading books on chemistry and physiology of agriculture. (The reason why Marx turned to physiology and chemistry of agriculture is clear: he wanted to study the life process of metabolism without falling into the trap of conceiving life that precedes capital in the terms of a Romantic “vital force”). Saito’s central premise is that THIS “contradiction” cannot be grasped in the Hegelian terms –this is why he mockingly mentions that Western Marxism “primarily deals with social forms (sometimes with an extreme fetishism of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*)”²⁵.

4. The greening of Hegel

Which mode of relating to Hegel should then an ecologically-oriented Marxism assume today? Is Hegel’s logic a mystified/idealist model for revolutionary process (*Grundrisse*, young Lukacs); is it the logic of Capital; is it the predecessor of new universal ontology? When Chris Arthur says that “it is precisely the *applicability* of Hegel’s logic that condemns the object as an inverted reality systematically alienated from its bearers”²⁶, he thereby provides the most concise formulation of the “Hegel’s logic as the logic of the capital”: the very fact that Hegel’s logic can be applied to capitalism means that capitalism is an perverted order of alienation... Or, as John Rosenthal put it, “Marx made the curious discovery of an object domain in which the inverted relation between the universal and the particular which constitutes the distinctive principle of Hegelian metaphysics *in fact* obtains”: “The whole riddle of the «Marx-Hegel relation» consists in nothing other than this: [...] it is precisely and paradoxically the *mystical* formulae

of Hegelian «logic» for which Marx finds a rational scientific application”²⁷. In short, while, in his early critique of Hegel, Marx rejected Hegel’s thought as a crazy speculative reversal of actual state of things, he was then struck by the realization that there is a domain which behaves in a Hegelian way, namely the domain of the circulation of Capital.

Recall the classic Marxian motive of the speculative inversion of the relationship between the Universal and the Particular. The Universal is just a property of particular objects which really exist, but when we are victims of commodity fetishism it appears as if the concrete content of a commodity (its use-value) is an expression of its abstract universality (its exchange-value) –the abstract Universal, the Value, appears as a real Substance which successively incarnates itself in a series of concrete objects. That is the basic Marxian thesis: it is already the effective world of commodities which behaves like a Hegelian subject-substance, like a Universal going through a series of particular embodiments.

In Marx’s reading, the self-engendering speculative movement of the Capital also indicates a fateful limitation of the Hegelian dialectical process, something that eludes Hegel’s grasp. It is in this sense that Lebrun mentions the “fascinating image” of the Capital presented by Marx (especially in his *Grundrisse*): “a monstrous mixture of the good infinity and the bad infinity, the good infinity which creates its presuppositions and the conditions of its growth, the bad infinity which never ceases to surmount its crises, and which finds its limit in its own nature”²⁸. This, perhaps, is also the reason why Marx’s reference to Hegel’s dialectics in his “critique of political economy” is ambiguous, oscillating between taking it as the mystified expression of the logic of the Capital and taking it as the model for the revolutionary process of emancipation. First, there is dialectic as the “logic of the capital”: the development of the commodity-form and the passage from money to capital are clearly formulated in Hegelian terms (capital is money-substance turning into self-mediating process of its own reproduction, etc.). Then, there is the Hegelian notion of proletariat as “substance-less subjectivity”, i.e., the grandiose Hegelian scheme of the historical process from pre-class society to capitalism as the gradual separation of the subject from its objective conditions, so that the overcoming of capitalism means that the (collective) subject re-appropriates its alienated substance. The Hegelian dialectical matrix thus serves as the model of the logic of the capital as well as the model of its revolutionary overcoming.

So, again, which mode of relating to Hegel should an ecologically-oriented Marxism assume today? Hegelian dialectics as the mystified expression of the revolutionary process, as the philosophical expression of the perverted logic of the Capital; as the idealist version

²⁴ I owe this line of thought to Alenka Zupančič.

²⁵ K. Saito, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

²⁶ L. Micaloni and C. J. Arthur, “The Logic of Capital. Interview with”, *Consecutio Rerum*, III, 5, p. 482.

²⁷ Quoted from https://www.academia.edu/3035436/John_Rosenthal_The_Myth_of_Dialectics_Reinterpreting_the_Marx-Hegel_Relation

²⁸ G. Lebrun, *L’envers de la dialectique*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2004, p. 311.

of a new dialectical-materialist ontology; or should we simply claim (as Althusser did) that Marx only “flirted” with Hegelian dialectics, that his thinking was totally foreign to Hegel? There is another one: a different reading of Hegel’s dialectical process itself, not the model of “subject appropriates substance”. Already decades ago, in the early years of modern ecology, some perspicuous readers of Hegel noted that the Hegelian idealist speculation does not imply an absolute appropriation of nature –in contrast to productive appropriation, speculation lets its Other be, it doesn’t intervene into its Other. As Frank Ruda pointed out²⁹, Hegel’s Absolute Knowing is not a total *Aufhebung* –a seamless integration of all reality into the Notion’s self-mediation–; it is much more an act of radical *Aufgeben* –of giving up, of renouncing the violent effort to grab reality. Absolute Knowing is a gesture of *Entlassen*, of releasing reality, of letting-it-be and stand on its own, and, in this sense, it breaks with the endless effort of labour to appropriate its Otherness, the stuff that forever resists its grasp. Labour (and technological domination in general) is an exemplary case of what Hegel calls “spurious infinity”, it is a pursuit which is never accomplished because it presupposes an Other to be mastered, while philosophical speculation is at ease, no longer troubled by its Other.

5. Eco-theology of signs

What such a reading of Hegel implies is that Hegel’s dialectics cannot be reduced to a total sublation of all contingency in the self-mediation of the concept. This brings us back to ecology: Saito opposes Hegel since Hegel is for him the very model of the negation of the autonomy of nature –does Hegel’s Idea not stand for a productive process which no longer needs to rely on a metabolic exchange with an Otherness but reduces every Otherness to a subordinate moment of the Idea’s self-mediation? But if we accept our reading of Hegel then Hegel not only tolerates but demands that we should allow the irreducible Otherness of nature. This respect for the contingency of nature means that we should avoid the trap of reading ecological catastrophes as signs which point in an unambiguous linear way towards a final catastrophe. Precisely insofar as we should take ecological threats extremely seriously, we should also be fully aware of how uncertain analyses and projections are in this domain –we will know for sure what is going on only when it will be too late. Fast extrapolations only give arguments to global warming deniers, so we should avoid at all costs the trap of “ecology of fear”, a hasty morbid fascination by a dooming catastrophe. Only a thin line separates the correct perception of real dangers from the fantasy-scenarios about a global catastrophe that awaits us. There is a specific enjoyment of living in the end time, living in the shadow of a catastrophe, and the paradox is that such a fixation on the forthcoming catastrophe is precisely one of the ways to avoid really confronting it. To maintain a minimum of credibility, such a vision has to cling on any bad news

that come along: a melting glacier here, a tornado there, a heat wave somewhere else, they are all read as signs of a forthcoming catastrophe... Even the big fires that were devastating south-eastern Australia in late 2019 and early 2020 should not be read in such a simplified way. In a recent comment in *Spectator*, Tim Blair opened up a new perspective on this catastrophe:

Controlled burns of overgrown flora were once standard practice in rural Australia, but now a kind of ecological religious fundamentalism has taken the place of common sense. There are many examples of recent legal rulings that punished those who cleared land around their properties. “We’ve been burning less than 1 per cent of our bushfire-prone land for the past 20 years”, says fire brigade captain Brian Williams, “that means every year the fuel load continues to build”. Well-meaning but ignorant attempts to protect animals’ natural ecosystems are, in part, the reason those ecosystems are now nothing but cinders and ash³⁰.

The bias of this comment is clear, it is directed against the presumption of global warming; as such, it should be rejected, but what we should learn from it is the ambiguity of signs. Here a turn to theology may be helpful since ecologists are often accused of harbouring a quasi-religious zeal –instead of rejecting this accusation, we should proudly accept it and qualify it. The beginning of the gospel of John contains a whole theory of signs (or miracles): God produces miracles (or, as we would say today, when shocking things happen which disturb our common sense of reality like the fires in Australia), but “if we see miracles without believing we will only be hardened in our sin”³¹. Signs are here to convince the believers, but when they occur, they at the same time strengthen the opposition to Jesus in those who do not believe in Him –this opposition “grows harsher and more belligerent, more open in its attempt to silence him; and each time he feels a deeper threat from the powers that were arrayed against him”³². Blair’s comment should be read along these theological lines –although it was definitely meant to make us “be hardened in our sin” (of global warming denial), it should not be dismissed as a corrupt lie but as a welcome opportunity to analyse the complexity of the situation in order to make it clear how this complexity make our ecological predicament all the more dangerous. In nature, this domain of contingency where the Idea exists in the externality with regard to itself, we are by definition in the domain of ambiguous signs and the “spurious infinity” of complex interactions where each occurrence can be a sign of its opposite, so that every human intervention aimed at restoring some kind of natural balance can trigger an unexpected catastrophe, and every catastrophe can be a harbinger of good news.

³⁰ T. Blair, “Fight fire with fire: controlled burning could have protected Australia”. See: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2020/01/fight-fire-with-fire-controlled-burning-could-have-protected-australia/>.

³¹ S. J. Cole, “Lesson 63: Believing is Seeing, but Seeing is not Believing (John 11:38-57)”. Cf. <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-63-believing-seeing-seeing-not-believing-john-1138-57>.

³² R. Stedman, “God’s Strange Ways”. Cf. <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/john/gods-strange-ways>.

²⁹ Cf. F. Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom*, Winnipeg, Bison Books, 2016.

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